

art you can build

holst's urban infill work is helping to propel portland's renaissance from industrial city to design destination.

by cheryl weber, lead ap



Ty Milford/Aurora Select

Innovators John T. Holmes and Jeffrey Stuhr provide the link between well-crafted design and conventional budgets. Outside, their infill buildings interact with the street; inside, they're full of light.

Rising 16 stories, with a fractal pattern of windows and red glass balconies that run playfully up and down the cream-colored brick façade, the 937 Condominiums are the latest jewel of the Pearl District, an arty shopping area in a former industrial section of downtown Portland, Ore. The building's eye-catching rhythm is the creation of Holst Architecture, a small practice with a bold aesthetic and a firm grip on the challenges of multifamily infill. In a city with an overabundance of designated historic districts lined with stout brick buildings, 937 comes across as elegant and light, yet its masonry material blends in with the neighborhood. Complementary, sustainable, and distinct, the project showcases Holst's talent for an inventive contextualism that jazzes up the urban landscape.

Those gifts are a natural fit in green-

minded Portland, where nature and culture converge to create an inviting form of urbanism. Surrounded by mountains, rivers, and vineyards, Portland's smart-growth planning codes and investment in mass transit have given rise to a humanly scaled city with a rich street life, one where eclectic art galleries and jazz clubs rub shoulders with brewpubs, bike shops, and bakeries. It takes architecture seriously too. In the last six or seven years, a collection of dynamic corporate and mixed-use buildings have energized neighborhoods on both banks of the Willamette River—a dividing line between the downtown core and the east side. One of them—the Holst-designed world headquarters for Ziba, a product-design firm—opened last year to critical acclaim.

Holst co-founder John T. Holmes, AIA, is a native of that realm, having grown



Photos: Lauren Coleman



Chris Hodney

Industrial and sumptuous materials commingle on the Clinton Condominiums, where street-level shops are wrapped in earthy mahogany. The project's 27 units were inspired by a geode, with a hard shell of Cor-Ten steel and crystalline glass privacy panels that become luminous at night. Dark walnut floors and cabinetry continue the theme inside.

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With its black-stained cedar siding and floating stucco balconies, Sunrose Condominiums is a visual anchor in an eclectic neighborhood. The 32 residential units, with 6,000 square feet of retail, rework Portland's typical shotgun condo layout with wide, shallow living spaces and window walls.



Photos: Chris Hodney



up in the Portland suburb of Gresham. Jeffrey Stuhr, Assoc. AIA, the other half of the business partnership, was raised in Salem, the state capital. The two met when Holmes was renting desk space in the office of architect Lee Winn, Stuhr's employer at the time. "With a little needling, John convinced me I should stop working for someone else and go out on my own," Stuhr says. "We ended up on the street together." They joined forces—not on the street, as it turns out, but in the attic of Stuhr's house—launching Holst Architecture in 1992 (the name is a hybrid of Holmes and Stuhr).

The firm grew steadily, adding one or two new employees each year to keep pace with the restaurant interiors and residential renovations that were staples early on. Later, as Portland turned its attention to salvaging its industrial warehouses, so, too, did Holmes and Stuhr. Their warehouse conversions for institutions and nonprofits quickly earned them a reputation for head-turning

design executed frugally and efficiently. And from the start, the partners extended Portland's deeply rooted environmental values. Their 2001 work on the Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center for Ecotrust, a conservation nonprofit, garnered the first LEED Gold rating in the United States for renovation.

a clear vision

Once an architecture firm is typecast, however, breaking into a new market can be frustratingly difficult. It took nearly 10 years for Holmes and Stuhr to score a new-building commission, but the opportunity came during the dot-com bust of the early 2000s, when former commercial developer Nels Gabbert—with partners Randy Rapaport and Lindley Morton—invited them to design the mixed-use Belmont Street Lofts. Even then, the Holst team had to find more experienced developers to secure a construction loan, since this was also Gabbert's first foray into condos. "You

can't just sit on a chair and wait for people to knock on your door, you have to figure out how to put stuff together," Holmes says. "We've always had that ethic; we try to make things happen."

That four-story building—consisting of 27 modest condos with street-level retail and parking beneath—differentiated itself from the competition in several strategic ways. While Holmes and Stuhr say most Portland condos are fitted together like a shoebox, with windows at the narrow end, the duo maximized natural light by turning the traditional box to the side, increasing the glazing, and placing the living spaces along the window line. They also finessed simple, affordable materials in unexpected ways to subtly knit the building to its neighborhood. With steel and concrete prices skyrocketing, they designed a timber structure with concrete floors that span the exposed wood ceilings. "Every square foot that you can leverage helps the thing pencil out," Holmes says. "Brick is heavy, so you have to build a



Units in the 937 Condominiums building (a collaboration with Ankrom Moisan Associated Architects) absorb warmth from the sun. The exterior's light-toned brick evokes downtown Portland's early 20th-century buildings, but the random, organic pattern of windows and red glass balconies are hallmarks of Holst's focused modernism.

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—john t. holmes, aia



Renderings: Courtesy Holst Architecture



The Housing Authority of Portland's Resource Access Center includes administrative offices and transitional housing, and will be the city's first commercial building to harvest graywater. Energy calculations drove the size of the windows, but Holst's playful use of green spandrel glass deinstitutionalizes the façade and makes the windows seem larger.

stronger structure; a lightweight skin, like ipe, lightens up the building and lets you build it for less money.”

The exterior's renewable Brazilian ipe rainscreen is a riff on the fire station across the street, its singed, deformed brick echoing the wood's coloring and variations. “Some people take contextualism very literally,” Holmes explains. “The problem is that buildings aren't executed to the same degree of detail as they were years ago, so you get a dumbed-down response; we try to abstract it more.” Understanding what materials can do gives Holst an edge on less talented architects. While the wood siding has been much copied recently on Portland's condo buildings, it was novel at the time.

