

YOGA IS SANSKRIT FOR *union*

 NEIL GONZALES

JOHN BERG'S new ultra-luxurious yoga studio in Palo Alto was never the property owner's expectation.

Completed in 2010, the new building replaced a vacant gas station. It was ready for stores, restaurants or maybe a bank, befitting the commercial vibe coming from the popular shopping plaza nearby in the tree-lined neighborhood known as Midtown. The sleek structure at 2995 Middlefield Road with its green-tinted, glass-wall windows and a latticed appearance from the heat-reducing louvers around the second-story exterior has many environmentally friendly elements.

Then Berg popped his idea on the landlord: Why not lease the entire two-story, 6,500-square-foot building to a high-end yoga studio consistent with the technological and cultural sophistication of Silicon Valley? Erik Corrigan, a real estate investor and broker, was intrigued. "He never thought he was going to get so lucky and have one guy take it for 10 years," said Berg, 54, who became deeply committed to yoga after being diagnosed with lymphoma a number of years ago.

"But the owner is thrilled," said Berg, cancer-free and looking fit and trim. "He has given me essentially carte blanche. He says, 'What you're doing to this building is so far beyond what we ever imagined.'"

It's true, Corrigan said. The building shell, now owned by a Corrigan family partnership, is the handiwork of Palo Alto architect Ken Hayes of The Hayes Group. It has 22-foot ceilings on the first floor and 16-foot ceilings on the second that "allow dramatic open spaces," Corrigan said. "As I broker I knew that tenants gravitate toward interesting properties."

Work on the Samyama Yoga Center began last summer. Its design sits head-and-shoulders above the strip-mall studios that have popped up across the country. Expected to open in April, Samyama features ultramodern amenities that belie the ancient practice it embraces. The first floor has a dedicated retail shop, spa-quality restrooms, a massage-therapy area and a lounge. Upstairs, a stunning main studio and a smaller, more intimate one await practitioners of yoga, a spiritual discipline involving stretching, breathing and meditation that originated more than 5,000 years ago on the Indian subcontinent.

A cancer survivor builds a sumptuous yoga studio in Palo Alto



RENDERINGS BY
BRICK ARCHITECTS



Throughout, the center boasts state-of-the-art mechanical systems, including lighting and sound that can be controlled by iPad or iPhone. The energy-efficient systems follow standards established by the building's shell construction, which earned LEED Gold certification. The center also incorporates renewable and alternative materials such as bamboo, a hardy and sustainable resource.

"Every choice I made for the center, I tried to think of what would be inviting and comfortable but also respectful to the environment and beautiful," said Berg, Samyama's founder and lead instructor. He worked closely with design firm Brick LLP in Berkeley and San Francisco-based BCCI Construction Co. to realize his vision for the interiors. The luxurious appearance ultimately is supposed to help yoga enthusiasts find true inner healing as well as a sense of communal harmony.

"I wanted this thing to be breathing with energy, life, art and beauty because what it's about really is the experience," said Berg, whose background in music (playing keyboards for 1990s band The Spent Poets) and technology (jobs at computer-animation studio Pixar and other firms) permeates Samyama's design.

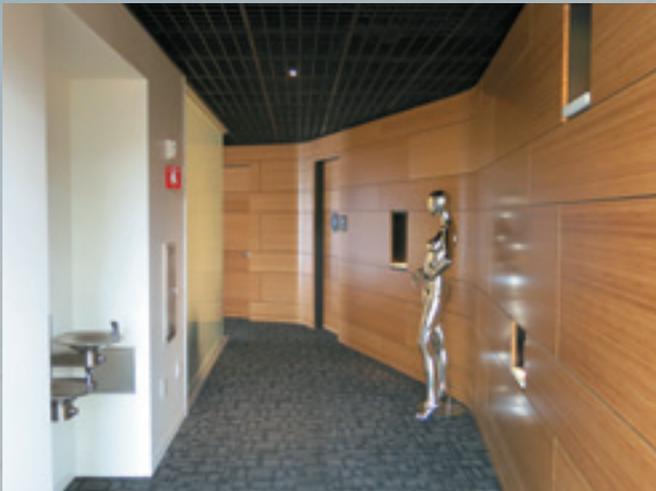
"If it's a place that's unpleasant, or if it isn't kept up, or if it doesn't have the facilities, or if it doesn't provide a nice place to relax and hang out, [it's just] a hole-in-the-wall," he said. "There's nothing wrong with that. I've studied at them. But there's nothing ever been done to really create community as the main focus."

Yoga, after all, is the Sanskrit word for "union," and Samyama means "binding."

BCCI and its subcontractors built plenty of detailed, custom work into the building. "It was a very intricate design," said BCCI Vice President Brad Gates. "There was a lot happening in that small space."

Walls and doors had to come down to create a single-tenant use. Rooms are





ABOVE:

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📷 JOHN BERG

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■ JOHN BERG, OWNER & FOUNDER, SAMYAMA YOGA CENTER

designed to flow from one to the next, tied together by common elements such as lighting, colors and bamboo. Walking through the center is supposed to feel like the inner odyssey that yoga practitioners experience. “There’s a real progression toward introspection once you enter the front door,” said Rob Zirkle, Brick principal in charge of the project and a Brick founder.

A two-story atrium lobby gives way to the retail section with wall-mounted shelving to the left and a curved, bamboo-veneer reception desk and display case to the right. Overhead, a graphic wall depicts the face of a meditating Patanjali, the sage credited with compiling words of wisdom in the Yoga Sutras centuries ago. The wall can give off a Las Vegas-style light show of shifting colors, a kind of calling card to passersby outside.

The curve of the reception desk and display case guides visitors toward the lounge, which one commenter on Samyama’s Facebook page described as “like the foyer to the Pearly Gates.” It features pods encircled with sheer drapes for individuals or small groups. The drapes can be retracted to open the room for workshops, presentations and other congregative uses. “This balance between the individual and the collective is a major theme throughout the center,” Zirkle said.

Upstairs, the collective approach fades and self-awareness eases in. A banquette’s upholstery runs along the wall and up the ceiling. The area “is intended to be a soft and enveloping, calm experience to help put students in the right frame of mind before a class,” Zirkle said.

The bright whiteness of the main studio can be momentarily blinding until the eye is drawn to a drip-pattern wall. The room has been soundproofed. Even the ventilation is silent. “We increased the amount of ducts feeding air into the area to reduce the air velocity and eliminate any noise,” BCCI project manager Mike Wall said. “It feels like you’re in the clouds.”

Yoga and Pilates studios are a fast-growing market in United States. From 2007 to 2012, revenue rose at an estimated average of 7.7 percent a year to \$6.9 billion, according to industry-research firm IBISWorld. Berg’s business plan projects revenue from the retail shop, teacher training and other sources. “Not only can we pay the rent, pay the bills and pay everybody, but we can turn a profit,” he said.

Since almost the time he first immersed himself in yoga, Berg wanted his own studio. “I had 10 years to dream this place up in my head,” he said. His father, Paul, who won the 1980 Nobel prize in chemistry, joined him in forming an LLC called Dream in Light, of which the center is a part. Nearly finished, the Samyama Yoga Center already has “an energy of love,” Berg said. “That’s the whole reason I built this place. I was lucky to survive, and this is my way of giving back.” □

