

Portland Architecture

A diamond in the Pearl: visiting the 937 Condominiums



Last fall the 937 Condominiums arrived just as the housing boom that made the project possible was coming to a crashing end. The building, designed by Holst Architecture and Ankrom Moisan, opened its doors in October, a time when most other condo projects coming on line were frantically switching to rental apartments.

While I can't tell you how sales have fared, the building itself represents one of the best highrise condo designs of this era. In fact, with apologies to other successful recent condos like BOORA Architects' The Metropolitan, THA Architecture's Atwater Place and GBD Architects' The Casey, I think 937 may be the very best.

On the outside, the building has a random window pattern resembling natural fractal patterns set against cream-colored brick. The building was designed from the outside in to maintain the integrity and bold look of the facade, so each unit has a slightly different window configuration. The randomness of the exterior glass pattern is offset by subtle symmetry, with each window spaced both vertically and horizontally from each other in the same dimensions. The brick is an attractive touch, recalling the early 20th Century architecture of downtown Portland such as the Meier & Frank building or the Jackson Tower, while the crisp clean look of the exterior and its tall, slim form is faintly comparable to modernist classics like Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Drive apartments in Chicago.



If we're talking about windows and 937, though, the real story may be inside. Stepping into model units of various sizes and prices throughout the building, I was struck by just how much natural light permeates each space. I've been in numerous LEED Gold and Platinum-rated buildings, including condos (The Casey was America's first Platinum condo), and I'm quite sure I've never experienced so much natural daylight as in 937. Usually to meet energy code strictures, buildings with lots of glass have to apply coatings to filter out excess sunlight that can make the glass seem dark, inside and out. Not so here. It seems clear as can be.



The bountiful daylight at 937 comes not just from windows and lots of them, but also from the form itself. This is a thinner, taller building than most all of the squatty condos in the Pearl. Looking from 937 across Glisan Street at the Elizabeth Condos, for example, one sees a squatty, dark building where units offer light on only one side, or two at best. The units I visited in 937 all had glass on at least two sides of each unit, and often times three.

This is the second design-development collaboration between Holst Architecture and developers Patrick Kessi and Geoff Wenker, who previously worked together on the Thurman Street Lofts. It's also a partnership between Holst and Ankrom Moisan. You could perhaps say Holst did the outside and Ankrom the inside, but there seems to have been more overlap than that. Considering that the inside units and outside facade work in such wonderful harmony, it's got to be a testament to how these teams worked together.

Hopefully the success of this collaboration will spur more condo developers in the future (if there are any) to employ such partnerships between studio-sized firms with the most acute design acumen and larger service firms with the ability to deliver the less sexy but very necessary aspects of a major building project.

At the same time, such success is never a given. On the Eliot Condominiums downtown, for example, an Ankrom Moisan/Zimmer Gunsul Frasca collaboration yielded a very attractive outside and some less successful interiors, with cheesy Caesar's Palace-esque chipped marble decorations yucking up an otherwise attractive contemporary look. At 937, though, everything is in harmony. There aren't crass marble countertops trying too hard to look fancy, just refined dignified interior design with a simple natural wood palette.



And while the age of luxury and booming economics may be over, some lucky affluent tenant who buys the 16th Floor penthouse at 937 will have perhaps the only condominium with its own outdoor hot tub. In this unit, a triple-wide glass door slides open to give the penthouse an opening out onto its balcony more width than a garage door. Even in a hot day such as when I visited, the cool air just pours through the space.

Although 937 doesn't wear its green credentials on its sleeve like some projects, the building is slated to earn a Platinum LEED designation.



While this is a joint design by Holst and Ankrom Moisan, 937 really ought to help elevate Holst in that it represents probably the biggest-scale work the firm has ever done. When you combine 937 with the Ziba Design headquarters finishing construction a few blocks away in the Pearl, suddenly Holst Architecture has reached a new size and scope of architecture projects in Portland. Although the firm has still designed little to nothing outside of Portland, 937 and Ziba ought to represent a kind of new beginning for John Holmes and Jeff Stuhr's firm. Could Holst become the next Brad Cloepfil, the next architects from Portland to gain a national or international following?

Two units from 937 (including the jacuzzi-stocked penthouse) will be included in the Street of Dreams home tour this August, along with The Encore (by BOORA), the Waterfront Pearl (by Vancouver's Soren Rasmussen and Portland's MCA Architects) and the Pearl Condominiums at Block 90 (by Vallaster & Corl). So you are encouraged to take a look in a few weeks when the opportunity comes. I haven't been on the Street of Dreams tour since I was a kid dragged by mom, but with the tour coming to the Pearl District, this annual symbol of all that's wrong with home building just mined, in 937, everything that is right.



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