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AIA Project of the Month: 1310 Union: modern steel in a brick world

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)
Special to the Journal

If you walk along 12th Avenue, from Pike Street to the confluence of Madison and Union streets, you'll see the odd historic window arch or crown cornice: traditional builders' details in a streetscape still marked by benign neglect and missing pieces.

There are some newly revived storefronts and renovations, too, and then there's 1310 Union. It stands between an old brick apartment building, a bakery and a car-repair shop in the back. In scale with the historic neighborhood but definitely not in step, it's a whole new way of living in this area.



Photos courtesy of Miller/Hull

With industrial materials and an exposed structure, 1310 Union makes a modernist statement in the redeveloping neighborhood near 14th and Madison.

It's basically a stack of lofts over retail, stepped right up to the property line and boxed in a deceptively simple shell.

But what a box.

Layers of exposed steel structure and

lots of glass belie its modest mid-rise scale. Like a shipping crate so overbuilt that it hints at very interesting contents, the seven-story, mixed-use building catches the eye and challenges the imagination.

Developer Liz Dunn collaborated with Miller|Hull Partnership's Dave Miller and Kurt Stolle to create a bold, modernist addition to the neighborhood. The exposed steel frame was fabricated off-site. Fire house red-tubular steel X-bracing faces the central bay, right in front of motorized garage doors that open up each floor to the city and reinforce the strong presence of the building. Stock glass and aluminum storefronts stack up on each side. The potentially overwhelming symmetry of this façade is broken by a top deck on one side of the central bay. Three steel balconies add more dimension.

"The building is an absolutely literal expression of what is on the inside," said Dunn, a high-tech industry veteran who began her second career by studying urban design and real estate development at the University of Washington.

From the exposed I-beams and corrugated decking on the ceilings to the polished concrete floors, the structure is as visible and honest in the lofty interiors as it is on the outside. With garage doors up, the occupants stand with only thin steel cable railings between their feet and the street almost directly below. The team rejected EIFS siding in favor of hand-stained cement board panels.

As many other developers have found, this kind of raw beauty is a tough act.

"Keeping it pure and simple is not always as easy as it looks," said Stolle.

For one thing, the fire code precludes exposing steel columns. At 1310 Union, however, a special coating that puffs up at high temperatures does the job. And to keep things pure, no mechanical rooms can pop up above the ceiling or hide in the corner, framed over. "There's a lot of work that

1310 Union

Architect
The Miller|Hull
Partnership, David Miller,
partner-in-charge,
Kurt Stolle, project manager

Owner
Liz Dunn, Anemone LLC

Project type
Live/work lofts

Project size
16,800 square feet

Completion date
Fall 2001

Construction cost
\$ 3.2 million

Structural engineer
Swenson Say Faget

Electrical engineer
Ed David, Jomega

Mechanical engineer
Sider & Byers

Civil engineer
Taylor Engineering
Consultants
General contractor
Turner Construction

Jury comments: "1310 Union is the caliber of building that should have been built in Belltown. Hopefully it will raise the standard for urban living in Seattle."

"This is a building of great visual interest, purposefully detailed. You have a sense that everything was studied, designed and crafted well."

goes into keeping things right in the walls," said Dunn.

Fitting the floor plans together was a puzzler. Each floor contains two units, varying in size from 700 to 1,000 square feet. The fourth and fifth level units are double height along the street façade, and mezzanines effectively add another floor to each. The lower, one-level units are fit into the floorplate so each reaches from front to back for light, ventilation and fire access.

A 575-square-foot flower shop occupies the street level, along with the lobby.

Parking was another challenge. To create parking for modest-sized cars, Dunn and the designers came up with a very urban idea: a German-made, pivoting hydraulic lift to serve a two-level garage in the rear.



Looking out from the mezzanine bedroom in the top unit, layers of structure frame city views.

Dunn began the project as Anemone

Partners, with another tech industry veteran seeking a live-work space of her own. They were originally attracted to the 40-foot by 80-foot lot because of its modest size. But Dunn, who took over the project as Dunn & Hobbes, soon found that with the industrial-strength architecture she wanted, she would have to build up for the project to pencil out.

