



Lair Flair

Finding serenity in an urban pied-à-terre inspired by an Italian hill town

By Brian Libby

When Gary Brown and Pawel Wojtanowicz moved from Portland to the Oregon coast in 2001 to take over as proprietors of the Coast Cabins, a luxurious cluster of cedar-shingled abodes in the cozy village of Manzanita, they didn't expect a day at the beach. "We didn't have any hospitality experience at all, other than that we really enjoyed staying at great hotels," recalls Wojtanowicz with a laugh. But in operating the pet-friendly cabins, which combine mint-on-your-pillow lavishness with Milk-Bone practicality, they found a comfortable niche—and earned an approving wag from their Weimaraner, Cameron.

The downside was that these longtime city dwellers were now two hours' drive from their favorite restaurants, shops and cultural destinations in Portland. "Living full time at the beach left us literally craving a taste of urban life," Brown says. So the couple decided to institute the ultimate reverse commute: After a tough work week on the coast, they head for a condo in the center of the city.

Better said, the couple's weekend pied-à-terre exists just close enough to the urban core, in the geographic oddity known as Lair Hill. Although it's a quick walk to downtown nightlife, this steeply inclined residential enclave in Southwest Portland is as quiet and diminutively scaled as a medieval village. Erected in 2005, their residence, the Lair Condos, reflects its neighborhood's appealing duality, gracefully entwining a sophisticated, urban sense of style with a deeply traditional respect for place.

When builder-developer Don Tankersley first approached Brown and Wojtanowicz with an early set of plans for the 13-unit building, the couple was immediately intrigued. Tankersley's estimable credentials as a high-end contractor were on display throughout the city on projects as varied as the chic, contemporary Bluehour restaurant and the historic Pittock Mansion, the kitchen of which his firm had been entrusted with restoring. More significantly, Brown had been hiring Tankersley on a series of fixer-upper home remodels over a period of about 17 years, and he was intimately familiar with the builder's meticulous craftsmanship.

"I wanted the Lair to be a jewel, something modern and beautiful—but also a real community," Tankersley recalls. His impulse was backed up by the hiring of Potestio Architects, a small, local firm known for melding classicism and modernism in award-winning houses and restaurants. Even before the plans were complete, Brown and Wojtanowicz reserved a unit.

"We were excited about the '50s-modern direction in which they were going," says Brown. "We also liked the intimate size of the Lair building. We've lived in places with 12 or 17 stories"—the couple had recently moved from a Pearl District condominium located near their previous business, the Orchid Exchange floral shop—"and this was just a little different."

But first it was up to lead architect Rick Potestio and assistant Rob Lamb to overcome the site's challenging topography. The lot had remained vacant for years in part because it sloped steeply downhill a few feet from the sidewalk. The design team embraced the situation, however, by integrating five levels of living space with the hillside in a graceful cascade. With only three of those floors rising above street grade, the building's low profile respects the scale of the historic Victorian and Craftsman single-family homes just down the street. Inspired by hill towns in Tuscany, where residences are commonly organized around terraced courtyards, Potestio placed a sunken driveway, lined with private garages, atop the lowest level. Open to the sky, it doubles as a community gathering space. "We've already used it for parties, and I've seen people skateboarding in there, which is great," Potestio says.

Since they don't actually live under the Tuscan sun, Brown and Wojtanowicz chose a corner unit with big, east-facing windows. "When the sun comes up, this place lights up like a lantern," Wojtanowicz says. Situated above one of the private garages, the 1,100-square-foot townhouse-style residence features a living area and kitchen on the main floor and two bedrooms above. Rich natural materials, such as granite countertops in the kitchen and Appalachian walnut floors, accent the spare, modern interiors. "The units aren't particularly large, so it's all the little details that make the difference—the small, glass tiles in the master bathroom; the good, clean, crisp edges on everything," says Wojtanowicz.

In customizing their abode, the avid travelers took lessons from the serene and uncluttered atmospheres of their favorite hotels, such as the sleekly elegant Setai in Miami and the sumptuous Halekulani in Waikiki. They even incorporated a festive bar into the home's dining area. The glass-shelved alcove, lit from below and set into a walnut-paneled wall, is modeled after one in a Swiss hotel. (More precisely, it echoes an earlier copy designed by carpenter Mark Newman for another of Tankersley's clients.) "We wanted it to almost feel like a restaurant," explains Brown.

As well, the home is outfitted with a handsome collection of vintage midcentury-modern furniture and contemporary art. The open-planned living and dining area, where Brown and Wojtanowicz spend most of their time, is graced by an immaculate Barcelona chair, a white marble Saarinen dining table and a scattering of wood, bronze and marble sculptures by local artists, all of which makes for a uniquely personalized hotel-away-from-home. "Being here allows us the time to be together, enjoy what we have and make plans for our future—before heading back to work at the beach," Wojtanowicz says. "Life is good."