

San Diego **CityBeat**

MARCH 4, 2015 · SDCITYBEAT.COM · F

They're their own clients, designers and builders, meaning FoundationForForm can get creative with the urban canvas

BY KINSEE MORLAN • P. 20

INNOVATIVE INFILL

KELLY P.4 HOUSING P.6 GOREY P.13 RESTORATIONS P.25

Tuesday, Mar 03, 2015

FoundationForForm's hands-on urban infill

Rising stars of San Diego's architect-as-developer movement mind the little details

By [Kinsee Morlan](#)



Standing in the central courtyard of the new North Park Post Office Lofts mixed-use development, the scene is reminiscent of M.C. Escher's famed "Relativity" print depicting several zigzagging sets of gravity-defying staircases.

"Because we don't do elevators in our buildings, we do these kind of stairs that break up the experience of climbing, so you can take a breather, look out, check out what's going on or stop and chat with your neighbors," says Mike Burnett, principal of [FoundationForForm Architecture & Development](#), one of San Diego's growing number of architecture firms that also act as developers, property managers and even general contractors on many of their own projects.

Burnett explains that these little alcoves are a small part of the firm's strategy of creating communities rather than just buildings. He says they don't try to force socialization by including community rooms or gyms in their projects—he points to plenty of existing places to socialize or workout within a few blocks of most of their buildings as better options for tenants anyway. Instead, Burnett says his team gives the extra space to the outdoors and creates an interactive experience by forcing circulation so residents collide during their routine daily lives.

"Coming and going from your car, the mail delivery—you don't hide that stuff away, you put it out in the open so residents feel safe, and that extra space then allows for a moment for neighbors to talk to each other," he explains.

Burnett and his partner (both in life and career), Craig Abenilla, also a principal at FoundationForForm, lead the way to the top floor of their newest building—an eye-catching three-story contemporary structure that incorporates the bones of the iconic former North Park Post Office. They make their way to the last available unit and open a door to a chic-looking, two-story rental with quite a view.

"In North Park, not much is over two stories yet, so once you clear that second story you get this," Burnett says, pointing out a large window.

"On a clear day, you can actually see the Coronado Bridge," Abenilla adds.

Abenilla walks onto the balcony and points out the giant solar screen that wraps around the building. The structure, he explains, was inspired by the old metal conveyer belts the post office used to sort mail.

"So, it was kind of this form that grew out of the post office and up and around and wound up sitting on top of it," he says. "This is just a modernized way to recognize that."

He motions toward the steel, teal-blue balcony pop-outs on the building and explains that the linear cutouts in the structures are in the shape of a postal code. If you could scan them, he explains, they'd give you the address of the building—3077 North Park Way.

"Those are like the stamps on the building," Abenilla smiles.

Like most of the projects that FoundationForForm finances, designs and builds, the unorthodox and distinctive design of the North Park Post Office Lofts tends to trigger strong opinions either one way or the other.

"Well, I definitely don't *love* the strange modern architecture, but I do love that they left the old post-office building intact," says Thirza Spencer, a longtime North Park resident, as she gazes up at the lofts from her seat at Lucky's breakfast restaurant across the street.

"It's better than before," disagrees Wang Chong, known to most as "Lucky," the eatery's owner, who's been working behind the counter for 40 years. "The building is good for North Park... I hope there'll be more like this soon."

Burnett and Abenilla say that, overall, they haven't heard many complaints about the project. Anti-gentrification fliers making innuendos about their You Are Here mixed-used project in Golden Hill, however, were posted around that neighborhood last year. For the most part, they think the majority of people who live in the older neighborhoods where they build understand what their distinctive projects are attempting to achieve.

"Urban sprawl is out; urban infill is in," Burnett says. "So, like in Golden Hill, we're rectifying what it once was—which was suburbia at one point. So, now we're just retrofitting old suburbia to be more urban."

Burnett is a graduate of Woodbury University's lauded master of science program in Real Estate Development for Architects (MRED), which was founded by architects Ted Smith and Jonathan Segal in 2004. The program has put San Diego on the map in terms of the architecture-as-developer movement, churning out a number of architects who see value in bypassing clients who often don't understand the intricacies of good, sustainable architecture and opt for increasing the bottom line by erecting big, boring buildings instead.



The innards of FoundationForForm's buildings are constructed to create active outdoor spaces where tenants collide.

Photo by Kinsee Morlan

"We teach architects to be in charge and be able to be their own owners, which, of course, gives them the freedom to be *actual* architects," says Smith, who calls Burnett the star of the MRED program. "That doesn't always happen when you have clients... There are always compromises with too many cooks in the kitchen."

Hoping to create even more successful architect-developer firms like FoundationForForm, Smith and others recently launched an MRED office, which allows recent graduates of the Woodbury program to volunteer their time in exchange for earning part ownership of projects. Once they have the projects in their portfolio, Smith says, they'll be more likely to attract financing and investors. He says the MRED office is already working on projects in Golden Hill and Barrio Logan.

"We need more architects doing what Burnett and his team are doing," Smith says. "He's a great example of someone whose purpose is not to build a giant building and make a bunch of money... Like, with their [You Are Here] project. Can you imagine a normal developer leaving that gas station in the middle of the building like they did? *No way*... But they saw it as important." (Smith is referring to how You Are Here incorporates architectural elements of a Texaco gas station that previously existed at the site)

Abenilla and Burnett are currently working on their next project—the biggest to date. They've purchased the lot where Craze Burger currently sits in North Park (the restaurant will relocate) and have submitted initial plans to the city.

"By summer, we'll hopefully be able to start construction," Burnett says.

Back at the North Park Lofts, Abenilla shows Jennifer Byard one of two vacant commercial spaces. Byard's part of Makers Arcade, a traveling pop-up craft show, which will hold an event in the space from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, March 21. Abenilla and Burnett regularly let local arts-and-culture groups activate their empty spaces.

Surprisingly, the duo isn't worried about the vacant commercial spaces in both their North Park and You Are Here projects. They've actually turned down several businesses interested in moving in, mostly because they didn't see them as the right fit.

"It's mostly about: Is it good for the street?" Burnett explains. "We're also trying to get local, non-corporate businesses."

The pair is heavily involved in almost every detail of the projects they develop, not just the commercial aspect. Burnett, for example, personally shows the units to prospective renters, and then Abenilla handles the move-in process. They say their hands-on approach has resulted in very few tenant issues, and they believe that the businesses and people who end up in their spaces are always a good match.

"I would say the building curates itself, almost, because of the way it's designed," Burnett says. "If you're an introvert that just doesn't want to talk to anyone, you're just not going to like it in our spaces."