

Condo project in Portland's Pearl District draws its design from

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Portland's buzzing, busy Pearl District isn't the city's most natural setting by far, but an upcoming condominium project in the district draws its design from the geometry of nature.

The design for the proposed 937 Condominiums is based on fractal geometry, the idea of similarly shaped elements repeating throughout a visual landscape. It's seen in nature, in elements like ponds and ferns – where bubbles and fronds are repeated, smaller and irregularly, inside the shape of the whole – and in the condominium design, it takes shape as an imperfect pattern of windows and solid space.

The fractal geometry grows on you, said Mack Selberg of Ankrom Moisan Associated Architects, which is collaborating with Holst Architecture on the project. You have to look at it and think about it, and then you come to understand it. It allows for the personal interpretations that people make.

The mixed-use, 16-story tower will occupy the half-block site at Glisan Street between Northwest Ninth Avenue and Northwest 10th Avenue, replacing an existing commercial retail building. Retail space is slated for the ground floor, with two levels of parking below and 114 condominium units above. The building will stand 170 feet tall, and have a floor-area-ratio of 9-to-1. If all goes well, it'll break ground sometime this summer.

The retail level is glass and pre-cast concrete, meant to give the impression of massive display boxes marching down the street. The geometry of the upper levels is carried out in wheat-colored stack-bonded brick, glass, steel and rain screen stucco. The building's balconies, enclosed in wine-colored glass, are stacked in vertical rows of various heights. The glass balconies – which will be backlit for a touch of evening color – congregate to segment the building into smaller parts.

The days of designing the same type of building over and over again – what Selberg calls Portland's design malaise – are done, he said. Buildings are fit to the time in which they're built, and local architects are grabbing the opportunities.

We don't live in the 1930s; we live in the 21st century, he said. And I think the reason for this kind of burst of creativity is because of the collaborative efforts between architects in Portland.

That inspired pairing is at work in the 937 project. John Homes and the team at Holst created the 937 design, with Ankrom Moisan adding detailing and acting as the architect of record. Holmes and Selberg worked together at Holst for four years, and Selberg said joining forces was a natural.

The thing came together very quickly, and it's gone exceptionally well, he said. We each have a sense of what the other wants to do.

The whole project, in fact, is one in which all contributors are coming together, Selberg said. The building is tracking for a no-sweat LEED Silver rating, he said, with the contractors and subcontractors bringing in ideas for pulling up points for the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating. The mechanical-electrical-plumbing components are design/build, something that would have been tough three years ago, he said, but is now a matter of course.

It wasn't just, 'OK, we're doing LEED,' he said. It was, 'Did you get this point? Did you get that point?'

An eco-roof is planned for the building's north side, and the team is currently struggling to make a massive stormwater planter fit into the scope of the project. They're also looking for ways to incorporate the enormous beams and planks that they'll harvest when the existing building is torn down.

The project as a whole is multi-dimensional, Selberg said, and much of that drive comes from developers Geoff Wenker and Patrick Kessi of W&K Development. The pair worked with Holst previously on the Thurman Street Lofts, a four-story condo-retail project that's wrapping up in Northwest Portland.

They want the building to be good at everything and exceptional at one thing, Selberg said. And that's beauty.

The 937 Condominiums will go before the Portland Design Commission during its regularly scheduled meeting today at 1:30 p.m. at 1900 S.W. Fourth Ave.