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## THE ART GUYS MAKE A HOME

Mixing work and life calls for a few large rooms and lots of light

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS



**Opposite page:** The Art Guys' studio. On the other side of the wall at the far end is Michael Galbreth's living quarters. **Left:** Dining room and living room, with kitchen to the right. Upstairs to the right are the bedrooms and bathroom. **Below:** Longitudinal and horizontal cross sections of the house/studio, also known as the Art Guys New World Headquarters (Cameron Armstrong Architects, 2005).

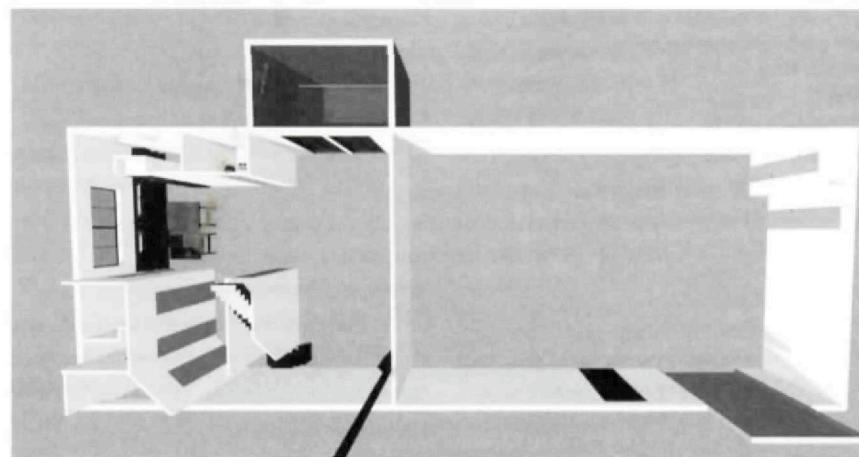
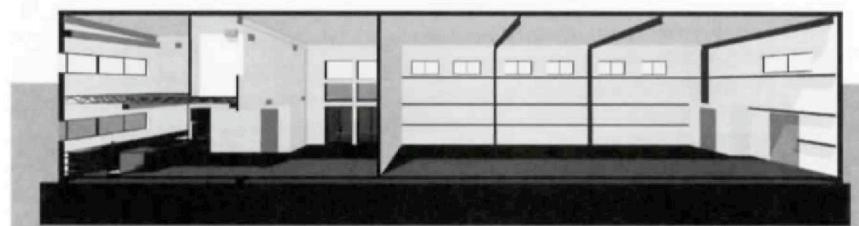
**IT WOULDN'T BE** surprising if some people, upon their first view of the Art Guys New World Headquarters, were a bit surprised, or even disappointed. After all, the Art Guys—as Houston artists Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth term their creative partnership—are hardly known as reticent. If anything, they're known as the exact opposite. These are the men who, for one art project, walked through downtown Houston with buckets of water attached to their feet, in another (titled "A Ton of Beautiful Women") asked different women to weigh themselves until a total of a ton of female flesh had been reached, and in yet another wore suits covered with corporate logos for a year, effectively making themselves into human billboards, or human NASCAR cars. The *New York Times* described them as a "cross between Dada and David Letterman, John Cage and the Smothers Brothers." Modestly reserved, they are not.

