

# Zum: a Zen-like temple for the physically fit

■ *BjarkoSerra Architects created a yin-yang composition of Asian discipline and circus chic.*



**A•I•A**  
PROJECT  
OF THE  
MONTH

By **CLAIR ENLOW**  
Special to the Journal

It's the season to fight off extra pounds. And we've all seen the typical field of battle — a vast gym floor filled with the red-faced army, peddling and pumping machines, and staring blankly into space or at a

screen.

The machines may be useful, but the fitness facility doesn't have to look that way.

"It should be inviting to the eye, the mind and the spirit," according to Peter Shmock.

Zum, his club on Fifth Avenue and Bell is all about education and fun, as well as training. It's a tightly programmed machine for multi-faceted fitness — without the war zone.

Sheltered behind massive steel-plate doors with arcing handles and a logo cut into the metal, Zum appears on the street like an enigma — a portal for an exclusive urban environment where people might eat, drink, meet or meditate. If it weren't for the showers and the weight machines inside, this might be a Zen temple, a Belltown wine bar or the next great sushi place.

Go through the doors and the enigma continues. Behind the raw steel, an elaborate crystal chandelier hangs over a sleekly modern reception area, with historic photos of an athlete blown up on the wall. Industrial fittings, rough concrete floors and exposed brick complete the yin-yang composition. Only the towels and the terry-and-lycra-clad patrons in the spaces beyond give away



**The fitness facility mixes hard industrial elements with sleek furnishings and fun.**

Photos courtesy of BjarkoSerra Architects

the real use of the place.

Zum's look — a combination of hard and soft, Asian discipline and circus chic — is largely the work of designer Rocky Rochon. Shmock, a former Olympic track and field athlete, and trainer for the Pacific Northwest Ballet and the Seattle Mariners, looked up Rochon early in the effort to set Zum in motion.

Drawing upon his years with a large, multi-disciplinary firm in San Francisco, Rochon began a dialog with Shmock using an eclectic set of images to get a sense of his client's vision of the project. The list of words that resulted includes "edgy," and "playful." Both especially liked the metaphor of a circus, and the graphics selected for Zum reflect this.

Shmock and Rochon brought BjarkoSerra Architects into the project

to help select a site, complete the design concept and work through design development. They found an old corner storefront on Fifth Avenue that had served as a retail outlet and warehouse for years.

The basic bones of the building — structural brick walls with timber trusses — would serve well as an outer envelope for a modest-sized urban gym.

But even with Shmock's concept for intense use of the space, square footage was a problem. It all began to work when the design team came up with the idea of a two-level core for the space. A mezzanine has been added, with space for offices and a small floor for stationary cycles. There is a bright, lofty meditation area, lit by the skylights of the original industrial building.

Rochon and Bjarko arranged all of these over a set of locker and shower

rooms, a corridor and extra exercise space in the three middle bays of the storefront structure — between the full-height reception area and the large open area at the rear of the building. Open stairwells lead to the second level.

Together, they devised a spatial arrangement that fits the logic of Shmock's philosophy of mindful physical exercise, and serves the program well. Like the ideal fitness program, the plan is symmetrical, placing emphasis on the center axis and the equal use of both sides.

A central corridor leads from the reception area past the mens' and womens' locker rooms to the main workout area, a scant 3,100 square feet in size. But it seems larger than it is, because of the high ceilings, exposed structure and mirrors along the outer wall.

In the center, lined up with the corridor, is a small "gazebo" cut out of chalkboard-painted sheetrock on a wood frame and covered with notices, messages and aphorisms marked on by staff and club members. The whimsical enclosure serves to block sight lines and provide a measure of privacy in the equipment-dominated room. Standing like a garden pedestal in the center of the gazebo is a fountain, a constant reminder to perspiring patrons to take a drink, and a place to stop and talk.

To expand the space even further, the designers added two final touches. During good weather, the room literally opens up with an easily movable garage door cut into the back wall. At other times, there is a dropped projection screen where still or moving images — from Cirque du Soleil to the Three Stooges — light up the house.

Zum was created on a very low budget, using a minimally built-out core in a recycled older space. The success of the design literally hinges on certain meticulous details. Full-height, heavy translucent glass panels with polished steel hinges have an ethereal effect in the showers and dressing areas against the raw concrete of the floors and partitions. There are no fluorescents, only soft down-lamps and up-lights. Old paint on the inside of the outer walls was further distressed for more contrast with new partitions and sleek built-ins. While the rest of the finishes range from dove gray to ochre, the abundant light from the skylight in the high ceiling of the bare-bones meditation room is reflected with a coat of all-white paint.

It may take a long time to wear those pre-holiday jeans again. But at Zum, getting there is half the fun.

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**Zum is full of surprises like this sand pit, where patrons can engage in a little track and field training right in the middle of Belltown.**



**Architect Greg Bjarko, owner Peter Shmock and designer Rocky Rochon at Zum. The club is a first venture for Shmock, an Olympic athlete and trainer.**

Photo by Clair Enlow



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Architecture does not stop at the locker room. Concrete meets steel hardware and full-height translucent glass panels in the showers at Zum.

## Jury comments

*"The pleasure of this project is derived from the dynamic tension between the totally unremarkable, bland exterior and the sense of entering a true temple — in this case, a sanctuary of fitness."*

*"There is a Zen-like quality to the space derived from the modern detailing and use of simple materials within the context of the cleaned industrial patina of the shell. What was once an open room housing machinery is now inhabited by work-out equipment, yoga rooms, balancing bars and a sandpit used for explosive movement exercises."*

### Zum Fitness Club 2235 Fifth Ave.

**Project Designer**  
Rocky Rochon Design, Rocky Rochon

**Architect**  
BjarkoSerra Architects, Greg Bjarko, Chris Serra, John Adams

**Owner**  
Peter Shmock

**Project type**  
Tenant improvement

**Project size**  
7,338 square feet (main floor,  
6,124 square feet, mezzanine 1,214  
square feet)

**Completion**  
May 2002

**Construction cost**  
\$643,000

**Structural engineer**  
Swenson Say Faget

**Electrical engineer**  
A.E.S.

**Mechanical engineer**  
Sider Byers

**General contractor**  
Lumpkin, Inc.

The Project of the Month feature is sponsored by the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The Project of the Month for January, Zum, by Rocky Rochon Design and BjarkoSerra Architects, was selected with the assistance of architects Peter Hockaday, Marilyn Brockman and Bill Fuller; and developer Val Thomas. For more information about submitting projects for possible feature articles, contact Peter Sackett at AIA Seattle, (206) 448-4938, or [psackett@aiaseattle.org](mailto:psackett@aiaseattle.org).