

# the **Big** Chill







WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
BRADLEY WHEELER, ITALIAFOCUS.COM

ARCHITECT ROB PAULUS  
BRINGS A COOL-FACTOR  
TO AN INDUSTRIAL AREA  
OF TUCSON, AZ



IT'S 4:48 AM. EVEN THOUGH THE SUN WILL NOT peer over the desert rim for another 30 minutes, it is by now light. Already there are signs of life in an old ice factory-turned-condominium homes. "You know ... the building has soul," Architect Rob Paulus tells me while I expose the first set of images. "It would have been cheaper to knock it down and start from scratch, but it wouldn't have had the same nostalgia." Thus begins day one of my five day, large-format-photographic odyssey of Tucson's hottest residential buzz, the Ice House Lofts. My sojourn would grant me "honorary resident" status, giving me the opportunity to live in and become one with the community for a week.

The history of what is said to be Arizona's finest example of authentic residential loft space is already well documented. On a hot day in May 2002, Paulus received a phone call from a client to take a look at a 413-foot long, 1920s ice and cold storage facility. Within the blink of an eye, a development team (Deep Freeze Development, LLC) was in place including Paulus and his wife, Randi Dorman, and developers Phil Lipman and Warren Michaels.

Because Paulus as architect is part of the development team, the équipe was able to accomplish the Herculean feat of deciphering the existing structure into a workable scheme of 51 individual units all in one day. "Our infrastructure is light, so we were able to move quickly to develop the big picture. That's how we were able to get the ball rolling so quickly," says the internationally published architect. "After that, it got so big there was no turning back."

Some four years after that initial project meeting, the benefits of the Ice House Lofts abound. During the shoot, I witnessed a thriving Millville neighborhood. The vibe was even greater than when I had photographed Paulus' urban renewal project across the street, Barrio Metalico, about two years earlier. Ice House residents have a communal pride that they are doing their part to live in (thus save ... i.e. finance) an important example of Tucson's past while helping the desert ecology. In fact, in the process of not "knocking down" the original structure, 1,240 tons of concrete and 777 tons of brick (not to mention endless amounts of trusses, beams,



#### NUMBERS GAME

- 3,600 lineal feet of 2-inch diameter refrigerant piping was salvaged and repurposed for fencing around the pool and bike racks.
- 5 lineal miles of 1x7-foot box car siding was reused as wooden fencing
- Elsewhere, 5,000 feet of 2x10-foot lumber, 4,200 feet of 2x6-foot lumber, and 14,400 square feet of corrugated metal were used.
- The average unit is 1,333 square feet. Dimensions range from 15.5' to 18.5' wide by 65' deep. The maximum floor-to-ceiling height is 21 feet. Early purchasers picked up homes for about \$170 per square foot. One of those same units recently sold for \$247 per square foot. Another recently sold for \$269 per square foot. A unit that was originally offered at \$169 per square foot recently sold for \$251 per square foot.

\*Editor's note:

As we go to print, Rob Paulus' newest vision for Tucson's future is underway. It is 22 homes in the spirit of his Ice House. **More: [www.indigomodern.com](http://www.indigomodern.com)**



columns, etc.) were left in place – material that otherwise would have been carted off to a distant landfill.

“A special kind of person was drawn to the Ice House, not based strictly on price or square footage, but on helping to save this magnificent structure,” says resident Billy Maas, one of the first residents to purchase her double unit before it was completed. “There is a real sense of community here ... we can even borrow sugar from our neighbors or watch their kids for them,” she says poolside as an Ice House dinner party spontaneously erupts. “We even have a yoga class every Monday evening in my loft,” she exclaims as a huge bowl of pasta appears seemingly out of nowhere.

Obviously, Paulus’ vision for Tucson’s downtown has caught fire. Besides the community being able to look forward to one of his next projects, other local development is taking place. After the architect lead the way to redevelop the once forlorn quarter, now other developers have thrown their hats into the ring.

“The Ice House project is pivotal, and I can’t stress that enough,” emphasizes Tucson-based builder and developer, Michael Keith. Keith points out that Paulus had the “unique audacity” to realize Tucson had other markets beside the retirement demographic and that new urbanism would work in “the Old Pueblo.” “Rob realized that the city had been a prisoner of its past and was ready to merge with the future,” he contin-



ues. “Thanks to Rob, the adaptive re-use market has opened up. Now every building downtown has the potential of being residential, mixed use, or another use altogether.”

The City of Tucson is now a bit more willing to hear Paulus’ unconventional ideas in meetings. “We have a lot more political capital since the project has been completed,” he says. “It was challenging to make decisions that would please everyone,” Paulus explains, as I expose the final set of images. While I collect my equipment and say my goodbyes, I think about Tucson’s future ... and it’s past. I can only hope that the two continue to merge under the thoughtful watch of this talented architect.