



Architect John Holmes turned a budget-conscious box into high design with details such as hardwood screens and inset windows. Below: Holmes's client, developer (and resident) Patrick Kessi

Lofty Ambitions

A challenging site, a modest budget and a green development team are no obstacles to exciting design at the Thurman Street Lofts.

 IT'S THE DETAILS at the Thurman Street Lofts that make Patrick Kessi proud. Striding through his 1,324-square-foot penthouse unit—his home, office and learning lab since he and business partner Geoff Wenker completed the five-story condominium building in April 2006—he points a few out, including several features borrowed from other Portland condominium projects. “We looked at what the market had that was really good. The cork floor is from the Marshall Wells; the plank ceiling is from the Belmont Street Lofts; and the under-mounted bathroom sinks and deep soaking tubs are from the Meriwether,” the 29-year-old Scappoose native explains.

Of all the details, however, perhaps the most important—and least market-tested—was the person they chose as

their architect, John Holmes, who would be responsible for turning all the parts into an elegant whole. Holmes had designed only one commercial housing project, which was still under construction, when Kessi called him up in 2004. Still, Kessi wasn't the only one taking a risk when they agreed to meet.

Kessi was then 26 and had never done a commercial-grade project. As a teenager he had worked for his father's heavy construction company in Scappoose, and as a finance major at the University of Portland he'd started buying and renovating houses, renting them to friends at a profit. By the time he and Wenker, a Scappoose-based former contractor 22 years his senior, founded W&K Development and secured their first parcel of land, the



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budding developer had flipped scores of houses, but he had developed nothing more complex than a low-rise apartment building.

Now, Kessi told Holmes, he planned to do something rather difficult: pile 15 condominium units on a small, 7,500-square-foot lot on NW Thurman St at 26th and sell the units for Pearl District prices. Holmes recalls his reply: "Are you out of your mind?"

Still, Kessi's call was well timed, sort of. Since founding Holst Architecture in 1992, Holmes and partner Jeff Stuhr had worked their way up from restaurant interiors to major retrofits of historic commercial buildings—including Ecotrust's Natural Capital Center, the Pacific Northwest College of Art campus

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and Oregon Ballet Theatre's headquarters. Construction was just beginning on Holmes's design for developer Randy Rapaport's Belmont Street Lofts, a 27-unit condo building named for its address on the busy Southeast strip. The architect's sleek four-story cube, clad in a rain screen of *ipe*, a Brazilian hardwood, was a minor masterpiece

of budget-conscious infill design that would later be featured in *Dwell* magazine.

It was a noteworthy achievement because, as with most "boutique"-scale projects, the pro forma profit margin had been thin, and Holmes had been pressed to maximize every inch of salable space. Now Kessi was proposing a very similar, but even more complicated, design puzzle.

The 7,500-square-foot parcel wasn't just small; it was in the middle of the block, which would make it hard to elegantly wedge the required retail space and an entry to the below-grade parking garage onto the ground level. Furthermore, to fit 15 units (they ended up with 16) onto the site would involve going up five stories, above the height limit set by the city zoning code, thus requiring approval from a well-organized neighborhood association. Finally, the team would need to make room in its tight budget for high-quality interior finishes because, for the project to work financially, Kessi wanted to sell the units for \$300 per square foot, about 20 percent more than condos in Northwest Portland were typically fetching at the time.



Top: Little things—such as a hidden vent over the kitchen range—and bigger ones—such as repeat appearances of sleek wengé wood cabinetry—minimize visual clutter in Kessi's penthouse unit at the Thurman Street Lofts.

Above: Sliding doors show space-saving smarts. When closed, these sliders create privacy for the master bath; when open, they make the master bedroom feel bigger.