

## Architecture & Engineering

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### AIA Project of the Month: Live Aboves: A wise, modest project meets its lofty goals

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)  
Special to the Journal

Columbia City Live Aboves call out to those searching for the perfect loft. But there's something very wise and modest about the project, tucked onto a back street in a rapidly redeveloping South Seattle neighborhood.

The eight live-work units are situated in two separate structures, with commercial space on the first floor. They step right up to the street, but more than half of the lot is devoted to alley-like open space that helps to define the future of the neighborhood.

Columbia City lies along Rainier Avenue in South Seattle, between South Hudson and South Alaska streets. Like a movie set of an American small-town main street, the turn-of-the century streetcar neighborhood survived intact through the 1970s and 1980s, to be rediscovered in the 1990s.

A historic Carnegie Library and a farmers' market are at the core of the revival, along with an active business association and arts events like Beatwalk.

Columbia City Live Aboves is the first new development by Rob Mohn. The career civil engineer and resident of nearby Mount Baker has become one of a handful of private players who have taken an interest in the future of Columbia City.

In a series of strategic moves, Mohn purchased two historic buildings in 1998 and 2000, restored them and then brought in Columbia City Alehouse, the Bookworm and some small fitness businesses and offices.



Photo by Arellano/Christofides Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

**At the street level, large doors with sheltering overhangs send a distinctly commercial message. In the rear, garage doors open out to usable open space.**

### Columbia City Live Aboves 3827 and 3829 S. Edmund

**Architect:**

Arellano/Christofides Architects  
Philip Christofides  
and Corinne Kerr  
with Jeff Floor, Ed Solseng and Margot Arellano

**Developer:**

Rob Mohn

**Project type:**

Commercial live/work

**Size:**

8 units,  
2,000 square feet each

Architect Arellano/Christofides has given us landmarks like Flying Fish and El Gaucho in Belltown as well as many high-end and low-income housing projects. Mohn sought out the firm after seeing one of its older projects, Fairview Lofts in Eastlake.

The land where Columbia City Lofts now stands was a vacant lot used for parking, a half block off the old commercial strip. It was zoned neighborhood commercial. Mohn had ideas of extending the urban ambiance of Columbia City beyond the main corridor, but he wanted to be sensitive to the residential street, so whatever he built had to be quieter and smaller in scale.

“We wanted to take the district and turn the corner,” said Christofides.

Owner and architect settled on two buildings with four live-work units in each. With a rhythmic repetition typical of historic urban housing, three-story units stand flush with the sidewalk. At the street level, large doors with sheltering overhangs encourage signs and send a distinctly commercial message. In the rear of each building, garage doors open out to usable open space.

On the floors above, loft-like spaces lend themselves to residential or office use. Clerestories running through the middle third of the units bring in light and provide stairwell access to roof decks, which are popular gathering places for lunch and breaks.

The 2,000-square-foot units are divided by substantial concrete-core brick walls, which are exposed on all sides in interiors and expressed along the fronts, backs and tops of each building. These walls serve multiple functions, as structural load bearers, fire breaks and acoustical barriers between units. But they also give the modernist building a distinctly permanent feel. Christofides likes to think of them in terms of time, the bones of the building that remain even when everything else around and inside it has changed.

But they had to convince the local landmark district board, the final arbiter for permitting. Board members were not accustomed to applying their concerns for historic character to new buildings, but they liked the live-work use, the scale and the structural brick, which is from local sources. They also warmed to the idea of letting the successful commercial center reach into a new block, so they gave the project a nod.

**Completion:**  
August 2007

**Construction cost:**  
\$3.4 million

**Structural engineer:**  
Perbix Bykonen

**Civil engineer:**  
LPD Engineering

**Geotechnical engineer:**  
Geospectrum Consultants

**General contractor:**  
Flip Builders

Jury comments:

*“Great use of masonry to bring what could have been just another housing project into a class of its own. Outstanding character and sense of each residential unit with the complex.”*

*“Maximizing the area of the site and using classic building materials, these live aboves look livable and welcoming to neighbors.”*

*“The great thing about this project is that it works on multiple levels. From neighborhood planning to interior spaces, its quality is consistent. I applaud the developer as much as the architects for putting a few extra dollars in to make sure this project ended up with lasting materials.”*



Photo by Clair Enlow [enlarge](#)

**Architect Philip Christofides (left) and developer Rob Mohn, a civil engineer**

The biggest issue in the approval process was in the designation of project type. The team was able to secure permits for fee-simple live-work townhouses, as opposed to condominiums, a distinction that freed the project from inflated risks of condominium development. To preserve the way the building works and feels, there are covenants and declarations involved with the sale of the units but there is no owners' association.

