

# Virgin territory

As new faces move to the megastore site, the area braces for change

By **Linda Matchan**  
GLOBE STAFF

It's not that Anna Bingaman dislikes "upscale people," per se.

They're fine, for the most part. "I don't mean to criticize," said Bingaman, 23, who was waiting for a bus at the corner of Newbury Street and Massachusetts Avenue, near her beloved former haunt, Virgin Megastore.

"But now that Virgin has gone out of business, it's probably definitely not going to be the same corner anymore," said Bingaman, who lives in Medford and is an event promoter for Avalon. "Which is unfortunate, especially if there are going to be more upscale people. They're a little more unfriendly. This is a happy, joyful little corner, and that's definitely going to change."

It's still unclear who the new tenant will be at this happy, joyful little piece of the Back Bay, occupied by such retail shops as Newbury Comics, J.P. Licks, Jasmine Sola, and Army Barracks. Curtis Kemeny, president of Boston Residential Group, which developed the property at 360 Newbury St., envisions a "high-end amenity" for the Massachusetts Avenue end of the street, which sits in the shadow of Berklee College of Music and has long been a playground of the young, pierced, and mohawked.

"We are still talking to multiple interested parties," said Kemeny, citing three categories of contenders: "Upscale home furnishings; upscale clothing, of course; and consumer electronics." (Best Buy is said to be one of several interested merchants.)

But the outcome is not a small deal to the youthful denizens of this area, between Hereford Street and Massachusetts Avenue, for whom Virgin and Urban Outfitters were "the lions at the gate" marking their turf, says Annette Born of the retail consulting and brokerage firm Urban/ Born Associates.

"The BSO and Berklee are the perimeter, and from here on in it's student-owned," says Ben Powell, 20, a jazz violinist studying at



PHOTO BY PAT GREENHOUSE / GLOBE STAFF

Anna Bingaman, an event promoter for Avalon, on the corner of Newbury Street and Massachusetts Avenue (shown on the next page): "Now that Virgin has gone out of business, it's probably definitely not going to be the same corner anymore. . . . This is a happy, joyful little corner, and that's definitely going to change."

Berklee. "This end of Newbury is a little on the low end of the scale. It's ruled by us."

But their power may soon be usurped. Virgin was located on the lower three floors of 360 Newbury, a dramatic Frank Gehry building recently restored by Kemeny's group. The top five floors, formerly office space, have been converted to 54 chic, loft-style "luxury residences" with a top ceiling height of 19 feet and a top asking price of \$3.5 million. The lofts have panoramic views that sweep Cambridge, Fenway Park, and Boston Common; top-of-the-line appliances; high-end fixtures; granite counters; penthouses with two-story-high living and dining rooms; and a lobby with a blue granite floor and onyx panels in the elevators.

So far, 40 units have been sold, says Kemeny, 44, who plans to live here himself, in a two-

story, 2,900-square-foot penthouse. (His own countertops are quartz).

Residents started moving in last month. And they definitely bring a different demographic to the street.

They include "yuppie couples with no kids, in their late 20s and early 30s" who work downtown in fields such as technology, finance, and media, Kemeny says, and "really get this end of the street." They include "creative" sorts like "restaurateurs and developers," and retired empty nesters, "but not your average retired nesters. They're urbanites, with a particular sense of taste and style. They're very active. They don't want to be square, and they don't want to live in a white box with services to the nth degree. They see it as a piece of art, and like the youthfulness of



Newbury Street."

They include retailers such as David Wayne, 54, owner of the Sleep-a-Rama store across the street, and his partner, Paul Fortier, 52, who moved here from the new Ritz because "we like the location and the vibes," said Wayne.

"We move a lot," added Fortier. "This is our eighth or ninth move in 13 years."

"My sense of the people at 360 is that they are urban sophisticates," says Kemeny. "They are very definite about their tastes. The fact that this building is a Gehry building, located on Newbury Street, that it has the views that it has and the finishes that it has — all these things are very meaningful to these people, in a very particular way."

They are also people who don't mind the muted roar of the Turnpike beneath the west-facing windows, or a luxury condo without a parking space (though they can rent one at a garage across the street for \$375 a month) or a balcony (only one suite has a deck).

They seem to be Bostonians who want to feel like they're in New York.

The building is "very iconoclastic for Boston, more like a slice of New York," says Hien Nguyen, 36, who works in finance, loves architecture, and purchased a two-story penthouse unit where his expansive windows give him an up-close view of Gehry's angular structural beams.

"When I saw this space, I knew it was the perfect space for me," said Nguyen, who likes its "modern aesthetic" and industrial sensibility, and felt it would accommodate his growing collection of African tribal wood sculptures and his postmodern furniture. "In this building, you could be in SoHo."

"I grew up in New York City, so I like the feeling of the city, and this does it for me, without having any buildings blocking my view," said Carol Sharp, 47, co-owner of Ilex Designs, a flower shop in the South End and on Beacon Hill.

"I wanted people on the street, a place that was vibrant, and food was readily accessible. Basically, I take out," said Sharp, who moved here in early October and is thrilled with her barely-used kitchen that features sleek Italian



PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE / GLOBE STAFF

**Curtis Kemeny, president of Boston Residential Group, which developed the property at 360 Newbury St., envisions a "high-end amenity" for this end of Newbury.**

cabinets; a Carrara marble tile backsplash; a Dornbracht faucet; and Sub-Zero, Bosch, and Miele appliances.

The building at 360 Newbury is just the latest hot luxury address to enter Boston's expanding and competitive world of condo development, each swankier than the last. The Ritz-Carlton Towers offers five-star hotel service. One Charles in the Back Bay has a private club room and fitness center. The Residences at Mandarin Oriental, Boston, slated for completion next year, will have roof terraces and private elevators. The architect in charge of renovation for 360 Newbury, Larry Grossman of ADD Inc, said he's working on a project in Natick where every unit has an iPod docking station.

The 360 Newbury building has none of these, though even design-conscious Boston condo mavens concede Kemeny scored a home run with his Arclinea cabinets, Ann Sacks bathtubs, and electric retractable window shades.

Still, the building's a bit edgy for some Bostonians.

"Our friends thought we were crazy," said empty-nester Georgette Boucai, 58, who is

moving here with her husband, Sol, and selling their longtime home in Newton. The couple, who own Truffles Fine Confections, bought two adjacent units and are combining them into one.

**MORE PHOTOS OF  
360 NEWBURY**

View a photo gallery at  
[boston.com/yourlife/home](http://boston.com/yourlife/home).

"They said, 'Why would you buy such a place with no indoor parking?'" said Sol, 61.

They did it because they loved the building, and "at this stage of my life, I want to live somewhere funky," Georgette said. "We can walk to wherever we are going, or take a cab, from here to, say, Mistral, to go to dinner. I want to be able to go downstairs and be in all the hustle and bustle."

She acknowledges, though, she's a bit leery about the particular hustle and bustle endemic to the Massachusetts Avenue end of Newbury, the area now ruled by the students. "I'm not sure how I feel about it," she said. "I'll probably walk out of the building and walk to my right."