



Interiors-Exteriors: Life in a Factory

May 7, 2019 by Richard Pallardy

Logan Square has its very own Factory. When Logansquarist paid a visit on a blustery day this past March, no latter-day Edie Sedgwick teetered down the precipitous staircase, nor was there any evidence of recent debauchery. The scene was, in fact, replete with coffee and cookies. But Andy Warhol would, I think, still approve.

The boundaries between art and life are simply non-existent in the renovated Wold Airbrush Factory, located steps from the California Blue Line stop. Home to artists Julie Sulzen and Dan Zamudio and their two teenage children, Bella and Vaughn, it doubles as the Sulzen Fine Art Studio and gallery, where the couple create and display their work and, sometimes, the work of other artists. Domesticity and industry blend seamlessly in the lofty space, which from the late 20th century to 1980 served as headquarters and manufacturing center for Olaus Wold, an innovator in airbrush paint technology. (Wold airbrushes are now made in New Zealand.)



Zamudio and Sulzen have turned their living space into a gallery of their work.
Photo: Paulina Fadrowska.



A distressed table, backdropped by an array of Sulzen's paintings and Zamudio's photographs. *Photo: Paulina Fadrowska.*

After the Wold factory closed, the space endured a period of neglect. Intermittently inhabited by disreputable characters and rented as studio space to performers, it was in a sorry state when Sulzen and Zamudio moved in as renters in 2002.

"It wasn't a great neighborhood," Zamudio says.

Nonetheless, cheap rent and the nascent artistic community drew the couple to the square. Several artist friends lived in Logan and the couple was familiar with the art scene in Wicker Park and Bucktown, having participated in the renowned artistic festival sponsored by Around the Coyote that saw various spaces turned into ad hoc galleries. Sulzen came from the North Center, where she was raised near Welles Park, and Zamudio made the leap to Logan from Boystown, where he lived at the time. Married later that year, the two creatives set about tailoring the factory to their own needs.

"As a lifelong Chicagoan, it's kind of cool to have stuff that maybe my grandparents walked past," Sulzen says in describing the appeal of the neighborhood. "Could they have come to the tailor here?"



Julie Sulzen and Dan Zamudio outside of their building, the former Wold Airbrush Factory.
Photo: Paulina Fadrowska.

Many of those older buildings have since been demolished, but preserved photographically by Zamudio, who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of local architecture and its stories. He rattles off references to various Logan historical sites: a studio where race films were once made; a Fullerton storefront that once hosted live sex shows.

The couple is ambivalent about the changing character of the neighborhood.

“It’s not the change of the people,” notes Sulzen. “It’s the change of the physical landscape.”

“I was not crazy about the height of those buildings,” she says of the monolithic MICA condos on Milwaukee, visible through her kitchen window. “I was part of the group that was like, ‘Can we hold off on this?’ I’ve lived here my whole life, [though]. I know things change. When the sun sets and you see all these oranges and golds [reflecting off of the glass] it can be really beautiful.”



The apartment looks out on the California Blue Line stop...
and the new buildings redefining the landscape along Milwaukee Ave.
Photo: Paulina Fadrowska

Their former landlord, Larry Warshaw, purchased the entire Wold property for a scant \$60,000 in the 1990s. While a few walls had been erected in the original second floor factory space, and some white paint had been slapped on the walls, it was essentially unmodified from its earlier incarnations. The downstairs neighbors had adorned their space with an upside-down crucifix. The couple wasted no time in turning the cavernous top floor to their own purposes, hosting their first show there only three months after they moved in.

Over time, they softened the industrial character of the building and made it more habitable. The stark walls are now painted in warm, sunny hues of buttercream and rose, some of which were bargain “oops paint” finds—cheap paint returned by hardware store customers who didn’t like the mix. Though the choices were serendipitous, they look utterly intentional, glowing in the abundant sun streaming through the 20-foot skylight crowning the roof.

The skylight was one of the space’s main selling points for Sulzen especially, who notes that it fulfilled her dreams of a Parisian-style garret.

“This is north light. For painters and artists that’s the ideal,” she says.



The abundant light pouring through the skylight was a major selling point to painter Sulzen.
Photo: Paulina Fadrowska.

The couple modified many of the other preexisting fixtures, observing a strict budget while still adhering to a purposeful aesthetic. The functional but unattractive cabinetry that came with the property was painted black. You'd never know that beneath the slick lacquered finish lurks the veneered storage familiar to most Chicago renters.

"I'm not going to throw them away," says Sulzen. "A.) I don't have the money and B.) They're functional."

An eclectic assortment of furniture creates a series of connected but discrete spaces to break up the expanse of the factory floor, still pitted and stained from its former life as a hub of the airbrush industry.

