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937 GROUP

The 937, shown here in an artist's rendering, will be an unusual take on modern design in Portland's Pearl District. The 16-story building will have wheat-colored bricks and mismatched window frames amid the Pearl's more squat red or brown brick.

Duo bank on random design

A \$50 million building called 937 is going up as condo sales lose altitude

By RYAN FRANK
THE OREGONIAN



BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

The 937 condo project developers, Patrick H. Kessi (left) and Geoff Wenker, started W&K Development with their first project, the Thurman Street Lofts in Northwest Portland.

Portland's hotshot high-rise condo builders could fit in one studio kitchen. Five developers put up most of the condos in Portland's seven-year downtown housing boom.

But at 937 N.W. Glisan St., a 30-year-old Portlander and his partner from Scappoose have made their case to join the club.

Patrick H. Kessi of Northwest Portland and Geoff Wenker, 52, are building the high-rise, high-cost condo tower known simply as 937.

The pair have done just one previous project together, a \$6.5 million condo building in Northwest Portland. Usually, the new condo business is either too expensive or risky for smaller developers. But just as the market slows, Kessi and Wenker have made a \$50 million bet on their slender, 16-story modern addition to the Pearl District, a neighborhood dominated by blockier, red and brown brick buildings.

Their entry into the tower business has impressed industry types but also has led to curiosity about whether they can pull it off at a time of cooling sales.



"It's brave of them," said Patricia Gardner, planning committee chairwoman for the Pearl District Neighborhood Association.

Wenker and Kessi both grew up in Scappoose.

Kessi started buying rental houses while at the University of Portland. Wenker spent much of his career managing commercial construction projects for Todd Construction Inc. of Tigard.

They connected in 2003 when Kessi asked Wenker, a friend of Kessi's brother, if he wanted to help build the Thurman Street Lofts in Northwest Portland. That's when they started W&K Development.

Wenker, an Oregon State University grad, is the construction guy. He wears a black mustache that has silver slivers peeking through.

Kessi is the fresh-faced design and finance guy who barely looks his age.

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937: W&K expects no apartment conversions

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Kessi extols the design concepts of the 937. Wenker is more to the point.

Some people see the 937 as just another condo project.

But Lloyd Lindley, chairman of the city's design commission, said it's a landmark for the Pearl and Portland. "It's more cosmopolitan than we're used to in Portland," he says.

Portland's condo boom has featured ample towers with symmetrical glass or brick exteriors. The 937's exterior is a wheat-colored brick with irregularly spaced and framed windows. In the

drawings, the building looks as if a white net — actually light-colored brick — covers it.

John Holmes of Holst Architecture came up with the "fractal" design, which he based on irregular patterns found on leaves, dried mud or rock formations. It's the first high-rise design for Holst, which partnered with the more experienced Ankrom Moisan Architects on the project.

"A little bit of randomness that's organized," Wenker says of the exterior.

On the inside, units feature high-end finishes with a modern twist — quartz countertops, stainless steel appliances hidden by oak panels, and hardwood floors. Cabinets and floors are fashioned from specially cut lumber to feature long grains and keep clean lines.

"It costs more," Wenker said, "but it looks like less."

The 937 will rank among the city's priciest condos. Asking prices crest above \$500 a square foot, so a mid-sized 1,200-square-foot unit would

Portland's big five condo builders

- Bob Ball
- John Carroll
- Mark Edlen
- Joe Weston
- Homer Williams

cost \$600,000.

The 937 has been the subject of whispers. With new developers, architects and high prices, could it be the next to convert to apartments given slowing marketwide sales?

Kessi and Wenker said no way.

They wouldn't say how many of the 114 units they've sold. But they think the Portland market will be strong for years to come.

"The demographic is that baby boomers want to downsize," Wenker said. "That's not changing."

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