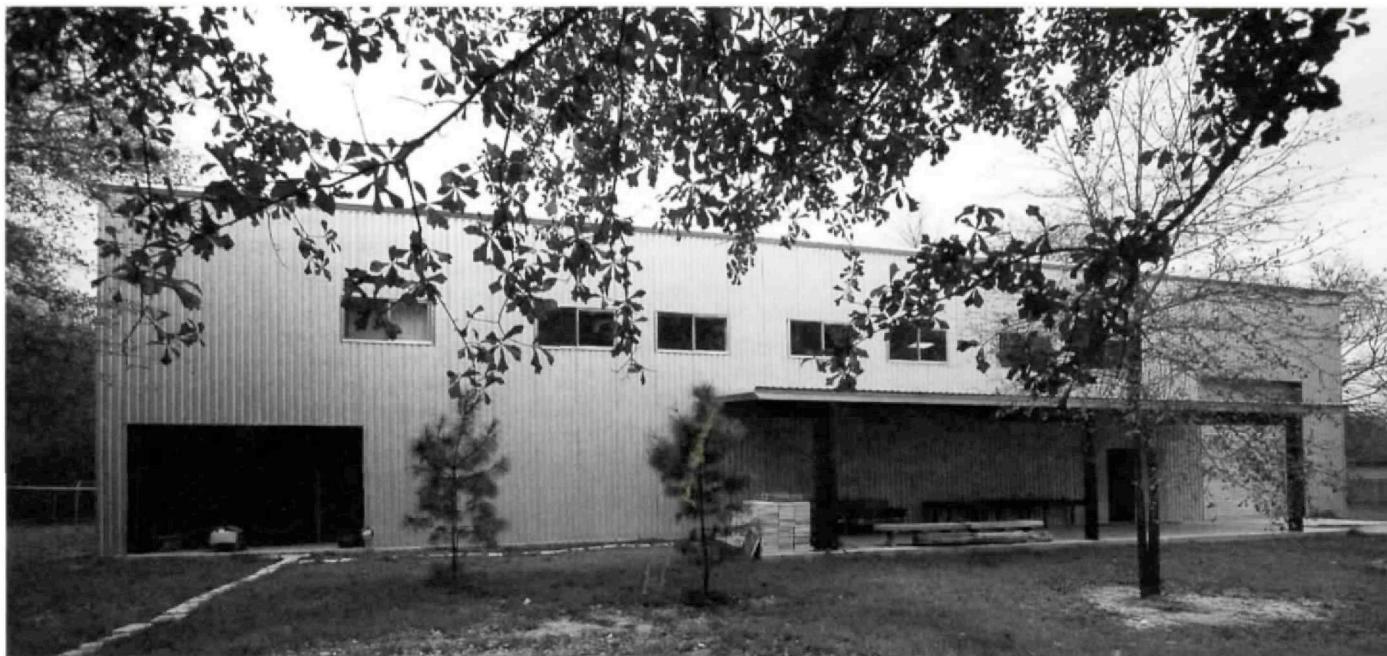
Their New World Headquarters, though, could easily be described as reserved, even modest. Tucked away on one side of a double-sized lot in Acres Homes, it seems less nondescript than invisible, almost hidden in the trees. As architect Cameron Armstrong, who worked with the Art Guys to design and build the combination home/studio,

remarks, the Headquarters almost appears to be an abandoned industrial building, something stumbled upon and refurbished slightly for artistic purposes. That it was in fact built from scratch, in part to create just such an impression, is evidence that appearances can be deceiving. And in that way it fits into the Art Guys aesthetic better than it at first seems to.

"There's a difference between our work and our lives," admits Michael Galbreth, "a big difference. I don't know that a lot of people recognize that. But then again, we've purposefully muddied the waters a little bit." The story of their New World Headquarters doesn't exactly make the waters less muddy, but it does reveal something of how life affects art, art affects life, and how the meeting of the two can sometimes create something quite unexpected.

Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing met more than two decades ago at the University of Houston, beginning in 1983 the partnership that would end up making them arguably their home city's most visible artists. Six years later, in 1989, they'd become successful enough that they decided they needed a home base from which to work, and where they could invite people by to see and participate in their art. "Before that," says Galbreth,





**Top:** Front façade. The entrance to the living quarters is through a door placed at an angle into the inset, left. The studio entrance is underneath the porch cover.  
**Above:** The view through the kitchen into the dining room. The ceilings here were left unfinished, revealing the ductwork.  
**Opposite page:** Looking down from the top of the stairs toward the dining room and back yard.

“our work was more conceptual or performance oriented. But by then we had started doing more actual ‘works,’ physical pieces that required a studio. We’d changed in what we did, so we needed to change where we were.”

What Galbreth and Massing found for what they came to call their World Headquarters was an abandoned mattress factory on 22nd Street near Shepherd. By the time they located and decided to rent it, the 19th-century structure had been empty for ten years. It was little more than an empty shell. For Galbreth and Massing that was perfect. They could build out the interior (thanks in no small part to art-friendly landlords) to meet their needs, which was in essence one big room in which to create art, and smaller rooms for Massing’s bedroom and Galbreth’s bedroom. The line between life and work was limited at best, non-existent at worst. The living quarters connected directly to the studio, and when friends gathered for openings or parties

the distinction between home and office tended to disappear.

