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PROJECT OF THE MONTH
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AIA Project of the Month: Agnes Lofts: it's the windows

By CLAIR ENLOW
Special to the Journal

When developer Liz Dunn contemplated ideas for her parcel at the corner of 12th and Pike, there were certain non-negotiable items. First and foremost: No punched windows.

This simple rule is not so easy to carry out in a small, mid-rise apartment building if you want a reasonable return on investment. Fortunately, Dunn's passion for this — and other basic design concepts — is shared by the architectural firm she chose, Weinstein A/U.

Photo by Michael Burns

Agnes Lofts rise above the corner of 12th and Pike, next to the renovated Piston and Ring Building. Two-story windows tell the world these are not typical one-bedroom apartments.

A punched window is the ubiquitous hole in a wall, a building tradition held over from historic construction.

The alternative, which has taken various forms since early modernism, is a larger expanse of glass. It typically starts at the floor level and breaks surrounding walls into sections. The free interplay of thick and thin, solid and void, is a consistent theme of modernism, early and "neo."

Floor-to-ceiling windows change the experience of a building from inside and out. Modern architects have made good use of this device to blend interior space with natural surroundings.

Agnes Lofts
12th Avenue and Pike Street

Architect
Weinstein A|U Architects
+ Urban Designers

Ed Weinstein, design principal
Lesley Bain, principal-in-charge
Kevin Tabari, project architect

Owner
Liz Dunn
Urban Shelter

But they have even more significance in the city, especially in an urban apartment building like Agnes Lofts, Dunn's new building at 12th and Pike. The private domain of the units extends into the street and the city, gaining the perception of space. In turn, the street gets a lift with a glimpse of life inside the building.

Dunn and the Weinstein team somehow made everything else work.

First, they settled on conventional five-over-one (wood frame on concrete) construction, with street-level retail. Then they cast as many rules aside as they could to fit 24 loft-like units into the code-limited height of about 69 feet.

“We were limited by conventions, but wanted to go beyond conventions to optimize a small footprint,” said design principal Ed Weinstein.

They had to push the ratio of leasable units to gross square footage. With multi-family buildings of this size, that's the key to financial feasibility, according to principal-in-charge Leslie Bain.

“It's easy to do six or eight,” she said. And projects with 50 to 60 units tend to pencil out easier because they can still be built with a single elevator. But city apartments with 20-or-so units (with elevator) are a different story, especially if you want something more than flats.

Ultimately, they won. With only three floors at the perimeter of the apartment levels (and mezzanines behind), the two-story, floor-to-ceiling windows define the building.

“The unit plates are reflected in the outcome of the elevation,” said Weinstein.

“The rest of the building was designed to hold those windows up,” laughs Dunn.

Behind each window is a loft apartment that has a bed-and-bath mezzanine with a kitchen tucked underneath, and a full-height sitting area near the outer window-wall. At the street-front side of the building, the windows wrap around the corners for an even more expansive view.

The actual floor space is modest, by loft standards, and the ceiling height of the mezzanine and the kitchen underneath is just 7 feet, 4 inches to the beams, low by any standards. But with exposed decking higher over the beams, it seems more open.

Type
24-apartment unit
mixed-use building

Size
Gross area: 40,000 square feet
Apartment sizes: 685 square feet to 99 square feet

Completion
October 2007

Structural engineer
PAO Structural Engineering

Mechanical/Energy Code Consultant:
Ecotope

Civil engineer
KPFF Consulting Engineers

Geotechnical engineer
Pan Geo

Envelope consultant
BEE Consulting

Code consultant
T.A. Kinsman Consulting Co.

General contractor
Chinn Construction

Jury comments

“Nice integration within the character of the neighborhood. Elegant yet simple design, with modern lines and excellent use of natural light.”

“…unapologetic urbanism. This project shows again that simple well-proportioned facades, expansive windows, sensible materials and detailing can more than compensate for (overused conventions like) hyper-modulated cemenitious clad buildings with white vinyl windows … OK, if I can’t get a unit at Columbia City Live Work I’ll take one here.”

Photo by Michael Burns

The mezzanine leaves just seven feet, four inches of clearance in the kitchen. But high windows make the unit seem spacious.

In fact, the units feel wildly spacious. Because of the expanse of windows in the outside wall, you can compress space (through the floor height of the mezzanine) without feeling oppressed, according to project architect Kevin Tabari.

Other standard elements, like hardwood floors and exposed beams, give you that loft feeling. Sliding doors to the bathrooms are surface-mounted instead of pocketed, for an open, industrial attitude.

