

clockwise, from top:  
Maryhill Double, a  
full-scale replica of a  
mid-century mansion,  
recently stood for  
three months on an  
Oregon bluff; exterior  
of 4 Parts House; Lead  
Pencil's renovation of  
Seattle's Lawrimore  
Project gallery (2006)  
transformed a space  
originally occupied by  
a sign company.





I.D. — September/October 2006

Lead Pencil Studio 02



Running on Empty  
*For the architects  
at Lead Pencil  
Studio, what  
matters is the soul  
beneath the skin.*

By Sarah Rich  
Portrait by Charles Peterson

THE THIRD FLOOR of Seattle's historic Woolworth building—all 20,000 square feet of it—has been vacant since the 1950s. You'll find nothing there but concrete columns and a few opaque windows. The only way to gain access is through the ground-level Ross Dress for Less store and up a slow freight elevator. But Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo want to bring people to this long-forgotten place for the very purpose of appreciating an environment devoid of utility. "The highest use of architecture," says Mihalyo, "is no use at all. If we could build anything, we'd build a place for nothing—just a structure for experiencing the space it contains."

Han, 39, and Mihalyo, 36, are behind Lead Pencil Studio in Seattle. Trained as architects and well versed in sculpture, they share an obsession with stripped-down interior volumes. Han compares shells like the Woolworth's to the Pantheon in Rome, where sheer scale and the ethereal handprints of history contribute to a sense of fulfillment and awe. In their own work, the pair emphasizes container over content, designing installations and buildings that honor a site's past lives.

Their love affair with empty enclosures began in 1997, not long after they graduated from the University of Oregon's architecture program. Employed in a commercial firm, they relieved the numbness of daily practice by renting a studio and spending evenings and weekends producing tabletop sculpture, mostly out of metal. Even this work soon proved unsatisfying. "When we were looking at those forms, we were always thinking about the space within. We just wanted to be inside," said Mihalyo. "So we began scaling up."

That same year, Princeton Architectural Press published *Wood Burners*, their photographic exploration of derelict industrial sawmills around the Pacific Northwest. Doing the book intensified Lead Pencil's fascination with purposeless architecture but took nothing away from its growing success in designing buildings with genuine functions (and clients). The partners spearheaded remodels for the Seattle and Chicago offices of the advertising firm Digital Kitchen and turned an abandoned storefront in suburban Bellevue, Washington, into a mixed-use retail/office development.

In 2000, they bought a neglected lot in Seattle's Central District—a transitional family neighborhood of mostly older homes—and set out to build a live/work space for themselves. The 4 Parts House, a 1,350-square-foot habitat, where studio and home intermingle without tangling, feels somewhat like a barn, with a voluminous, undivided interior defined according to function: living, sleeping, and working, plus an entry portal. The materials are environmentally responsible concrete and steel along with locally salvaged items, such as Boeing surplus aluminum for a small upper deck.

But scaling up didn't confine Lead Pencil to architecture. While 4 Parts stirred inquiries for residential projects, the duo's artwork continued to magnify into a succession of acclaimed site-specific installations. Their 2004 "Linear Plenum," an exhibition at Seattle's Suyama Space gallery, consisted of 19,000 lengths of string hung from the ceiling in calculated profusion. In 2005, Minus Space re-created the



contours of the land beneath Seattle's Henry Art Gallery, where the piece was built. Both projects gently directed visitors to focus on the gaps between and around objects.

Lead Pencil's latest installation is a full-scale duplicate of the Maryhill Museum of Art, a mansion built for the early-20th-century Quaker magnate Sam Hill and completed in 1940, nine years after his death. Mihalyo and Han first appealed to the museum to construct their replica next to the building, which stands alone on a bluff above Oregon's Columbia River Gorge. After that request was turned down, they leased a small piece of the vast plateau across the gorge with funding from a Creative Capital grant and sponsorship from the Portland, Oregon-based art group Disjecta. Made with scaffolding and translucent construction netting, the 6,000-square-foot Maryhill Double was a hollowed-out echo of the original, standing for three months this summer on the opposite side of the ravine, like a phantom.

And then there's the third floor of the old Woolworth building, which Han and Mihalyo have been contemplating for five years, since stumbling upon it during a real estate hunt. Thanks to grants from Seattle city arts funds, in the spring of 2007 they will finally realize their vision of bringing art and visitors into the sprawling cavern. After being briefly roused from its dormant condition, the space may be forgotten for another 50 years, or perhaps it will be leased, sold, or demolished. Lead Pencil doesn't dwell on the building's future; it will be enough to turn a storehouse into a pantheon, at least for a time. ★

*previous spread* Lead Pencil Studio's Daniel Mihalyo and Annie Han in their 4 Parts House in Seattle

*above* Minus Space, Lead Pencil's installation for Seattle's Henry Art Gallery, 2005

---

*Based in Seattle, Sarah Rich is the managing editor of both Inhabitat, an online publication covering sustainable design and architecture, and Worldchanging, a collaborative blog dedicated to current events and news.*