

In Depth

Architect finds poetry in clients' words, making spaces work

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John Thodos likes the steep slopes. He likes the narrow lots. He likes the problem properties, the insane code restrictions and the kind of close-to-the-edge budgets that might cause other architects to shake their heads and walk away.

As long as those problems come with a joyful client with a willingness to consider modern design, the Carmel-based architect will take any design problem thrown his way.

But at age 72, with his college sweetheart always at his side (Judy, who only married him 17 years ago "because he stopped being a rake," she says), and a second career as a painter, sculptor and furniture designer that keeps him artistically content, Thodos has won enough awards and designed enough buildings to know that he can afford, mentally and financially, to say no to a project that won't make him happy.

"You cannot do a fine project without a fine client. They have to be truthful about their needs, their budget, their fears. They need to be able to work with me and let me know what they really need and want," Thodos said. "My job is to take their words and get a little poetry out of it. It's not about a large home or expensive materials. It's about how the spaces work, and if they toss in a difficult site, so much the better."

Nearly a dozen American Institute of Architecture awards, including four "Best of Show" honors for buildings ranging to private homes and offices to a youth art center and a Greek Orthodox Church, attest to his skills. So does the esteemed Italian architecture magazine "L'architettura," which did a 22-page pictorial of Thodos' work.

Thodos divides his work almost evenly between commercial and residential work, with much of his commercial work taking place in Portland, but even his commercial projects exemplify his penchant for unusual or challenging properties. The long and narrow Cundari and Mason office building, for ex-



Dennis G. Hendricks

Architect John Thodos and his wife, Judy, live in Carmel. John Thodos, who divides his time between residential and commercial projects, delights in solving architectural challenges and making space work in modernistic designs.

ample, sits on a 1,000-square-foot triangular lot near downtown Portland. The building is in a transitional area between residential and commercial and Thodos tried to bridge those two elements in his design.

The building won an AIA Honor Award, and AIA judge Sir Richard Rogers said of the project: "This building is a perfect example of turning a sow's ear into a silk purse."

But it's his clients who really rave. So much, in fact, that client Peter Nosler (he's the "P" in leading technical builder DPR Construction Inc.) had to confer with his wife Kay before being interviewed to figure out how he could sound believable.

About 12 years ago, the Noslers bought a traditional Carmel bungalow, and despite reservations about modernity, came to enlist Thodos in the teardown and redesign of their home.

Nosler said he was aware of Thodos' work, having walked past the architect's ultra-modern former home on Scenic Drive. He said

that while he and his wife had envisioned building a newer version of their traditional bungalow, Thodos convinced them otherwise, and they're grateful he did.

"We went through a process with three architects, but decided we had to at least talk to John because tearing down a house in Carmel is a very iffy thing," Nosler said. "In talking to John, I realized he absolutely was a leading architect with a great sense of process and design quality."

"John does not design something as a statement, he designs what is pleasing and delightful for the client. He challenges you. You say you want one thing, but he will ask, 'Have you thought about this? Have you considered that?'" Nosler added. "This home is a place that makes us happy. It so embodies the things that tickle us and inspire us."

For Oscar-nominated composer George Aliceson Tipton and his wife Paula, a former civil litigator, Thodos designed a 1,300-square-foot contemporary residence to replace an