



LAYLEE OLFAT (LEFT) WITH HER LANDLORDS, THE SANDER FAMILY.

MY LANDLORD, MY ARCHITECT

ARCHITECTS WHO WANT TO
REALIZE UNDILUTED IDEAS
DOUBLE AS LANDLORDS.

Text **Katya Tylevich** / Photos **Caleb Coppola**

‘GEHRY’S IDEA WAS
TO FIT INTO THE EXISTING
SPACE WITHOUT
CAUSING TROUBLE’

— Bradford Schlei —

APARTMENT BLOCK ON VENICE BEACH
DESIGNED AND OWNED BY FRANK
GEHRY AND CHARLES ARNOLDI, BUILT
FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES.

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It makes for a sexy office. Not least because of the view: Venice Beach, tourists and bodybuilders, bums and their arresting officers. But we keep the floor-to-ceiling windows closed and shuttered. Ditto the skyroof. The California sun disagrees with computers, and drafts from open windows arrive on wings of incense, pot smoke and noise. So we remain, hermetically sealed between plywood and stucco.

It's summer 2004 and I'm writing for a production company. From my desk, I enjoy views no less absorbing than those outside: expired coupons taped to a white wall. Junk mail addressed to 'Mr Frank Gehry or current resident'.

My office belongs to a six-unit complex designed and owned by Gehry and the artist Charles Arnoldi. The oceanfront studios ride ground-level commercial units – 'mom and pop' organizations, to use Arnoldi's words. Now,

imagine mom as a tattoo artist and pop slicing pizzas, and you've got yourself a context.

The lofts were designed as artists' studios, Arnoldi told me by phone recently. He and longtime friend Gehry are keeping the properties for their children. A fact I already knew. Back in '04, I had the good fortune to eavesdrop on my boss negotiating with the leasing agent. My boss wants to buy the loft: 'Just let me speak to the owner.'

'That's not gonna happen.'

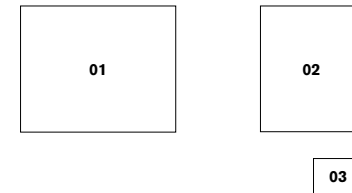
As their tenant, I never speak with Gehry or Arnoldi, either. Never see them. But like my co-workers, I often drop their names. Part of my benefits package is a foolproof icebreaker. 'Frank Gehry's my landlord.' Not bad.

My colleagues take smoke breaks on the roof deck and exchange legends of the loft: 'Stiletto heels are prohibited to preserve the wood

floors.' 'You can't pin anything to the walls.' 'Robert Downey Jr used to live here.' 'This is like a heritage site or something.'

In September 2009, I contact the building's manager – conduit between owners and tenants since the building's 2000 inception. 'Unless it's something serious, Gehry and Arnoldi don't do day-to-day operations,' he says. 'They just ensure the place is maintained. It's a normal business relationship.'

In fact, Los Angeles is full of whispers about big names owning big spaces. Many such names deny the rumours, or like Gehry in this case, decline interviews. 'Landlord' can be a dirty word. A sensitive topic: tenant as architectural element. Are architects as picky about their residents as they are their stainless steel? I wonder. What really happens when architects forgo that final gut-wrencher: handing the keys to a client?



01 CATHERINE HOLLISS AND WHITNEY SANDER.

02 DEBORAH GUYER GREENE, CO-OWNER OF THE ECO-SUPPLIES COMPANY IN WHITNEY SANDER'S BUILDING.

03 WHITNEY SANDER'S 'ORANGE OFFICE' ON LINCOLN BOULEVARD.

'THIS
ALLOWS ME
TO BUILD
FANTASTIC
PROJECTS.
I CAN EXPERI-
MENT'

— Whitney Sander —

Living in Symbiosis

'I'm not born to be a developer,' Whitney Sander says. We're sitting in his studio, 112 m² of an orange building erupting above gas stations and nail salons on a congested LA street. 'I'm born to be an architect. Architects live, breathe, and bleed for their ideas. But many projects don't see the light of day.'

Catherine Holliss – Sander's wife and partner – joins us. She and Sander digress, chatting with tenants, employees of the eco-supplies company leasing 558 m² of 'Orange Office'. Sander turns back to me: 'This allows me to build fantastic projects. I can experiment,' he says. 'Take chances.'

Sander found his 'landlord hat' in 2002, when he completed his private residence, two levels visually tied with acrylic 'ribbon'. Sander designed the home with an adjoining studio, but his practice outgrew the workspace well

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before the housewarming. Lo, a rental unit was born, and the impetus for larger such projects.

Sander's now marketing a new two-unit townhouse. Its exposed steel gleams with the realty cards stacked on counters. 'I mean, this makes sense mathematically, but you don't just go to the highest bidder,' says Sander.

Finishing each other's sentences, Sander and Holliss describe a kind of architectural Darwinism, in which a space naturally selects its residents, and vice-versa. 'The architecture determines the tenants, which determines our relationships with them,' says Sander.