The building code took a bite out of the floor plate for stairways. But the 64 percent lot coverage limit mandated in the Seattle zoning code was just not compatible with her vision of an urban neighborhood — historic or modern.

"It looks very suburban, frankly," she said. But Dunn wouldn't let her project go.

Through 1310 Union, Dunn was becoming an advocate for street-conscious new construction on a small scale. The upshot of design review was the right to build on 88 percent of the lot area. It's not a tight fit, but it puts the "fill" into "infill," completing the urban streetscape in ways commensurate with traditional multi-story urban settings. It also juxtaposes old and new in a way Dunn says suits the neighborhood: an urban place where historic bricks and modern steel belong together.

Followers of 1310 Union's bold, modernist example have not been swift to appear. That's because, at over \$195 per square foot, the cost was high, and the profit margin was low, at best. For Dunn, it was non-existent. The raw shell turned some potential buyers away. She was hoping she could do better than break-even. Instead, her prospects, already dampened by the tech bust, took a dive when sales really got started — in September of 2001. "People lost their sense of adventure," she said.

So she moved in herself. "You can tell the difference between a model unit and a place people live," said Dunn, opting for the latter. She and her partner lived in the top unit for 18 months, while potential buyers trooped through in the cool 9/11 real estate market.

Then Nate and Luanne Skou came along, giving up their home in Mount Baker for a new lifestyle. He's a financial advisor and she manages the Seattle showroom for Herman Miller, and they are typical of the mid-career owners at 1310 Union.

"Everyone who works outside walks to work," said Luanne Skou.

Since the initial sales, half the eight units have turned over. They appreciated an average of 30 percent almost immediately, according to Dunn.

She hopes that 1310 Union will be the steep side of the learning curve as she works her plan for the neighborhood. In addition to adding high-quality modern architecture, her vision also includes fine-grained, pedestrian-friendly development inspired by Post Alley and Harbor Steps.

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and simple is not
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it looks.'***

***-- Kurt Stolle,
Miller|Hull
Partnership***

Her company, Dunn & Hobbes, now owns six properties around 12th and Madison. Some of the pieces on one street are contiguous with those on the other.

"This," said Dunn, "is a big opportunity to carve out the center of the block for a pedestrian mews."

Her strategy of carefully selecting local and regional retail tenants is one she shares with developer Ted Schroth, who is renovating the Trace Building at 12th and Madison. (See "Developers Work Together to Build a Neighborhood" in the June 14 edition of the DJC.)

Her own renovation of the Piston & Ring Building will be completed this spring. Designed by Weinstein A|U, it will house Osteria Restaurant and retail tenants. Her 12th & Pike Marketplace lofts, a new mixed-use apartment and retail building also designed by Weinstein A|U, is scheduled for completion in early 2007.

The new multi-family project will be partly wood frame construction. But she has not given up her modernist convictions.

"1310 pushed the envelope in every possible direction," said Dunn. With the help of Weinstein A/U, also a strongly modernist design firm, she will hang on to certain basic concerns even as she scales down the structure and the expense.

The basics, according to Dunn, include "giving people an open floor plan Â... and I could go on for hours about windows — outside and inside."

1310 Union has been a big boost for Miller|Hull. "That project brought in so much work," said Miller. "We've had to turn down half of it." They didn't turn down a condominium mid-rise now nearing completion in the River North area of Chicago, where Dave Miller once worked with Skidmore Owings & Merrill. Its structure is much in the vein of 1310 Union.



Photo by Clair Enlow

From left to right, condo owners Luanne and Nate Skou with developer Liz Dunn and architect Kurt Stolle.

And now a 120-unit light steel-frame building at 14th and Madison is in the schematic phase for developer Charlaine Curtis.

With friends like these, the rapidly redeveloping edge of the Pike/Pine neighborhood might become an EIFS-free zone. No Belltown spec style here.

"I'm just not interested in doing a project with punched vinyl windows," said Dunn.

September's AIA/DJC Project of the Month, 1310 Union, was selected by King County Housing Authority director Stephen Norman, architect Leslie Bain, and architect Jim Suehiro.

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