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The Wronkse Brothers: Making small homes hip, popular and profitable

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Kevin (left) and Hardy
Wronske/Photo by Martha
Benedict

First project on Patton Street project in Echo Park. Photo courtesy Heyday Partnership

By Brenda Rees

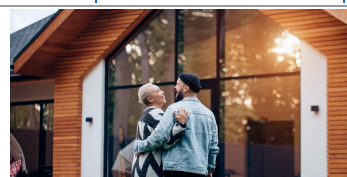
They are smart, sleek and small – and probably in a neighborhood near you.

Leading a quiet revolution in the housing development landscape, Heyday Partnership is changing minds and raising eyebrows by designing, building and developing relatively affordable contemporary residences, with most homes being constructed from Eagle Rock and Glassell Park to Echo Park and Silver Lake. Boring stucco-box, cookie-cutter construction for the masses? Naw, you won't find that with these guys.



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With a string of real estate successes that span more than 10 years, Heyday has weathered the first five years of its business model – usually the toughest time to stay afloat – and brothers Hardy and Kevin Wronske are seeing a future where they can continue to carve out their characteristic small-spaced dwellings and have, as they say, “a lot of fun” to boot.

“I think we are finally hitting our groove,” says 36-year-old Kevin, the brother who graduated from Southern California Institution of Architecture (SCI-Arc) and often puts pen to paper to design the under-2,000-square-foot homes that Heyday is known for.

Brother Hardy – who brings a construction background and USC’s Dollinger Master of Real Estate Development degree to the table – is also relishing the fruits of the hard work of the past decade. “What we want to create is a business that will last, not some quick get-rich scheme,” the 38-year-old elaborates. “I don’t want us to get much bigger, but I think we will always have room for refining our practices.”

Buzz Court, Silver Lake/Courtesy
Heyday Partnership

Before teaming up for Heyday, both brothers spent time working for private companies and Hardy did a stint for Habitat for Humanity. Growing up in Florida, the Wronskes, who now call Silver Lake home, remember working for their father, a well-respected landscape designer. They spent summers lifting and hauling but they say they were also introduced to how space can be changed with certain dimensions and details. As a homage to their father (“Who really taught us the value of hard work,” says Kevin), Heyday’s Buzz Court in Silver Lake takes on Papa Wronske’s nickname.



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To be sure, the boys have come a long way. For their first projects, the Heyday office was, well, the work site. About five years ago, they set up shop in Echo Park. Two years ago, the brothers — now with about seven full-time employees to oversee — are working out of a non-descript downtown L.A. space in the shadow of the Sixth Street Bridge.

Through the years, the Wronske mantra was to create affordable housing in small spaces, but doing so with style and green-minded commitment (all their homes are LEED certified). The brothers take their cue from Los Angeles' small-lot ordinance that allows property owners to carve up exiting lots into smaller pieces that can be developed and sold as individual homes.

How small? Think 1,300 to 1,600 sq. ft. (Their biggest project to date will be the 1,950 sq. ft. Peak Place in Glassell Park, six units that are slated for groundbreaking this spring.)

Their two and three-level ultra-mod homes often feature balconies and patios, stainless steel appliances, solid core doors and sustainable bamboo floors. Amid the sleek contemporary design lines, you'll find tank-less water heaters, drought tolerant landscaping, low-flow fixtures and green roofs pre-wired for solar.

When both were in the respected schools back in the late 1990s, the brothers discovered fellow students who were often struggling to find a place to live. Their friends wished someone would build homes for them — nontraditional and simple, avoiding the American dream home of a bungalow with a white-picket fence. The brothers quickly realized these folks were — and are — their core market.

Even today a Wronske home appeals to the young up-and-coming crowd, homeowners who would rather appreciate a compact and efficient kitchen than mow a lawn. After going on the market early last fall, the six homes in Buzz Court, for example sold out within two months at prices starting in the mid \$700,000 range.

While young single people are often the ones buying Heyday homes, the brothers have great interest from married couples and small families. And to counter concerns about small spaces would mean quick turnovers, the boys point out that since Eagle Rock's Rock Row hit the market in 2009, only one unit out of 15 has changed hands.



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“People who buy our homes are staying there,” says Hardy who adds that he sees a common thread with buyers. “First time buyers, young, professional and able to embrace the art and design of the building,” he says. “They also tend to be fit,” adds Kevin. “After all, they will be going up and down three flights of stairs.”

Critics also worry about that the high density in Heyday homes could possibly bring extra cars on the street, more need for public utilities, etc. During a recent city council candidates’ forum in Echo Park, some of the contenders said they would look at restricting the use of the small-lot ordinance that builders like the Wronskes have taken advantage to build their projects.

The brothers remind naysayers that city zoning laws are their own. “If people want to change their zoning regulations, they can,” explains Hardy. “We are just being responsible developers working within the regulations. We would never, like some developers have done, ask to have certain regulations waived, or work around other restrictions. We go by the book.”

As anyone knows, with success comes ... competition.

Today, the brothers are witnessing Big Developers – many from Orange County – swooping down to gobble up big chunks of property in Northeast Los Angeles. The days of buying and building high-priced, multi-united properties – like the Rock Row’s 15 units – are probably over for a while for the Wronskes. But they don’t mind. They’ll refocus and go forward.

“Instead of doing one big project, we’ll tackle five smaller ones,” says Hardy. Isn’t that more work?

“Sure,” says Hardy, “It’s about three times as much work, but it’s fun. We can explore the design, try new things and incorporate diversity. It just means we have more time for fun – and that’s what it’s all about.”



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and Hardy Wronske in their downtown office. Photo by Martha Benedict

Milestone Projects for Heyday Partnership

First Project: Patton Street, Echo Park (pictured at top)

Details Four Unit Apartment Building; 4,200 Sq. Ft.

Completed 2004

Photo courtesy Heyday Partnership

First Single Family Homes: Jack + Jill, Lincoln Heights

Details: Two Hillside Single Family Homes; 1,650 Sq. Ft. Each

Completed 2006

Photo courtesy Heyday Partnership

First Small Lot Subdivision: Rock Row, Eagle Rock

Details: 15 Single Family Homes; 1300-1610 Sq. Ft.; LEED Platinum + Gold; Sold Out in Five Weeks

Completed 2009

Sales Price: \$465,000 – \$600,000

Photo courtesy Heyday Partnership

Most Recent Project: Buzz Court, Silver Lake

Details: 6 Single Family Homes (Small Lot Subdivision): 1500-1900 Sq. Ft. Each; LEED Platinum: Sold Out in Four Weeks

Completed 2012

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Price: \$765,000 to \$835,000

Next Project: Peak Place, Glassell Park

Details: 6 Single Family Homes (Small Lot Subdivision); 1950 Sq. Ft. Each; LEED Gold Predicted

Break Ground Early 2013

Estimated Sales Price: Approx. \$500,000

Brenda Rees is a writer and Eagle Rock resident



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