Adds Holliss, gesturing around the office: 'Anybody interested in a building like this is, by virtue, *interesting*.' Describing their tenants, they use words like 'friends' and 'symbiosis'. Remarkably, their tenants do the same.

Downstairs, the 'eco-build' company is days from a grand opening. Deborah »



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‘THERE ARE CERTAIN TERMS THAT COME WITH THE TERRITORY – “DEVELOPER”, “LANDLORD” – THAT I CHOKE ON’

— Michael Sant —

Guyer Greene, running the show, steps out of a meeting and laughs: ‘You want to know if it’s all true?’ Like her landlords, Greene admits they’ve had aesthetic differences – ‘certainly nothing is patty-cake patty-cake.’ Partitions and spiral staircase finishing were topics of negotiation, for starters. ‘But we’re professionals working together.’ Then that noun again: ‘Friends.’

‘It could have been a nightmare,’ says Greene. ‘Which never occurred to us. Even signing the lease was a little cocktail party.’

I crash something of a cocktail party at Sander’s residence the following evening. Sander, Holliss, their baby, babysitter and tenant – Laylee Olfat – are cooking, drinking, laughing.

Olfat, an independent film producer from New York, has been renting here for a year.

Out of Sander’s earshot, she tells me it’s her dream place. We’re talking REM sleep. ‘Before moving to LA, I saw a house shaped like a cube; a carport beneath,’ she says. ‘Post-modern . . . spiral staircase . . . I even sketched it.’ Olfat discovered Sander’s home while scouting another rental nearby. ‘I just stood, staring.’

Olfat takes off for an important dinner. The home’s atrium fills with ‘good luck!’s. Before leaving, Olfat whispers in my ear: ‘He’s like a father to me. We’re one happy family.’ Later, Sander surveys his bustling home and jokes: ‘Just call me “Lord”.’

Shepherding Your Project

Two miles north of Sander’s home, in a busy café, architect Michael Sant calls himself the ‘mayor of a microscopic town’. He does so

with a smile, but indeed he fields many hellos and conversations-in-progress from passersby. He responds thoughtfully, diplomatically. I suppose on this boulevard he represents the nation that is his mixed-used development: seven residential units above shops and a popular café.

Sant and I could have had our coffee there – inside our ‘architectural subject’. But that would have deprived the architect of all anonymity. The tenants know him. He knows them. When they cross paths, they hug, catch up. Were I not there, they might talk new security locks and noisy neighbours; it’s a place Sant calls an ‘experiment’.

Completed in 2006, Sant’s modernist structure spans three lots, of which he owns 279 m² of commercial space and two residential units. As president of the owners’ association, Sant

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01 MICHAEL SANT.

02 ARTIST BRETT HOFER, RESIDENT IN MICHAEL SANT’S ‘MICROSCOPIC TOWN’.

03 MICHAEL SANT’S MODERNIST STRUCTURE.

remains ‘in conversation with everybody’.

‘There are certain terms that come with the territory – “developer”, “landlord” – that I choke on,’ Sant tells me. ‘They’re the appropriate words, I guess, but for me it’s about being able to care for the quality of the experience, about doing right by the project. Shepherding it, protecting it, so that it doesn’t get watered down. An essential part of sustainable design is brining a total commitment to what you make.’

When Sant and I tour the ‘test tubes’ of his experiment – the seamless transitions between indoor and outdoor, public and private – I notice integrated windows below my feet going upstairs. Sant notices various minutiae out of place. He laughs: ‘I try and temper myself. There’s a difference between being actively concerned and meddling.’

His project’s success, says Sant, depends on whether he can step back without the

internal or external health of his building deteriorating. The architect sees his residents as ‘protectors of the idea’. Unlike Sander and Holliss, he doesn’t allude to natural selection; rather, his microcosm is the product of a kind of Creation. ‘It’s like Frankenstein,’ Sant says. ‘You’re trying to deliver the lightning that brings a thing to life. If the building doesn’t have its own beating heart, if it’s functioning with somebody else’s energy, it’s a flat experience.’

In that analogy, survival of the fittest plays its role. Many of Sant’s current residents vied for their units. Brett Hofer, an artist, describes this unorthodox courtship: ‘Typically, when you buy property, you don’t interact with the seller until close of escrow,’ says Hofer. ‘But because the property is so specific, as is Michael’s particular vision, I thought it good for us to meet. We did. We



talked about modernism and what I believed modernism to represent.’

Hofer has been a vital organ of the Frankenstein for going on two years, now. He owns the unit above the bakery, eats at the restaurant, visits the stores. ‘There’s nothing about my building I haven’t used.’ Then, as if architect and resident had compared notes: ‘Part of me feels I’m participating in a social experiment. And I like that.’