Such nimble solutions have earned them the respect of infill developers, who typically seek vibrant buildings with long-lasting appeal rather than ego-driven design statements. That was certainly true in Gabbert's case. “They are able, with the fairly simple use of materials and thoughtful design, to create an impact that's not necessarily flashy or expensive, but a subtle, strong statement that people respond to,” he says. What's more, their clear vision makes them easy to work with. “They come up with an overall approach of where they want to go and begin to develop well-grounded strategies to get there,” Gabbert adds. “They don't deliver a piece of art and say, ‘Now we have to figure out how to build it.’ They know where they want to go and how to get there in a way that's affordable and within time constraints.”

portland and beyond

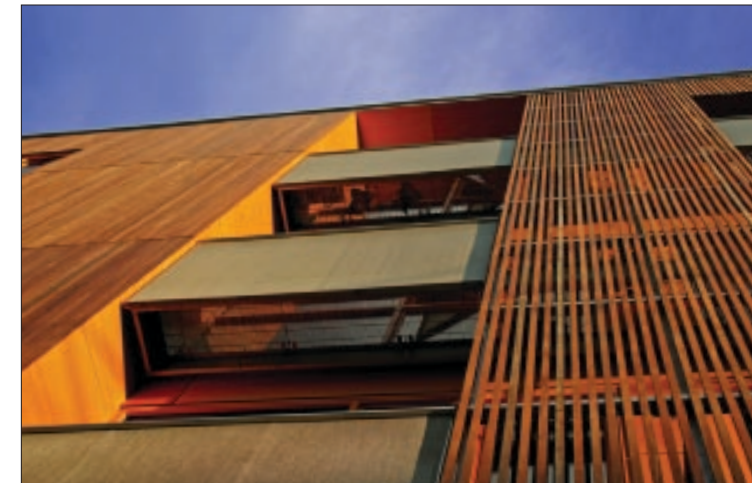
Since then, Holst has embraced infill projects in concert with the city. But its

most difficult challenge isn't making stylish buildings that support sustainable lifestyles. Rather, it's making such products profitable for developers. The firm's experience with nonprofits has made it pragmatic, adept at squeezing a lot of design value into every budget while focusing on craft and human scale. Interiors typically have just two or three materials—often gypsum board, wood, and stone. They have good light and are simple, clean, and elegant, allowing the owners to put their stamp on the space.

Holst's buildings are also unified from the ground up, respecting the street but not mimicking it. One of its trademark moves is creating boxy extrusions that articulate parts of the structure, which breaks down the mass while providing opportunities for balconies and expanses of glass. The firm often deinstitutionalizes its buildings by using fir or mahogany rather than aluminum on street-level storefronts and by hiring local craftsmen to shop-build the unit interiors.

To hear Stuhr and Holmes tell it, all this plays out in constant collaboration between them and their 13-member staff. The partners share design and marketing responsibilities, though one or the other takes the lead on each project. “Our ethic is to continually question our assumptions and those of our clients to get the best design response,” Stuhr says. “We keep pushing when we come up against a wall.” They also push for LEED certification (they anticipate a LEED Platinum rating for the 937 Condominiums building), because the process creates a framework for decisions. Yet they're realists too. “Other times, we say, Let's not spend \$50K on getting certified and instead put the money into the building. We have to be smarter these days about getting things executed.”

The tanking economy has changed a lot of things for Holst's principals. Yet



Photos: Lauren Coleman

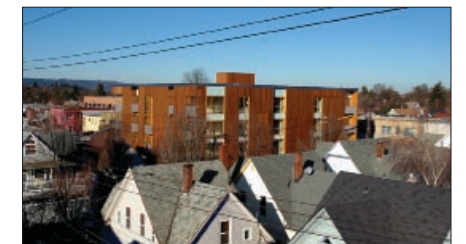
while many firms are down to a skeleton staff these days, they only had to lay off three employees last fall. Holmes attributes their resilience to a solid client referral base and their quick switch to public sector projects when the condo market began to crumble. “Until the banks can deal with all the problems they have, I don't see condos coming back in any strong way,” he says. “There might be a few select projects here and there, but not like it was.”

Slated to take the firm through 2011 is the Resource Access Center, an eight-story building with 130 public housing units, a men's shelter, and a day center for the homeless, plus administrative offices for the Housing Authority of Portland. With a goal of LEED Platinum, it will include advanced framing and insulation systems, solar hot water, and graywater harvesting.

With fortuitous timing, Holst's work has captured attention outside Portland too. It recently landed a commission in Amherst, Mass., from a private developer

who does mixed-use housing on and around college campuses. “They found us on the Internet,” Holmes says, surprised. “I think they did a fairly extensive search and found that there aren't many firms with a niche of mid-rise urban infill projects.” He continues, “Lots of people are going back to school now, and public/private partnerships with universities are a market niche that seems to have some life.”

Holst's emerging East Coast presence offers a nice bit of symmetry and promise, given that Stuhr and Holmes have long admired the work of Pietro Belluschi, the Italian-American architect and former dean of the MIT School of Architecture + Planning. Known for his pragmatic approach to modernism, Belluschi designed more than 1,000 buildings—most of them in Portland and New England—between the 1940s and 1960s. It's not hard to imagine that Holst, too, is well on its way to making a broader mark on America's up-and-coming urban places. **ra**



Adam Bacher

Holst's first major new project, Belmont Street Lofts (2004), embraced Portland's values of low-impact living and arty design. The abstracted use of simple, natural materials—ipe rainscreen and Spanish resin panels, for example—was achieved on a relatively modest budget and caught the attention of developers.