

Zoltan Pali Designs LA's Most Iconic Spaces

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Dreamworks: Architect-in-high-demand Zoltan Pali in his Culver City studio.

“When I was young, I wanted to maybe go to Paris and work as an architect there,” muses LA native Zoltan Pali as he gazes contemplatively around his Culver City office. “And then I realized that if I was an architect at that moment in time and could go anywhere in the world... it was Los Angeles. The city of optimism.”

Indeed, the 53-year-old Pali has remained in his hometown ever since—a decision that seems to have been written in the stars. Growing up, his mother took him to shows at Hollywood’s Pantages Theater, where he was wowed by its Art Deco detailing; in 2001 his firm, [Studio Pali Fekete Architects \(SPF:a\)](#), completed an award-winning restoration of the space. As a UCLA design student, he studied at The Getty Villa; in 2006, SPF:a was lauded for leading the renovation of its museum. And he vividly recalls running errands with his family at the Beverly Hills Post Office and May Company department store; today, he’s responsible for transforming them into the [Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#) and [The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures](#), respectively.



The offices of Studio Pali Fekete Architects features an 1,800-square-foot art gallery space that features the work of local artists.

Although his story may sound like the product of fate, the down-to-earth Pali doesn't see it that way. "If you hang around [LA] long enough, it's inevitable that you'll work on a building that you've been in," he says with a modest shrug. "And the buildings that were interesting to me were the sort of places where your parents took you."

It's not surprising then, that Pali—the son of Hungarian immigrants who loved opera and theater—grew up to become a master of historic restoration and a leading designer of arts spaces. From the Greek Theatre to the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel, it's hard to think of a landmark LA structure that he hasn't touched—a fact that made SPF:a a natural fit for the Wallis Annenberg Center, which saw the Beverly Hills Post Office site transformed into a state-of-the-art performing arts campus. "Zoltan is filled with passion, and his passion resonated with us and our vision," says Lou Moore, executive director for the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. "He's also highly creative, so when there's a problem, he always comes up with several solutions."

Case in point: Conventional wisdom called for putting a 500-seat theater inside the post office, which, Pali says, "would have meant "having to rip the building apart, literally. I said, "that's just wrong." Instead, he proposed building a brand-new structure to house the main theater and leaving the 1934 post office intact to serve as a box office, café, gift shop, and administrative offices.

His inventive spirit also shows in the month-old theater's façade, which resembles a sea of envelopes. "I knew the community would want to have something that looked like the old post office, and I wasn't going to do that; that's part of [my] rebellious [side]." Rather than reference the post office's form, Pali looked back at its function—and thus, the building's modern, mail-inspired skin was born.

Pali is bringing a similar mix of reverence and revolution to the future Academy Museum, which he's designing in collaboration with Italian architect Renzo Piano. "Renzo and I call [the LACMA-adjacent May Company building] 'the beautiful old lady,'" he says. "We're going to fix all of the pieces and then leave her alone out of respect." A new glass and metal sphere will sit behind the building, harboring a theater, plaza, and terrace with city views, while more theaters and tech-enhanced gallery space are planned for inside. (Another example of kismet in action: 18 years ago, Pali and his partner, Judit Fekete, named the first of their two sons Renzo in honor of Piano, whose work they admired. "Now that I've actually met the man and am working with him, it's kind of embarrassing," Pali says with a laugh.)



A model of the May Company building that Pali and his team are transforming into The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures.

With projects like these in his lap, Pali has been clocking lots of overtime this year—but as a tireless worker who claims his only hobbies are designing and building, he wouldn't have it any other way. "My perfect Saturday would be right here, with a cup of coffee," he says, gesturing to his office desk, which is littered with design books, sketches, and colored pencils. He credits his engineer father with teaching him how to draw, and, in a roundabout way, his traditional mother with helping to hone his California modern aesthetic, which is most evident in SPF:a's many elegant, light-filled residential designs.

"I used to spend every Saturday helping my mom clean house, and there were little doilies underneath the crystal... that's what meant wealth in a way, the fanciness," he reflects. "It wasn't a conscious decision whatsoever, but somehow that didn't make sense to me. Was [my aesthetic] a rebellion against all that business? Could be."

Pali's family and career continue to collide today—Fekete runs the business side of SPF:a, while Pali seems to have an amiable relationship with his staff of 30, who playfully tease him as he poses for photos—and he doesn't see himself ever giving it all up for the golf course. "I'm never gonna retire," he says resolutely. "That's just not a word that enters my [vocabulary]."

At the end of the day, it's not the awards or recognition that drive him, although he's received plenty of those; it's the simple desire to make the world a more pleasing place. "We're born, we live, and we die," he says. "We have to have some beauty in that period of time."

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