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SEPTEMBER 2006

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ANGELANO: JASON MULLER/REX; PHOTO: JEFFREY MAYER/REX



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## MONDO CONDO

*Is an on-site art museum and trendy restaurant enough to lure those million-dollar loft buyers to downtown... Culver City?*

BY GARY BAUM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW TY LEE

Enlightened L.A. architects have spent years extolling the virtues of mixed-use civic development—the kind where ground-floor coffeehouses bustle beneath a row of live-work lofts marked by an excess of light and purchases from Design Within Reach. The experiment suggests that living where you work, or working where you live, cuts down on traffic and builds up business in otherwise sluggish commercial districts. But very few of these New Urbanism acolytes actually choose to either live or work in their new projects. At least, that is, those who've already got kids in the Little League demographic.

Domestic and professional partners Zoltan Pali and Judit Fekete didn't mind the inconveniences that come with walking the mixed-use walk. They were willing to chuck traditional home staples like grass, carpeting, and pretty much any semblance of privacy when they recently moved into the largest unit at MODAA Lofts, a 2-story building that they've just completed a short stroll east of downtown Culver City amidst Washington Boulevard's buzzed-about Art District. Along with the room of their own, the block-long complex also consists of six other million-dollar lofts, their 30-person architecture firm, a 2,000-square-foot exhibition space and a bistro run by the one-time chef at the former 5 Dudley in Venice. "The land was just big enough to put all of our dreams into it," says Fekete, who prioritized space for the gallery, which serves the dual purpose of helping the project fit into the existing neighborhood while simultaneously acting as a bit of high-minded marketing.

"Who needs a lawn anyway?" says Pali, a Tarzana native who, along with Fekete, has overseen a mix of residential projects from Santa Monica to the Hollywood Hills, as well as commercial commissions like NASCAR's corporate office in Century City and the renovation of the Getty Villa in Malibu. "You have to mow it all the time, and how often do you actually use it? Maybe once in forever. We'll be going to the local park instead."

The couple's two sons, Renzo, 11, and Ezra, 9, may have lost out on the green space of their previous, single-family home a few miles to the west, but they've won access to something far cooler for tween-aged boys. The decked-out new woodshop in their parents' ground-floor office space has been quickly co-opted for their own precocious scale models—Renzo's latest is an early plan for an aeronautical museum, while Ezra's busy envisioning his hillside dream house.

But balsa wood and glue will only content the boys for so long. In a few more years the crux of their parents' new lifestyle decision—to live in a communal space with hardly any walls—may begin to cramp their adolescent desire for privacy. "Right now we have no doors into their rooms," says Fekete. "It's all open—really what lofts are about. I know that'll have to change, though, when they get a little older."

Not that the couple has anything against doors. In fact, they've installed several dozen of them throughout the building—as windows. The six-foot-tall sliding glass doors have been installed along the

CONTINUED...

The flat aluminum Linea coffee table is surrounded in the loft's main space by Marcel Wanders-designed Buttoni sofas and chairs, as well as oversized planters from Design Within Reach. The couple created the built-in bookshelves themselves before having them detailed by custom cabinetmaker Rick LaBorico.



