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Live-work lofts bring a fresh face to a landmark space

By Valerie Easton

"Mixed-use" takes on new meaning in a Columbia City project that is more about community than retail. Not that the takeout tamale shop and the bed and breakfast aren't bustling. It's just that people are also stopping in to consult an architect or reading tutor, others are living and working in the eight lofts designed for ultimate flexibility by architect Philip Christofides.

The three-story, live/work lofts are welcoming, with red trim, bright yellow doors and floor-to-ceiling windows. Built by Flip Builders, the project's size and style fit harmoniously into Columbia City's Landmark District. The units are grouped around a cobbled courtyard that invites pedestrians to stroll through by linking up with the network of neighborhood alleys.

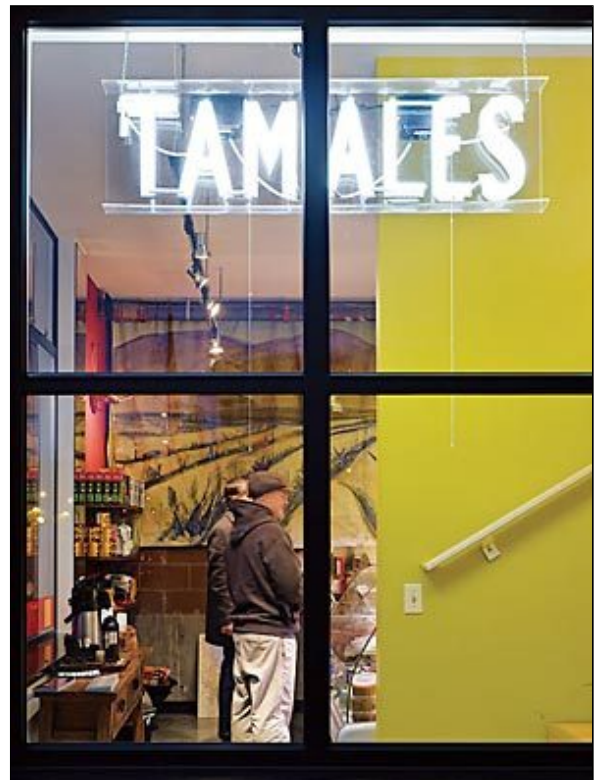
"We wanted to design a project that built community within itself," says Christofides, pointing out the semiprivate rooftop decks and the roll-up garage doors opening to the shared courtyard/alley space.

Inside, each fee-simple loft is 2,000 square feet of clean-lined, modern space. The walls are painted in the rich, modern color palette architect Christofides is known for, with streamlined kitchens, wall-sized windows and floors of bamboo, cork or Marmoleum.

The units were designed for maximum flexibility so owners could choose for themselves how to use their space. One unit houses a legal author's library and workspace on the first two floors, topped by an apartment on the third. A group of architects bought another unit and share the ground-floor conference room. Perhaps the most innovative use is the two-level B&B apartment that sleeps four and rents for a week at a time. The owner says it's often rented by parents visiting their grown children living in Columbia City, or by people with relatives in nearby hospitals.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Eight live-work lofts with rooftop decks are a fresh take on urban renewal in Seattle's Columbia City neighborhood.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The neon "Tamales" sign enlivens the building and draws customers to Villa Victoria for a trademark banana leaf-wrapped tamale. The takeout shop occupies the ground level; up the steps is the architecture firm of Arellano-Christofides.

Developer Rob Mohn and Christofides began by sitting down together to imagine what could and should take place on this former parking lot. They wanted to design a street-friendly project that would attract both residents and business people. They visualized a building adaptable enough to evolve with the community around it. "We tried to imagine 100 years from now, not just the moment, and realized it was impossible to predict how the neighborhood would change," says Christofides.

There were challenges. This is the first new project in the heart of Columbia City's Landmark District in 40 years. It went through six land-use reviews. But Christofides and Mohn prevailed with their modern spin on the old-world concept of living above the bakery.

"With Philip's help, we were able to use the city's new live/work regulations to develop something this flexible," says Mohn. They'd expected more people might opt to live in their units, but so far most are being used for commercial purposes. Forty people occupy the lofts during the day while others return home to them in the evening. Such an innovative project may well serve as a fresh model for revitalizing older neighborhoods.

"We grossly underbuilt here; there were plans for a 23-unit condo development on the site," says Christofides, clearly pleased with the comfortable neighborhood scale of the eight-unit project. Didn't economic viability require more units to be built on this prime piece of real estate? "Overbuilding comes from a lack of imagination as much as economics," says Christofides. "We don't have to have all these bloated buildings."

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BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Huge windows, pale interior colors and clean design lend a feeling of near-transparency despite the brick construction. This legal office looks across the courtyard toward the off-street half of the project.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Editor Barbara Helen works and lives part-time in a top-floor apartment she describes as "unbelievably cool, and quiet at night." She loves that the space is divided up so efficiently and that her commute is mere steps.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
The lofts are light and airy, with high ceilings. Blond cabinetry, chartreuse walls and Marmoleum floors distinguish the top two floors occupied by the Arellano-Christofides architecture firm.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
This is the first new project in 40 years in Columbia City's Landmark District. Its yellow doors, red trim and wall-sized windows are welcoming, yet the sturdy look of its load-bearing masonry construction fits into the ambience of the historic neighborhood.

Why Columbia City?

"This little neighborhood has great bones," says developer Rob Mohn. "It's the only truly pedestrian neighborhood in the south end of the city." He appreciates Columbia City's density, its sense of place and fine old architecture.

If you subscribe to the old, recently resurrected idea that quality of life is measured by what you're able to walk to, the neighborhood has a library, farmers market, cinema, restaurants and thriving arts community all within a few blocks. Mohn has his office on the ground floor of one of the project's units and rents out the top two floors as a bed and breakfast until he and his family are ready to move into it in year or so.