Contributing to Society

‘It’s not like this is a new thing,’ says architect David Gray, showing me around his office (one of three spaces he currently owns). ‘I’ve been doing this for – I don’t even want to do the math.’ He points to models of his latest ‘adaptive reuse’ projects, historic downtown buildings he’s designed and developed. ‘You own a piece of history, which contributes to the fabric of »

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‘I WOULD ENCOURAGE ALL ARCHITECTS TO DESIGN AND BUILD OR REHABILITATE THEIR OWN BUILDINGS’

— ‘Big’ David Gray —

society,’ says Gray. ‘It’s a rare thing, and most people renting from me sense they’re getting something they can’t get elsewhere.’

There’s another David Gray worth mentioning, here. This Gray (no relation) manages the Tomahawk Building (2004), which the architect developed. At one point, the architect owned and rented all eight units in the building; he now owns and rents out one.

‘For day-to-day problems it’s “call Little Dave”,’ Gray the manager points to himself, standing in his downtown studio. ‘For problems I can’t handle, “Big Dave” steps in.’

Little Dave lived in Tomahawk prior to Gray’s ‘architectural intervention’; he later helped Gray with building, stayed on as his tenant, and eventually bought a unit. ‘I know *all* the stories,’ Little Dave says and gives me the abridged history of ten years in downtown LA. Here’s a simple random sample of his words:

‘Crack-heads.’ ‘Whorehouse.’ ‘Riots.’ ‘Death, drugs and debauchery.’ ‘Madness. Just madness.’

Downtown has changed over the years, but Little Dave remains an essential bridge between his living, breathing building and its architect. ‘Big Dave’s not far removed,’ he says, citing examples when the architect’s had to be called in (tenants failing to pay rent, or damaging their units).

For years, the architect actually used one of Tomahawk’s studios as an interactive university classroom. He taught ‘Architecture and Development’. ‘The assignment was to pick a nearby building or vacant lot and design, develop, and put it all together,’ says Gray. ‘I try teaching students to expand the vision of how they practice architecture.’

If my talk with Gray is any indication of the syllabus, then students also learned that ‘As an architect you don’t want to micromanage, and as

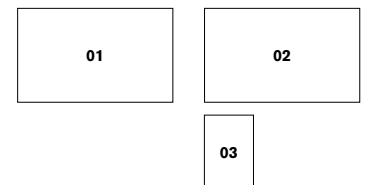
a building owner you don’t want to micromanage,’ says Gray. ‘The worst thing in the world is some architectural control freak telling you what you can and can’t do.’

But a tenant has less say than a client, I venture.

Gray laughs: ‘Oh yeah. If they do something *really* bad I have no trouble telling them.’ Then, very sincerely, he adds: ‘I would encourage all architects to design and build or rehabilitate their own buildings. It’s a perspective. The whole goal is to set standards you believe in.’

At the time I’m writing this, Gray’s Tomahawk unit has a ‘For Lease’ sign in its window; Sander and Holliss are disappointed by low turnout at an open house for their new duplex. The market is ruthless, the words ‘architect’ and ‘bankrupt’ appear together in sentences all too often. Still, the architects I speak with don’t emphasize ‘rent money’ as motivation

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01 ‘BIG’ DAVID GRAY.

02 ‘LITTLE’ DAVID GRAY.

03 DAVID GRAY’S TOMAHAWK BUILDING.



for moonlighting as landlords. That’s not to say they deny a relationship between property ownership and something in the bank. Rather, they stress that owning helps finance other projects; particularly those that would not otherwise be built.

As Whitney Sander puts it: ‘Yes, it gives you payback and helps pay the mortgage,’ but the biggest profit is ‘aesthetic ownership’. ‘By being my own client, I have the capacity to do things I wouldn’t normally be able to.’ Sander nods to his office. There’s freedom in not having to worry about a client’s legacy, he says.

Legacy also figures for Gehry and Arnoldi, whose lofts are designed to stay in the family name. At my old haunt on Venice Beach, I meet with Bradford Schlei, head of production at a film company renting in Gehry’s complex for almost nine years. Today, Venice has among the most desirable and expensive properties

in Los Angeles. A decade ago – ‘hope you don’t get mugged,’ Schlei laughs. He reads that history into Gehry’s design. ‘Gehry’s idea here was to fit into the existing space without causing trouble,’ says Schlei. ‘It’s like me going down to a rough bar. I’m not going to order a Singapore Sling with a little umbrella in it. I’m going to have a whiskey and a beer.’

Well, a ‘name beer’, anyway. The production company I worked for has since relocated. Former coworkers call the old office ‘Gehry’s’. The new office, though architect-designed, remains anonymous. A nuance as important to consider as the idiom, ‘Watered down.’ Independent of one another, Sander and Sant say that’s the last thing they want their projects to be. Doubling as landlords allows these architects to keep their ideas largely undiluted. As ‘Big’ David Gray put it: ‘Whatever it is, *you* did it.’ «