

Project Makes Non-profit's House into a Home

by Alison Ryan, Daily Journal of Commerce

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Exterior of p:ear's new space at the corner of Northwest Sixth and Flanders.

The downtown space that p:ear rents at Southwest Park Avenue and Alder Street houses the learning, creating, thinking and music-playing spaces that serve transitional and homeless youth. But the nonprofit knew the downtown spot wasn't a place it would want to call home forever.

Last fall, the organization heard that its tatty, fractured, cramped spot on the ground floor of the once-elegant Cornelius Hotel was going to be renovated back into a hotel.

"Already it was a problematic space for us," p:ear's Sarah Dougher said. "It's crowded. In the winter, water comes in through the track lighting. We're grateful for the space, but it's not meeting our needs anymore."

But now the nonprofit has found a place that does. A p:ear board member's real estate agent was representing the window-lined brick-and-stucco historic building on the corner of Northwest Sixth Avenue and Flanders Street.

And p:ear also found an architectural firm that was looking for a pro-bono project. SERA Architects had just started a program based on 1 % Solution, an idea created by grant-and-donation-supported architectural practice Public Architecture that challenges firms to dedicate 1 percent of their staff work hours to pro-bono work.

"We should be designing for the good as well as the wealthy," said SERA's Jessamyn Griffin.

The idea is still new at SERA, where an office-wide discussion about how to get junior staff more involved at the firm led to the creation of groups for people with similar interests. Griffin and Suzanne Blair, both junior job captains, and Christina Tello, an interior designer, were interested in doing pro-bono work. SERA architect Tim Richard agreed to mentor.

The 1 % Solution – which shakes out to about 20 hours of pro-bono work per person a year – was a good launching pad, Griffin said. And the p:ear building was a perfect pilot project.

"P:ear just really was the obvious choice," she said. "It's in our community, and we have really closely aligned values as far as sustainability and the community goes."

The architect's and client's visions for the new space were aligned as well. About 700 kids over the past five years have enrolled at p:ear. Between 30 and 40 kids arrive daily, Dougher said, with widely different interests.

"What we try to do is provide different ways of interacting with things like literature and art, so they feel enfranchised," she said.

A kitchen, which restaurateurs Peter Bro and Joe Holm are working to help design and outfit, will be the heart of p:ear's permanent home. A gallery, for students and visiting artists to show and sell their work, will reap the light-filled benefit of casement windows and a roll-up door. A quiet library for reading, art space, a darkroom, a soundproof music studio, and a great room for just hanging out are also part of the plan.

Offering a little stability of place, Griffin said, is also key. Early designs use regional, warm materials to reinforce the sense of home for the youth enrolled in p:ear.

"It's theirs, it's not just some left-over spot," Griffin said. "It's really meant for them."

VOLUNTEER

For more information on the 1 % Solution program, visit www.theonepercent.org.

For more information about p:ear, visit www.pearmentor.org.