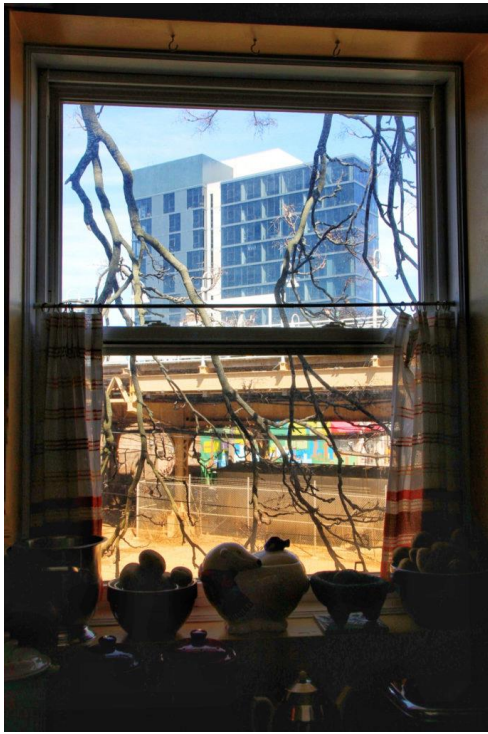
Zamudio describes their style as "early Concordia or early dumpster." Most of the pieces, unbelievably, have been scavenged from alleys and donated by friends, or taken from discards at Concordia University, where Zamudio is a librarian. Despite their dubious provenance, the overall aesthetic is unified: a rich tapestry of bright colors and intriguing neutrals that echo Sulzen's light-filled renderings of Chicago scenery.

A kitchen table was a gift from one of Sulzen's students who was going through a divorce. The distressed grey *faux bois* laminate would be at home in a West Elm showroom. The couple is frequently asked where it came from. In fact, they have no idea who its original manufacturer was. And the distressing is real ... the table often serves as a workspace as well as a place for family meals.

Among the few actual purchases are a series of thrift store finds. "Village Discount has changed the way we live," confides Sulzen. The upholstered chairs at the table, and a kitchen cupboard are both vintage finds.

"This is Prairie style," Sulzen says of the cupboard, "but we're really just whatever style. It has to be functional."





Photos: Paulina Fadrowska

They removed three feet of trash from the courtyard, hoping to make it safe for their dog, and in the process discovered that it was in fact paved in elegant flagstone. Further research determined that Wold, whose offices and residence were in the adjoining building, had in the 1930s and 40s styled the courtyard after those he had seen in New Orleans. The iron work was based on molds taken from original NOLA railings.

Their improvements extend to the outside of the building as well. Sulzen has constructed a raised bed in the alley, making use of concrete from a building that was knocked down on Milwaukee. The shrubs that inhabit it were grown from free plants provided by the Arbor Day Foundation. The plantings provide a spot of beauty in an otherwise barren stretch beneath the El tracks.



A mural on the exterior announce's the couple's studio to passersby.

Photo: [Paulina Fadrowska](#)

"I'm the steward of it, I feel like," Sulzen claims. The other residents of the alley—rats—unearthed some unexpected treasures when they burrowed in. One day, Sulzen went to check on her plants and found a glittering array of glass spread across her beds. The rats had excavated the shards. Among the glass were antique perfume bottles, some of which she kept.

"I wish I had taken a picture," she says of their unintentional archaeological contributions. "I was so horrified and disgusted that I didn't."

By 2007, the couple had turned the space into their own. "We saw the neighborhood change and we were like 'we're going to get pushed out,'" says Sulzen. So, with Sulzen's brother, they purchased the property. They have since bought his share as well. Now, the upper floor serves as their living space and studio and the lower floor is rented out to a tenant.

The wall space is almost entirely devoted to their work. Sulzen's Chicago landscapes, rendered in oils, and Zamudio's photographs, taken with a plastic toy camera, form a floor-to-ceiling panoply of Windy City perspectives, from close up to expansive.



Paintings and photographs are arrayed with a gallerist's precision on sections of plywood affixed to the brick walls. *Photo: Paulina Fadrowska.*

While Sulzen focuses on oils, she also dabbles in watercolor and has recently ventured into digital photography. "I trained as a figure painter but for whatever reason I was really drawn to painting Chicago landscapes," she explains.

Zamudio uses a camera found by his father after his mother died. "I wasn't getting the feel I wanted," he says of his early ventures into photography. "[I wanted] a very Walker Evans, 40s, 50s, Robert Frank feel." The Diana, the camera he uses, captures exactly that aesthetic. Indeed his photographs mirror the sensibilities of an earlier era of the art form. Among the most striking are a series of storefront shots arrayed in a contact sheet format to document entire blocks. Appropriately enough, Zamudio's work was exhibited at the Chicago Cultural Center alongside that of Vivian Maier, a street photographer whose trove of unpublished work was discovered in a Chicago storage locker in 2007 and later published to wide acclaim.

Speaking of a commercial contract for his photographs, Zamudio relates that he was told, "You're ahead of your time."

"I'm doing 1850s photography here," he laughs.

Another of his series features images of vintage hand-painted movie posters from the silent film era, likely used as advertising for the since-demolished Bugg Theatre in North Center. The couple unearthed the posters when they were cleaning out Sulzen's parents' house. Piecing together the shredded posters became something of a passion project for Zamudio, who plans on taking further photographs and exhibiting them.

Zamudio and Sulzen explain that in the early days of their gallery shows, they were forced to gerry-rig the mountings, supplementing hangers with duct tape to achieve the

desired effect. Now, plywood panels installed on the brick walls ease the process: the effect is both utilitarian and warm.

The couple has since hosted some 35 shows, including a chamber performance. Publications such as *Atlas Obscura* have toured the property and the couple has been in contact with the Logan Square Preservation Society. Their open houses attract a varied crowd, which is all to the good as far as Zamudio and Sulzen are concerned.

“If a gang banger comes in you offer him a glass of wine,” says Sulzen. “You open your doors and end up meeting all of these other artists.”

This egalitarian mentality is reflective of the new Logan Square: a synthesis of history and progress, art and commerce, youth culture and family. As the neighborhood fills with yawn-inducing condo complexes and the tedious yuppies that inhabit them, its early pioneers continue to define the character that made it so appealing in the first place.