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Architecture firm makes going 'green' look easy

Nearly 12 years gone, St. Helens native returns to start design firm with wife

BY BRIAN STIMSON
The Chronicle

Last November, the finishing touches were put on the storefront in Old Town that some might say is a little out of place. Akaan Architecture and Design LLC, a new architectural company at 101 St. Helens St. stands out with the large "101" painted on the outside wall, and silver sunscreens covering the view of the interior of the office from the street.

But local residents don't need to worry. It isn't a Portland transport, attempting to make his own Pearl District in the heart of Columbia County. The innovative architectural firm is owned by long-time resident Al Petersen and his wife Kannikar Petersen-Niamlarp. The husband and wife design team have just moved from the East Coast, where they both practiced as architects for larger firms.

The couple had met while both earning their master's degrees in architecture from the University of Houston. Petersen, a graduate of St. Helens High School, had teaching teaching abroad after earning a degree in Linguistics and Latin American Language and Culture at the University of Oregon.

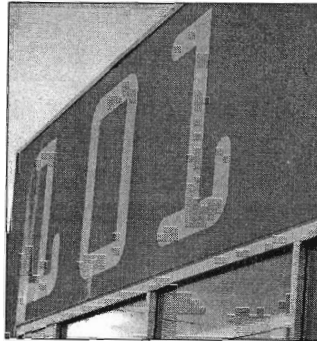
Petersen-Niamlarp had been studying architecture as an undergraduate in Thailand before coming to the United States to earn her master's. After the couple graduated in 1996, they moved to Thailand to teach at King Monkut's University of Technology. Returning to the United States three years later, they both found jobs designing buildings for different firms in Philadelphia.

Petersen-Niamlarp designed buildings for Ivy League universities; Petersen helped design low-



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Kannikar (pronounced ka-nee-ka) Petersen-Niamlarp and Al Petersen started their own architecture firm with an emphasis on accessible and environmentally-friendly design.



"Good design doesn't need to be expensive"

—Kannikar

Petersen-Niamlarp
architect

income housing units and the new baseball stadium for the Philadelphia Phillies.

But after a family emergency, the couple decided to settle down and open their own business in Petersen's home town of St. Helens.

With a 'green' focus

Both Al and Kannikar say their architecture practice is focusing on the relatively new trend of building green. Their office is designed with conservation, efficiency and innovation in mind. The carpets are made with recycled materials; the old single-pane windows in front have been replaced with new, energy efficient glass; the old ceiling tile has been replaced with thick foam insulation; and many aspects of the office such as the desks, have been constructed out of common, but inexpensive materials.

The key that Al and

Kannikar say is essential in making everyday materials look high-class: design.

"Good design doesn't need to be expensive," Petersen-Niamlarp said.

As a part of this attitude that stresses recyclability, the pair are also both certified in the LEED program developed by the U.S. Green Building Council. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and attempts to place standards by what a "green" building can be.

Currently, the pair are working toward breaking ground on their first housing development in St. Helens. Located out on Sykes Road, the five lot subdivision called Garden Court could prove to be home to one of St. Helens' newest and most innovative homes.

The couple has custom designed the houses to the sites, ensuring the sun shines

in all the right windows and rooms, the house is the right size and shape for the lot, and other custom home characteristics such as solar-powered heating. They both hope to make at least one home on the lot to be their own, as a sort of showcase house. The subdivision will also serve as Akaan's golden standard—a way to show the community what these architects are capable.

Although the couple is currently working on this residential development, they hope to branch out to commercial design for the community.

Petersen-Niamlarp said she would like to help in the revamping of many empty buildings in the Old Town area, an area that the couple thinks has a great future.

Whether renovating or building anew, Akaan is poised to make waves in the area of architecture.