But even then, owner and architect had to ask themselves: Can this project type really work?

“Our conclusion: We don't know,” said Mohn.

They knew that a number of variables might undermine the idea, from market factors to neighborhood dynamics. To respond to this risk, the units needed to be “very flexible in use... clean, efficient and minimalist,” according to Christofides.

Between the evenly spaced structural brick walls, virtually anything can be rearranged, he said. Even the floors themselves can be partially carved away to make extra high spaces within the building.

But while the team decided to make the interior life of the buildings very flexible, they were ambitious about changing the way the city lives around them.

“CC (Columbia City) has a wonderful network of alleys,” said Christofides who, along with his spouse and business partner, Margo Arellano, has family roots in the Columbia City area.

Columbia City is blessed with short blocks, alleys and a number of pedestrian passageways that make it truly distinctive in character and lend it great advantage as a pedestrian environment.

The newly discovered neighborhood is now getting its share of bulky, non-descript multi-family buildings. But with Columbia City Live Aboves, Mohn and Christofides tapped into the fine-grained pattern and demonstrated how new development can build on this historic advantage.

“You have many ways to get around the little neighborhood, and that makes it more interesting,” said Mohn who, along with other members of the business association, has successfully lobbied the city to increase garbage pickup so that there are not so many dumpsters.

He and Mohn wanted to tap into that grid, making the outdoor areas of their project into an extension of the alley and the streets, one that would add value for new residents and the existing ones. They envisioned that there would be businesses on the adjoining alley, and that pedestrians would be drawn from the public rights-of-way through the site.

Now, a private alley-courtyard lies between the two new buildings. To connect to the street in front as well as the alley behind, the two equally long buildings are simply jogged in plan so that



Photo by Arellano/Christofides Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

**Each floor opens up to daylight and views in front and back of the building. Operable clerestory windows bring in more light and ventilation, and a stairway leads up to the roof deck from the third level.**

the passage in the rear joins the existing alley and connects with a narrow parking area behind and the next street.

Interlocking paving is semi-permeable and dotted with green, and the passages in and out are not quite wide enough to accommodate a typical car. End units in each of the buildings align with the street openings, for full visibility between visitors and units.

The courtyard is not sealed or secure.

“This was a big decision,” said Mohn. They wanted to encourage a less paranoid way of thinking about security, he said.

Columbia City Live Aboves are custom-made for artists or small professional offices, and for retiring baby-boomers with second careers. But owner and architect also wanted to see more traditional commercial activity on site.

Christofides and Arellano took the first step. They purchased the corner unit closest to Rainier Avenue, and committed to moving their six-person office there from the Vance Building in downtown Seattle.

But they didn't need all three levels. They decided to sub-lease the street-level floor but not to another office. They found their ideal tenant in Villa Victoria, a take-out restaurant specializing in hand-made tamales. The lively ambiance and lunchtime traffic adds just the right note to the corner.

Mohn himself has moved his office into the base of one unit and leases the upstairs levels as the Last Loft, a by-the-week tourist rental advertised internationally. Other businesses in the base include a reading tutor, a publisher and another architecture office. All the available units sold months before the building shell was complete.

In addition to several new full-time residents near the center of Columbia City, about 40 people are working in the complex. Walking the streets is even more interesting. Columbia City has indeed turned the corner.

*The Project of the Month is sponsored by the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The Project of the Month for May was selected with the assistance of UW professor Eddy Rojas, landscape architect Michele Arab and architect Ron Van der Veen. For more information about submitting projects, contact Stephanie Pure at AIA Seattle, (206) 448-4938, or [stephaniep@aiaSeattle.org](mailto:stephaniep@aiaSeattle.org).*

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