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JOEL DAVIS/THE OREGONIAN

Adrienne Inskip and Paul Van Slyke spent five years transforming an old power substation into an expansive Thai restaurant on Northeast Alberta Street.

Intrepid duo give building an electrifying new life

By Mark Anderson

SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

S tately 1930s Mediterranean industrial structure? Or upscale Thai eatery?

Adhering to Portland-style logic, Siam Society Bistro and Bar is both. But it's no McMenamian brothers retrofit. The Northeast Alberta Street restaurant is the improbable creation of husband and wife Paul Van Slyke and Adrienne Inskip.

Marking Siam's first year in business — in the black and with solid reviews for inventive cooking — the couple are finally able to exhale and reflect on their

five-year adventure of turning an old power substation into another kind of electrifying presence.

"Hands down, it's the most interesting building on Alberta Street," says Gabriel Dominek, project manager at Holst Architecture, a local firm involved in the transformation's early stages. "But it really required quite a bit of vision and commitment to bring that place to where it is today."

Neighbors are pleased, too.

"Every time I go in there, I can't believe what they've done," says Michelle Ovando, chairwoman of the Concordia Neighborhood Association. "I

Siam Society Bistro and Bar

Where & when: 2703 N.E. Alberta St., 4 to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 4 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, closed Sunday

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was in there for an art exhibit many years ago, and the building was full of walls. I can't imagine what it cost to take those walls down."

She's especially happy the stucco-and-concrete structure, listed on the National Register of

Historic Places, was saved. "We were afraid that the building would get torn down. So what they've done has been perfect for the street and the neighborhood. Instead of tearing it down, they brought it back to life."

Van Slyke, 35, and Inskip, 27, discovered the forlorn structure on the corner of 27th Avenue and Alberta in early 2002. It was boarded up and for sale after a couple of decades sitting mostly vacant.

Built in 1931, the Northwestern Electric Co. Alberta Substation was designed to meld into the Concordia neighborhood, then a flourishing streetcar

suburb. The building trafficked in kilowatts until the mid-1980s, when its electrical equipment was removed. A maze of towering concrete walls and dirt-floored bunkers was left behind.

"When I first walked into the place and saw all those walls and bunkers, I said, 'This won't work,'" Van Slyke says. "But my dad convinced us that it would work. So we started planning the demolition and looking at our finances. We came up with a business plan. But we were very green."

With a second mortgage and backing from family, they raised



COURTESY OF SIAM SOCIETY

When the couple bought the building on the corner of Northeast 27th Avenue, it was a labyrinth of walls and had sat vacant for years.

\$300,000 for the property and another \$300,000 for everything else, including an addition in back for the kitchen. They scored a \$15,000 grant and hired a local company, Faster Permits, to handle the mountain of city paperwork.

It helped that Van Slyke's parents have owned a popular Thai restaurant in Eugene, Mekala's, for 20 years. From there, they received used tables, chairs and place settings — and knowing counsel. Secondhand kitchen equipment came from a culinary center. The main bar was made from a massive wood beam found at a salvage yard.

But the couple still had real-life restaurant dues to pay. So as saws and sledgehammers brought the walls down in Portland, the couple moved to Eugene and spent 3 ½ years working at Mekala's.

"That was boot camp," Van Slyke says, smiling.

"But it was good to have a harsh learning experience," adds Inskeep, who earned her Thai

chef's stripes apprenticing with Van Slyke's mother. "It really ended up being fortunate that everything took so long."

Today, throwing open Siam Society's front doors still provides a jolt. Soaring ceilings, wide-open spaces and 8-foot-tall arched windows give way to gigantic vases, draped fabric swatches, lively artwork and soft lighting.

"The original structure was actually overbuilt, so we didn't have to do a seismic retrofit," says Pam Hillstrom of Hill & Dale Engineering in Eugene. "And since it was all concrete, there was no asbestos issue and no environmental issues to deal with."

Van Slyke and Inskeep, enjoying the neighborhood's quirky bonhomie, are grateful the project went more smoothly than it could have.

"We were really hoping some restaurateur would come in, finish the place and fail — and that we'd be able to start up from where they left off," Van Slyke says. "But nobody wanted to take on such a large project." ■