For young artists, for people to whom life was work and little else, this was fine. “Crazy as the Art Guys are, we were a stabilizing influence on the neighborhood,” recalls Galbreth. “We had regular activities, we were always around. We were a fixture.” But just as their work had matured to make a studio a necessity, over the next decade their lives matured to make living at that studio less attractive. By 1999, Jack Massing had gotten married and moved out, commuting to the World Headquarters for work, but leaving Galbreth as the building’s single occupant. Then Galbreth met his wife to be, and by 2003 he was married and ready for something different as well.

“The old studio, I loved it so much. Jack and I were both very close to that building because so much of the Art Guys’ history is there,” Galbreth says. “For us, it was an extraordinarily important building. But our personal lives

changed, and we both required other things.” Other factors came into play as well. Massing and Galbreth had been thinking for a while about the advantages of owning their own space rather than renting. And the real estate market was such that mortgage money was cheap. It made the decision to move easier than it might otherwise have been. “That situation, when you decide to move, is based on so many variables,” Galbreth says. “It was a painful yet wonderful thing to think about. And if we were going to build a place, this was the time.”

One thing Massing and Galbreth agreed upon was that anything new they came up with reflect the things they liked about their original World Headquarters. One of the characteristics they most wanted to retain was the quality of the light, which filtered in from windows set high in the walls. They also liked the adaptability of the open space, the freedom it provided. Any new World Headquarters, they decided, would have to be based in large part upon their old World Headquarters.

“When we were talking about what they wanted,” says Cameron Armstrong, “the process became that we’d assume they were going to renovate and adapt an existing building to suit their needs. And then the question was, what sort of building would you like to adapt? Once we decided that, we’d go ahead and create a new building to fit those requirements. So it’s like we were designing the perfect abandoned warehouse.”

Armstrong was brought in by Massing and Galbreth in part because they knew they’d need an architect to give physical form to their ideas; in part because they knew they wanted a metal building, and Armstrong is recognized for his metal structures; and in part because he and the Art Guys had been friends for years, and they very much wanted to hear what he had to say about their plans for a new home. Armstrong for his part was happy to comply; over the years he’s had a number of artists for clients, and says he likes the give and take that working with an artist entails. Some clients, he notes, have no idea what they want and depend completely on the architect for ideas. Other clients know exactly what they’re after, and get an architect simply to carry out their existing vision. But artists, says Armstrong, while they often have distinct desires are still working on the best way to satisfy them. Collaboration is key to his work method, Armstrong says, and artists are often the best collaborators, engaging in a give and take that provides him a chance to surprise himself, and be surprised by others.

One of the surprises in this instance was the degree to which the lot the Art Guys had found to build on influenced

the design. Located in a semi-rural section of Acres Homes in northwest Houston, the lot was in fact two adjoining lots, neither of which had anything on it other than a tangle of overgrown briars and a small forest of trees. The land was purchased not just for a studio, but also for living quarters for Michael Galbreth and his wife, Rainey Knudson, who operates the arts website Glasstire.com. Initially, the idea was to have two structures, one a home for Galbreth and Knudson, the other a studio for the Art Guys, connected by a sky bridge. But that proved impractical in part because it would require crossing the line that connected the two lots. Even though both lots had the same owner, as far as the city of Houston was concerned they were separate properties that would require separate permitting.

The resulting bureaucratic entanglement helped scuttle the two structure approach, so the Art Guys and Armstrong settled on the adapted warehouse idea, where one part would be a studio and another part a home. To avoid the lot lines issue, the studio/home would be placed on just one of the lots, with the other left as yard. And since everyone wanted to retain as many trees as possible, it was decided that the least forested space would become the construction site.

That space was close to the right edge of the property, and hardly dominated it. For the Art Guys that worked fine. "The studio was to be a workspace, not an expression of their artistic ideas," notes Armstrong. "One thing about a warehouse design is that it provides a sense of anonymity, it lets you fade into the background. That's something artists tend to like, since they get so much attention elsewhere. The placement of the building only added to that."