The windows themselves — designed for high-rise construction but code-compliant for residential — were expensive.

“It's basically two (one-story)
window walls tied together by horizontal tube steel, with a flush structural header,” explained Tabari.

Although full-height windows are not inherently more costly to build into a project than “punched,” they don't fit into estimating conventions for wood-frame or multi-family construction, and contractors tend to mark them up. But Dunn found one contractor, Chin Construction, that was willing to learn along with them.

Costs were squeezed out in other ways. Sheets of clear, two-layer plastic polycarbonate replace rails on the steel stairs, which where otherwise fairly expensive. The kitchen is furnished with pre-manufactured cabinetry from Ikea.

“It's probably not as profitable a project as it might be, but in the long run it will pay off,” said Dunn.

The secret to the success of Agnes Lofts lies in the adjacent building along 12th, also owned and developed by Dunn. The one-story Piston and Ring building has been smartly renovated to accommodate a number of commercial tenants. The skinny new Agnes Lofts towers over it. They're an odd couple, but together, the pair contributes to the kind of block that makes a city.

It's not what a speculative developer would be expected to do. Preserving the older building makes the 58-foot by 91-foot apartment building too small to yield enough rentable units for a typical multi-family pro forma. And keeping the old building leaves too much code-approved height on that site unused. While the Piston and Ring Building has its tough, early-industrial charm, it's not a designated landmark.

But the decision not to demolish gives back, in more than one way. First, it provides the kind of contrast in scale and character that makes a city exciting, and gives the neighborhood the kind of continuity that defines the place. In this way, every new project surrounding it — no matter how badly designed — benefits. With a new deck area and low profile, it has given the block a de-facto open space.

"Most people just don't stop to think about what you can leverage out of an old building," said Dunn.

Photo by Michael Burns

Transparent polycarbonate in place of stair railings saves money and lets more light through.

The buildings may look independent, but for Dunn, it's all about the relationship. Behind the visible shell, they're very connected because she and the architect found ways to make it pay.

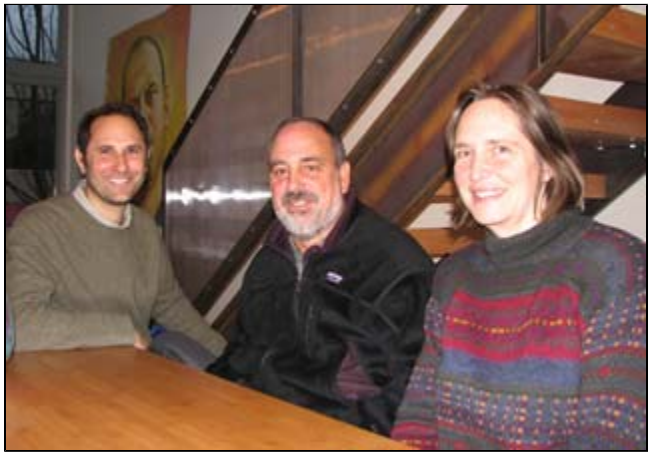

Photo by Clair Enlow

Kevin Tabari, Ed Weinstein and Leslie Bain at Agnes Lofts

The secret was adding a mezzanine floor inside the two-story, underground level of the old automotive building. That mezzanine adds leasable commercial space — now occupied by a toy store and a professional office — that opens onto a new deck, while keeping the structural beams of the old building. The deck is set to become part of a kind of inner-block mews that winds through to 11th Avenue and another of Dunn's properties.

Agnes Lofts and three levels of the renovated Piston and Ring building share one elevator, built into the south side of the apartments. The two buildings are also connected underground, through

a base level of storage and parking, and another level of rentable commercial space below grade.

And the low-profile older building gives back to the new building in one more way. Agnes Lofts was able to justify windows on the south side, with great views. The plan helped to secure the number and quality of the units inside.

A new restaurant called Boom Noodle thrives in the base of the Agnes Lofts building. A theater group has moved into the basement, accessed through the Piston and Ring Building. A total of three restaurant tenants straddle the street-level space, with two in the old building.

The loft units leased almost immediately, and there is a waiting list. Driven by some simple but powerful design priorities, the project is a magic attractor on one corner of the Pike-Pine neighborhood.

“It's the windows,” Dunn said.

The Project of the Month feature is sponsored by the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The Project of the Month for January was selected with the assistance of UW professor Eddy Rojas, landscape architect Michele Arab and architect Ron Van der Veen. For more information about submitting projects for possible feature articles, contact Stephanie Pure at AIA Seattle, (206) 448-4938, or stephaniep@aiaseattle.org.

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