

## Call it 'Mario's Village'

A developer's devotion to his neighborhood is proving profitable not just for him, but for the South End as well

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**E**ven with a heavy spring rain on a May weekend, the SoWa neighborhood art market and walk in Boston's South End drew a steady flow of people milling in and out of galleries and warehouse space along the northeast end of Harrison Avenue.

The art event, which includes an open-air market through the summer and fall, was started four years ago by Mario Nicolsia, a longtime South End developer and resident, and head of GTI Properties.

"The beacon he sends out that there is life, an urban life in what was once thought of as a no-man's land of old factories, low-income housing, and Boston's best-known homeless shelter, the Pine Street Inn.

"The area needs help," Nicolsia said in a recent interview. "It can't survive on its own. We make a lot of effort to bring people into the neighborhood. And it helps me in the long run."

Certainly any real estate developer has his self-interest at heart. But in Nicolsia's case, what's been good for him has also been very good for parts

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of Boston's South End, which has been gentrifying and remodeling itself steadily over the last several decades, with him as one of its pioneers.

Thirty years ago, he was one of the first developers to venture past Huntington Avenue into the South End. He created luxury apartments from distressed properties on St. Botolph Street, now one of the most picturesque in the city. GTI Properties owns 1 million square feet of old mills and other period, architecture buildings in the area south of Washington Street in the South End. Moreover that he is, Nicolsia branded the area SoWa, and staged neighborhood events to convince outsiders it is safe to come to this once-remote corner of the city.

Harrison Avenue has been "summing up" for some years, the "summing up" from the Back Bay side of the South End also has intersected. The removal of the old elevated Orange Line along Washington Street opened up the boulevard for redevelopment and drew an influx of moneyed professionals, high-end condos, and hip restaurants.

This end of Harrison Avenue was once better known for cheap rents and loft parties, and commerce of a different kind: drugs. That hasn't gone away entirely — just loosened, drug dealers is sometimes still in evidence.

Some of his tenants affectionately refer to the area as "Mario's Village." And Nicolsia does impart an intense sense of ownership to the neighborhood, a genuine fondness for these old buildings.

"I've always been close to the area, a local developer," he said. "I never ever thought of buying in the North End or the Back Bay."

He toughed it out through years of slow motion in this particular section, especially when a dip in real estate values in the 1990s made his Harrison Avenue holdings worth less than what he paid for them.

"This stuff takes time, you can't do it in a couple of years," Nicolsia said, softly. "I'm in it for the long haul."

Indeed, he continues to own



Rocca's sleek semicircular bar — and large quantity of free parking — have been a new draw to the SoWa neighborhood.

group, the trio operated the lauded restaurant Riato and the swish bar Noir in Harvard Square's luxury Charles Hotel, and the modernist bistro Blu in The Sports Club/L.A., next to the Ritz Carlton in Downtown Crossing.

Larson remembered the group's beginnings in up-and-coming East Cambridge, when it opened her namesake restaurant, Michalek, in 1985 in an old factory neighborhood she feels is comparative to Harrison Avenue.

"I loved that, being in territory that hadn't been developed," she said.

"When this came up, I loved the idea of pushing the limits of the South End."

She and her partners had been eyeing the area and talking with Nicolsia for a couple of years, feeling out the possibilities before they committed.

"We saw there was not a lot of foot traffic. We wanted to be sure

the successful partnership of Michela Rocca, Gary Sullivan, and Karen Haskell. As the Sapphire

properties at his first South End location, on St. Botolph, and his investment in this neighborhood extended to paying for private security patrols to help deter crime.



Regular open houses that invite visitors to tour artists' studios promote the area's cultural energy.



A Sunday open market on Harrison Avenue offers items such as fresh baked goods, plants, artwork, and textiles.

city pretty," said Kiger. "Like any urban area you have to watch out. I agree it's not perfect," said Dominic. "I agree it presents issues sometimes. But our approach is, let's have a dialogue and talk about what we can and can't do. Let's be creative. As long as people understand there are limits, once our guests have the property, we don't have any legal leverage with what they do."

For now the neighborhood retains the diversity that used to be found throughout the South End, a mix of edgy and funky that gives urban areas a particular allure. "It's a real city," said Larson, the restaurant. "It's an area that's still very mixed. That's part of its better get used to the Pine Street Inn's clientele, because the venues

that people weren't daunted by getting there," Larson said.

So, the restaurant boasts that luxury of all inner-city luxuries: 50 parking spaces in a lot bang next door — free.

"Just knowing you don't have to pay \$16 for parking is reason enough to go," cracked Nicolsia.

More are coming. In July, at 560 Harrison, near Boston Sports Club, the Aquatics Group is expected to open Ginkgit Brasmis du Club, which will include a table-top, section called Greenlights. In September, Boston architect David Duffy, who led the build-out of Rocca, is opening a furniture store at 520 Harrison. And GTI is developing more apartments, too.

John Kiger, GTI's leasing director for commercial properties, said his phone has been ringing constantly since January as more businesses seek to move into the area. But GTI, he said, is near full.

For now there is an uneasy co-existence between the new and old on this end of the South End. Just steps away is the Pine Street Inn, which in any given day can shelter dozens of homeless business.

"There's no question about it. It

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