

HOME & DESIGN
Praise for Thin Flats
Inga Saffron on Northern
Liberties rowhouse condos. H1.

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Changing Skyline *By Inga Saffron*

Taking liberties with design

Improvising architect creates vibrant rowhouse condos.



Architect Tim McDonald's Thin Flats condo project is on Laurel Street in Northern Liberties. Above is the greenery on the rooftop.

It's easy to imagine a painter or musician improvising during the artistic process. If their ramblings take them down a creative dead end, they can always try something else. But it's not so simple for architects. Most design decisions need to be locked up far in advance, if only to ensure that buildings stand up and construction budgets don't break the bank. There's a reason that blueprints are legal documents.

Such constraints make the accomplishments of Philadelphia architect Tim McDonald all the more remarkable. A jack-of-many-trades who is just as likely to pick up a See **SKYLINE** on H6



TIM McDONALD

Changing Skyline *By Inga Saffron*

Design freedom in N. Liberties

SKYLINE from H1
welding torch as a computer mouse, he hybridized himself years ago into a designer-developer-builder to maintain artistic control over his projects. It's given him the freedom to improvise and experiment.

The rewards of his free-spirited approach are now on stunning display in Northern Liberties, where McDonald and his team are just completing an eight-unit condo project on Laurel Street called Thin Flats. It's been a family affair, with brothers Pat and John; his wife, Liz Kinder; and childhood friend Howard Steinberg participating.

They indulged McDonald, the design architect, while he kept rearranging the facades, moving around the panels of glass, steel and a wood product called Trespa until the last possible moment. The result of all that tweaking is walls that dance with the exuberant boogie-woogie rhythms of a Mondrian painting, rattling the bricks of the project's solemn Philadelphia neighbors. Consider the design a spontaneous act of controlled combustion.

Many of the same architectural preoccupations that surfaced in McDonald's earlier projects, Capital Flats and Rag Flats, are on vivid display here. McDonald never met a wall he didn't want to deconstruct into layers of texture, void and shadow. In the past, his obsession with the exterior collage sometimes caused him to short-change the construction details. But with Thin Flats, his group has achieved a higher level of refinement, especially for the interior finishes.

The design you see is only half the story. Thin Flats is on track to become the first residential building in America to qualify for a Platinum certificate from the U.S. Council on Green Building, its highest rating.

There are solar hot-water panels and greenery on the roof, radiant heating under the floors, and electric car plug-ins in the parking area. It's rare to get such devout

environmentalism and good looks in the same package, and that makes Thin Flats easily the most exciting rowhouse project to come out of Philadelphia's recent construction boom.

Actually, you might not initially recognize Thin Flats as a group of rowhouses. From Laurel Street, it looks more like a small apartment house whose 72-foot-long facade has been segmented with narrow vertical strips. We're not accustomed to seeing our rowhouse rhythms subverted in this way. McDonald says the strategy comes out of "a fascination with density and how it gets revealed."

The density gets revealed loud and clear. By jamming together so many verticals, McDonald leaves the viewer with no doubt that there is a lot of life and action going on in this building. The contemporary screen captures a sense of movement, in much the same way that baroque churches do.

For all that, McDonald isn't adverse to a little visual subterfuge. His sliced-up facade conceals as much as it reveals.

So while Thin Flats spans four building lots, it contains eight duplexes, upper and lower units. It's hard to tell precisely how many floors are behind the screen. It looks like three, but turns out to be four, with the bottom level of the lower duplex located partially below sidewalk grade on Laurel Street. It makes you wonder why McDonald didn't make Thin Flats a real apartment building, since it would have saved space devoted to staircases.

The deceit does have a purpose. There is a second, more sedate, wall behind the syncopated facade. By separating the two skins, McDonald creates a feeling of depth and enables a vast amount of sunlight to penetrate the lower units. On the upper levels, the careful patterning modulates the sun's brightness.

It takes a while to appreciate the complexity. McDonald's pattern of grays and

silvers never repeats. He pulls you in and keeps the rhythm going, with hints of orange behind the main screen. Those voids contain small, sheltered balconies.

After all the pyrotechnics on the facades, the 18-foot-wide interiors are surprisingly serene. McDonald and his brother Pat, a master plumber, have managed to incorporate environmental features in nearly every room. Some are utterly low-tech, like the lineup of skylights and glass floor panels that spread light through the duplexes.

But they've also included a sophisticated computer system that controls the heating, lighting and security, and can even be operated off site. The pipes for the radiant heat and solar hot-water panels are works of art.

Most green projects are expected to get their materials from distributors within 500 miles. But for McDonald's team, buying local means purchasing from providers located five minutes away. Many of the products, such as the artisanal steel railings, were crafted in Kensington. The bathroom sinks are the work of Kinder, who is a ceramicist.

It seems natural that such a collaborative, creative project should be realized in a neighborhood like Northern Liberties, a funky mix of rowhouses and small factories that has welcomed innovative new construction.

Thin Flats sidles up to a classic brick rowhouse. It's a momentarily disconcerting juxtaposition. The block, which already features the earlier Capital Flats and several other modern designs, will grow even more eclectic and interesting once McDonald completes a single-family version of Thin Flats on the corner.

The resulting sandwich of old and new is a reminder that all successful cities are the product of a little improvisation.

Contact architecture critic Inga Saffron at 215-854-2213 or isafron@phillynews.com.