As for the building itself, says Armstrong, the major issue was its size. "In the end, their studio is a production facility," he notes, "and they need a lot of freedom in there. So in terms of design, as long as we got the perfect volume, we were good. Whatever was done inside was a secondary issue." The result was a simple 110 foot by 40 foot rectangle created from five distinct bays, the ones at each end being 25-feet wide and the center three being 20 feet. The two bays at the left end would house the living quarters; the remaining three bays would constitute the studio. The roof would be sloped from front to back like an oversized shed. In many ways the design was simplicity itself. "This is an industrially fabricated building," Galbreth admits. "There is nothing at all to distinguish it from a commercial building."

But for all that, the details mattered. It was the details that would capture the spirit of the original World Headquarters. "We went round and round in our discussions," Armstrong says. "It's like a

spiral. You start out and you can move everything three or four feet in any direction, and at the end of the day you can't even move it 3/8ths of an inch, because it's all right where it's supposed to be." Armstrong recalls there were constant trips back to the old mattress factory to check proportions and light. "We constantly used it as a reference for the New World Headquarters," he says. "But the curious thing is, in the end, the new studio was actually quite different. It had different materials and different proportions. Somehow, though, it still had the same feel."

On a warm fall afternoon, Michael Galbreth sits on the large porch fronting his and Jack Massing's New World Headquarters. The porch, though sizeable, is little more than a sealed concrete slab open on three sides and covered by a metal roof. Still, it's cozy in the afternoon sun. It will be perfect, Galbreth notes, for parties, when revelers can empty out of the studio just behind him to enjoy the fresh air. It will also be a good place to work on art not suited for the indoors. At the original World Headquarters, he notes, they used the driveway for that purpose.

The Art Guys have not been here long. The land was purchased in 2002, and construction began in the fall of 2003, with the slab being poured around Thanksgiving. But it wasn't until spring 2005 that the building was ready to move into, and even today there's work that remains to be done. One reason for the delay is that while laying the slab and raising the exterior walls and ceiling were done by contractors, much of the interior work has been done by the Art Guys themselves, particularly Galbreth.

The studio, the 2,600-square-foot expanse of which can be seen through a door not far from where Galbreth sits, is still little more than a shell. A temporary office has been set up inside, but the building-out that Galbreth and Massing have in mind has had to wait while a large art project for the Phoenix airport is finished. A walkway from the looped drive that curves in front of the building remains to be laid, and a wood floor is still to be placed in Galbreth's living quarters.

As to those living quarters, the only way to get to them is through a door on the outside. There's no direct inside connection to the studio itself, a product, Galbreth says, of getting to an age where he appreciates the separation between home and work, even if that separation is just a short walk. "In the old Headquarters the house and the studio eventually became just one big space," Galbreth says. "I was never really away from work, and when we had parties or openings there was no way to close the apartment off. After a while it's just not pleasant to wake up to the smell of stale



beer in the morning. And besides, Rainey just wouldn't have it."

It was his wife Rainey that worked with Armstrong most directly to shape the living area, Galbreth says. "I told Rainey to do what she wanted, it was her house," he notes. "I could live anywhere." He and Massing focused most of their attention on the studio. One of the easy decisions was to keep all the windows high on the wall, to replicate the light that had fallen in the original World Headquarters. The windows, running in a row just under the roofline, appear small, but do a surprising job of keeping the interior illuminated. And because all the support beams are on the edge, the studio is supremely open, little more than a space waiting for something to happen. A similar sense of light and airiness are found in the living space, although in this instance a wall of glass that opens to the back yard helps.

"One of the most beautiful things about this building is the metal joists, which we left exposed," Galbreth says. "They're attached to the perimeter of the

building, and that's what supports the second floor in the living quarters. All the walls are non-load-bearing. So if we wanted to move a wall, we moved it. It gave us a lot of freedom. I love it. I think it's almost Shaker in its simplicity. It's very much a minimalist style and approach. There's an elegance to it I really like."

"What ultimately made this work is that there were a lot of conflicting desires and needs that had to be accommodated," Galbreth adds. "Everyone was in agreement about certain things, such as having an unfinished concrete floor or leaving a lot of the construction elements exposed so the materials could speak for themselves. But everyone also had their distinct ideas. If Jack had done it alone, the building would have been different. If I had done it alone, it would have been different. If Rainey had done it alone, or Cameron, it wouldn't have been the same. But we did it together, merging our needs, and that's the only way we could have ended up with what we have. And I think it really works. I just wish we'd done it a long time ago." ■