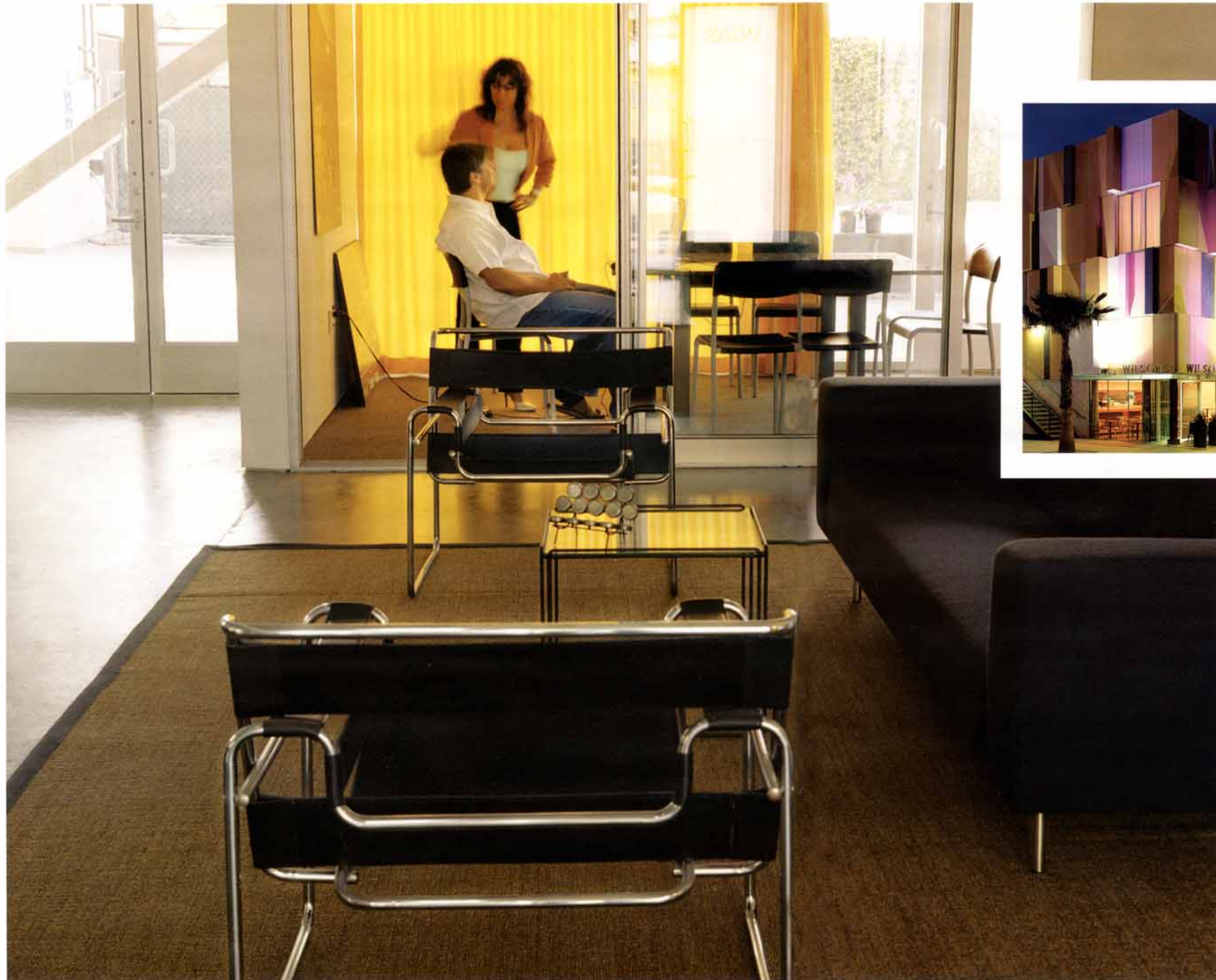
*"WHO NEEDS A LAWN ANYWAY? YOU HAVE TO MOW IT ALL THE TIME,  
AND HOW OFTEN DO YOU ACTUALLY USE IT? MAYBE ONCE IN FOREVER."*



**Left:** The couple curated a group show at their gallery space in July that featured Cheryl Ekstrom's stainless steel furniture as well as the paintings of Charles Arnoldi. **Above:** Pali and Fekete designed the restaurant, Wilson, around the centerpiece image of a chef exercising his cooking staff atop the Hotel Commodore in Manhattan. The 1920 photograph was reproduced on a large canvas after rights were secured from the Museum of the City of New York. Cylindrical lampshades designed by the architects and manufactured by Hollywood Lighting Design illuminate the custom-made, CaesarStone-topped tables.

...CONTINUED Washington Boulevard façade to take advantage of the coastal breezes that shoot through the neighborhood. "We don't have many bugs flying around in this area, so we decided not to use any screens," says Pali.

If the architects' open windows don't bring in insects, they certainly invite noise, particularly the din from the new restaurant, Wilson, which they purposefully chose to live directly above. Aside from the expected chatter of customers and clatter of silverware, the family's urban equivalent of a rooster's morning crow comes in the form of daily 4AM truck. CONTINUED...



...CONTINUED deliveries just a few feet from where they sleep.

"It reminds me of back home," says the Hungarian-born Fekete happily. "She absolutely loves that stuff," adds Pali, who isn't quite as enamored of the racket.

Originally, Fekete had hoped to operate a café in the space on her own. "I begged her for months not to do it," says Pali, who eventually convinced her to let a professional chef handle the restaurant. Michael Wilson soon came on board, and he's now busy cooking up a rococo-casual menu that runs from BLTs with barbequed eel to rabbit sloppy joes. The local power-lunching crowd is already in place, with Sony execs in particular turning the bistro into an off-site commissary by regularly reserving tables for 12 or 16.

Sandwiched between the restaurant and the couple's office is the building's namesake, the Museum of Design Art and Architecture gallery. Pali and Fekete curate the non-profit vanity project, which in recent months has exhibited both the large-scale acrylic abstract paintings of Charles Arnoldi as well as Cheryl Ekstrom's stainless steel versions of famous Herman Miller and Charles Eames pieces. Automotive designer Harald Belker's models and sketches are currently on display (he's most famous for reimagining the Batmobile).

For their part, Renzo and Ezra are more interested in the vivid display on the wall upstairs in their living room. Their parents set up a projector near a far corner, which the boys employ for 16-by-24-foot screenings of favorites like the *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Maybe loft-living is appropriate for child's play after all. **A**

**Left:** The architects' office lobby features black metal Wassily chairs by Marcel Breuer. The miniature sculpture that sits on the Linea table is a replica of George Nelson's famous Marshmallow sofa, cast in stainless steel. It was a gift from sculptor Cheryl Ekstrom. **Above:** The couple sees the block-long complex, and its dramatic facade in particular, as a visual link between downtown Culver City to the west and the more artsy, industrial district to the east.