



GOING UP?

NEW DEVELOPERS IN LITTLE ITALY FLEX THEIR MUSCLES WITH MIXED USE AND HIGH DESIGN.

By AnnaMaria Stephens
Photography by Robert Benson

When acclaimed architect Ted Smith found himself with an empty storefront in the oldest building in Little Italy, he knew just what to do. “Little Italy has great cafes, and wonderful croissants and cinnamon rolls,” he says. “But every once in a while you want a regular old breakfast.”

Along with other pioneering architect-developers like Jonathan Segal and Sebastian Mariscal, Smith helped turn Little Italy into the ultimate comeback kid, transforming the former fishing village mired in urban blight into a hip urban center. During that ambitious '90s undertaking, Smith, along with architect and real estate partner Robin Brisebois, fought to save the building, opting to rehab instead of raze the 125-year-old charmer, a marine supply store since the '60s.

When the owner retired, Smith put a sign in the window: “Fish, breakfast, or Mexican? Please call!” Then he decided to open his own eatery, Harbor Cafe, an old-school breakfast bar with a cook in the middle.

URBAN OUTFITTER
Clockwise from left: Jeff Svitak is part of the next generation of architects as developers, following in the footsteps of his mentor, Sebastian Mariscal, an early pioneer of the neighborhood; architect Jonathan Segal's Q building boasts a two-story penthouse; a view from Broadstone.

He only has to walk a few blocks from his digs at the Essex—another one of his standout neighborhood designs—to get his fill of flapjacks and farm-fresh omelets.

Meanwhile, the work of those early groundbreakers—whose boldface ranks also include Lloyd Russell and Rob Quigley—continues to inspire up-and-coming talent. Why? Because these renegades started the trend of transforming the neighborhood one small, odd-shaped and underused lot at a time. And that's doable even for the little guy, like InDev (indev-sd.com), a unique two-man urban development duo who got their start in Little Italy with a small project and are now building Ten on Columbia, set to be completed next spring.

Not far from that, on Columbia between Fir and Grape, Jeff Svitak (jeffsvitak.com), an in-demand young architect mentored by Mariscal, is putting the finishing touches on a modern-chic 18-unit building. He divided his project into six little buildings, which feature private patios, shared walkways and two courtyards, not to mention cross-ventilation that makes the most of the harbor breezes.

“It's very European,” says Svitak, who recently gorged on architecture during a trip around France.

But even deep-pocketed, larger developers are committed to maintaining what makes Little Italy a vibrant 'hood while still giving new tenants what they crave in contemporary condo living.

With 199 swank residential units, Broadstone (broadstonelittleitaly.com), inspired by Amalfi Coast resorts, boasts a golf simulator and

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NEW HEIGHTS From top: Marco li Mandri and Chris Gomez specialize in neighborhood redevelopment; a rendering of the Piazza Famiglia.



BY THE NUMBERS

That's Amore

San Diego's love affair with the historic Little Italy neighborhood is past and present.

1920s

The decade that ushered Little Italy into existence through immigration and booming tuna fishing industry

2016

Anticipated opening year for Piazza Famiglia, Little Italy's most ambitious public space

46

Square blocks making up Little Italy

\$5,141

Monthly rent for a penthouse apartment at the new Broadstone

456

New apartment units in the neighborhood

5

New restaurant openings this year, including Ironside Fish & Oyster, Juniper & Ivy, Ballast Point, Cookbook Tavola Calda and Harbor Cafe

...CONTINUED dance studio, electrical car charging stations and plenty of other cutting-edge amenities. At the opening party, acrobats swung gracefully over the zero-edge pool as guests sipped vino and gazed at bay views.

H.G. Fenton Company (hgfenton.com) is behind two new buildings, one a 97-unit tower with ground-floor retail offerings that will complement the Piazza Famiglia, another Fenton project. The new piazza, slated to be completed in a couple of years, will include a public promenade, umbrella-shaded bistro tables and a prominent water fountain.

"It's inspired by the great public spaces around the world," says Mike Neal, H.G. Fenton Company's CEO. "The area will be open and inviting, and will be a community gathering place that complements sidewalk dining and engages residents on their balconies above."

"Little Italy has been at the forefront of developing public spaces," says Marco li Mandri, a devoted local, who along with Chris Gomez, heads New City America. The firm specializes in neighborhood redevelopment and business improvement districts, including core client Little Italy. He was behind the push to take back the streets for the new piazza, which requires closing

Date Street to traffic between India and Columbia.

"Streets are public places," says li Mandri, who looks to New York's Bryant Park and similar gathering places throughout Europe and Mexico for inspiration. "They just happen to be devoted to cars. We're vacating streets and prioritizing the sidewalk. We're making opportunities for building public spaces."

That's welcome news for the ranks of eager residents who will be moving to Little Italy, and for the new restaurants, bars and boutiques that line its increasingly pedestrian-friendly streets. Some of the city's hottest spots are in the neighborhood, from design-minded restaurant Juniper & Ivy to hip lifestyle shop Love & Aesthetics. Older stalwarts are doing their part to boost curb appeal as well, like Indigo Grill, a Little Italy favorite that recently reopened with fresh style. Moreover, the appeal has been noticed across the border, with Baja-based chef Javier Placentia set to open his own outpost later this year.

"Families will come to Little Italy to get pizza or gelato, and they can sit on the corner and watch their kids play and hang out," says li Mandri. "Piazza Famiglia will be an outdoor living room for everybody to enjoy." ■

