

Live/Work

Working at Home, Living at Work



Deborah K. Dietsch

Foreword by Sarah Susanka

STREET MUSIC

Rhythmic patterns of color and shadow dance across the facades as if to represent the activities pulsing inside the building. It is called the Museum of Design Art and Architecture, but there is nothing precious about this multi-tasking structure on a busy boulevard in Culver City, California. Zoltan Pali and Judit Fekete of Studio Pali Fekete designed its 28,000 square feet to accommodate their life under one roof: offices for their architecture firm, a gallery for their favorite artists, and a restaurant on the ground level, topped by six live/work lofts for like-minded neighbors and a spacious apartment where they reside with their two young sons. "Everything we need is here," declares Fekete. "We don't have to leave the building."

The couple designed as well as developed the roughly \$4 million building, which has two twenty-foot-high stories. "We were tired of pouring money into leasing old warehouses," explains Pali. "The project started with the idea of building a space for our offices. That led to creating a building for our lifestyle." And he adds, "I had to think like a developer. By keeping the space flexible, we could rent it out should we need to downsize."

Linking

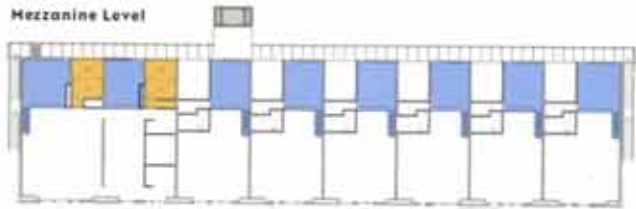
A timber-framed breezeway at the building's rear, reached by outdoor stairways, runs alongside separate entrances to the architects' loft and six other apartments.

Siting

Catching the attention of motorists on a busy boulevard, the mixed-use building known as MODAA (the Museum of Design Art and Architecture) presents a checkerboard facade of fiber-cement boxes above a glass storefront.



Mezzanine Level



Apartment Level



Ground Level



Climbing

A steel staircase leads up the building's side to the living units on the upper stories so that residents do not have to enter the main level. The facade's three-dimensional pattern was designed to create a transitional visual rhythm between the city's gentrified and industrial areas.





Arranged behind the glass walls along the sidewalk is a suite of commercial spaces that bring in the public. Most of this ground level is occupied by the Studio Pali Fekete offices, with a model shop at one end that is visible to passersby. Next to the firm's open workroom is the "museum," a 2,000-square-foot gallery for temporary exhibits that also serves as a conference space; it has become a civic amenity, used for town meetings, high school art shows, and other community events. In the adjacent space, a small restaurant run by the chef Michael Wilson (son of the late Beach Boy Dennis

Browsing

Next to the architects' office is the "museum," a 2,000-square-foot rotating exhibition gallery that also serves as a conference space. Displayed here are works by the painter Chuck Arnold and the sculptor Cheryl Ekstrom.

Dining

One side of the storefront is occupied by a restaurant run by the chef Michael Wilson. Decorated with a mural of chefs, the eatery attracts a neighborhood crowd and visitors to the building's galleries.

Wilson) also serves the neighborhood. All of the tall storefronts are unified by raw concrete floors, white walls, and few boundaries, so they flow into one another like the spaces within the lofts upstairs.

From their offices, Pali and Fekete take the stairs or the elevator up to their four-bedroom duplex, which combines two of the 1,800-square-foot live/work units. Reflective of the loft vernacular, the main space incorporates a kitchen open to the double-height living area overlooking the street. Ceiling joists, steel beams, and ductwork are left exposed, and flooring is the same unpolished concrete found on the ground level. Softening touches are provided by modern furnishings, a fluffy rug, and white oak cabinets and woodwork. From the main level, a stair leads to a mezzanine. Bedrooms are tucked under this upper level at the back of the building.

The six other units are smaller versions of this residence, including a mezzanine and an enclosed room that can be used for sleeping or work. So far the building has attracted creative types who work at home, including a commercial designer, a movie producer, and a painter. To qualify for residency, occupants must obtain a business license from the city.





Working

Arranged behind the twenty-foot-high glass storefront is the open workroom of Studio Pali Fekete and its corner model shop. The architects purposely kept the space flexible in case they might want to lease the space in the future.



Living

Zoltan Pali and Judit Fekete combined two apartments into a duplex for themselves and their two sons. The main space incorporates a kitchen with an oak-finished island open to the double-height living area. The stair leads to a mezzanine used as a playroom and an exercise area. Bedrooms are located at the back of the main floor under this upper level.

The lofts can be reached without having to enter the lobby. On both ends of the building, steel staircases lead up to an outdoor breezeway at the back. Climbing the stairs provides a close-up view of the white, gray, and yellow cement-board panels that wrap the facades on three sides. "We wanted to create a vibrant architectural texture, but not with phony historical elements," acknowledges Pali, who compares the patterned relief to a musical score. Its syncopated visual rhythm, he explains, is meant as a symbolic transition between the gentrified area of Culver City to the west and its shabbier industrial district to the east. "We are right in the middle," he notes. On the building's back wall, a cedar screen is more in keeping with the wood-framed houses on the adjacent lots to the north.

The success of their pioneering live/work building has led Pali and Fekete to undertake similar developments in Culver City. "It's a different sensibility for Los Angeles, where [single-purpose] zoning has really messed up the city," asserts Fekete, who describes the difficulty of persuading investors to buy into the still-experimental mixed-use concept. "Though the idea of live/work is new," she continues, "it is important as a way of fostering higher-density urban living and reducing traffic by eliminating commuting. We believe that this is the way the city should go."

The couple also cite the personal benefits of living above the store, such as having places in the office for their kids to do homework or play games after school. "It's a wonderful way to live and be creative," remarks Pali. "Some people say that you need to get away from work, but I'm thinking about work all the time anyway. So it's great to have the office just downstairs."



LESSONS LEARNED

Create a grand entrance as well as a private one. Different circulation routes allow employees, visitors, and residents to easily enter and leave the building yet allow living and working spaces to remain independent. A public entrance leads to the ground-floor offices and commercial spaces and also to an elevator for the lofts. Outdoor staircases along the building's sides connect to the upper-story breezeway at the back, providing direct access to the lofts from the sidewalk.

Consider parking requirements. Pali and Fekete incorporated a seventy-three-space underground parking garage and a surface lot at the back of their building, with room for eleven more vehicles. The numbers reflect local requirements for commercial structures; a strictly residential building would call for fewer spaces.

Make room for a mezzanine. The super-tall ceilings of this live/work development allowed for broad balconies that provide extra room while the main level below rises the full twenty feet. Within the architecture firm's offices, the mezzanine houses a library, a graphics department, and administrative staff. In the owners' loft upstairs, the mezzanine is used as a play area for their kids, an exercise room, and a storage space.