

# Rack Em' Down

DESIGN

The unexpected surfaces at an underground pool hall in the hip Belltown neighborhood of Seattle—designed on cue by George Suyama, AIA

By Holly L. Richmond

**P**ool, food and fun racked up in one: That's what happening at the distinctive Belltown Billiards restaurant and billiards parlor in Seattle's Belltown district. Architect George Suyama, AIA earned a special Award of Merit from the Seattle Chapter of the American Institute of Architects for transforming this turn-of-the-century basement chemical plating plant into a first-class establishment for the seasoned or novice pool player. Not interested in eight balls or corner pockets? It's still worth a trip underground. The sleek bar and casual Italian restaurant make everyone feel welcome in this young, emerging neighborhood.

Whoever says that friends should not work together will be happy to eat his words at Belltown Billiards. While the pool hall is a hit with players, the restaurant and bar are receiving rave reviews from Seattle's food and wine critics. The concept of combining casual dining with an atypically classy pool hall environment was developed by three creative minds with seemingly disparate backgrounds. However, the trio, namely Steven and Jennifer Good and Fred Links, were focused on a singular end—a successful business venture.

The hall materialized almost as an afterthought. The Goods, who own and operate the upscale Queen City Grill located above the old plating plant, were seriously considering opening a more casual restaurant in the thriving neighborhood. Being a contractor and avid pool player, Links urged his friends to try something new—a restaurant combined with an attractive, contemporary pool hall, completely unlike the smoky, dark "dives" typically associated with the game.

Ensuing events quickly focused their attention. The chemical plating company moved out at the request of the Environmental Protection Agency because its industrial use was no longer appropriate for the location, so the Goods and Links took advantage of the opportunity to ask Suyama to evaluate the plant. "When the space became

available, Fred and I thought it might work for our pool hall and restaurant concept," says Steve Good. "Then we brought George to see it and he felt it would be absolutely perfect. I must say he had foresight."

Suyama, the designer of the Goods' residence in 1981 and a long-term friend, found what anyone might expect in an old, 5,860-sq. ft. industrial space, which included large cement vats, cracked concrete floors and exposed pipes and plumbing, all coated with a fine metallic dust residue. Once he was convinced that the basement could work, Links entirely gutted the area over a three-week period, leaving only a stark, skeletal base. Existing mechanical, electrical, fire safety and security systems were not spared so that the new facility would meet the latest codes and restaurant regulations.

"It was such a mess," chuckles Links. "But George was intent on not cleaning it up too much. He wanted the exposed piping to give texture to the space and allow it to retain its turn-of-the-century flavor."

Belltown Billiards' design concept is strictly industrial, using steel as the princi-

pal material to provide the raw, unfinished look critical to the character of the game. However, a thread of comfort runs through the space with the incorporation of warm woods, varnished walls and a colorful mural by Charles Stokes that enlivens the long black wall of the pool area. Suyama believes that a project's design must be totally controlled to successfully ensure its integrity, so he custom designed the lighting fixtures, bar and bar stools in keeping with the basement's industrial origin.

Although there was little prefabrication and most components were built on site, the project team managed to keep costs down. "I was very particular about the 1/4-in. steel plate bar and the way in which we were to mount it," notes Suyama. "It had to look used and a bit rough with the necessary durability, so I decided on black-anodized, square-drive screws."

To attract customers, Suyama and Good made sure Belltown Billiards didn't look rough on the outside. The architect incorporated a friendly neon "ristorante" sign and a bank of steel and wire-glass windows on the otherwise unaltered facade to let pedestrians catch a glimpse of the young professionals relaxing inside. (Proof that people seldom fail to attract people is the fact that Belltown Billiards has become the preferred private party establishment for local companies such as Microsoft, Aldus Corporation, and Virgin Records.)

Even jaded pool hall habitués may be fascinated by the scene that awaits within the oversized entrance door with its offset porthole window. In the foreground stands a grid of 12 Brunswick Gold Crown III tables glowing green under caged factory lamps. Overhead, reflecting the green from the pool tables' surfaces, are custom-layered, convex fiberglass "canopies." "The canopies were purely practical at first to protect the tables from leaks in the exposed plumbing," explains Suyama. "Then I decided to build one canopy per table and make them part of the design scheme."



Custom light fixtures over the 1/4-in. steel plate bar (opposite) at Belltown Billiards provide young, professional customers with the friendly environment they need to relax after a long day. Raw steel benches and bar stools, stained and rubbed strand board and finely finished wood trim work together to round out an industrial-based design philosophy. Of course, a contemporary interpretation of a billiards parlor (below) is the main attraction, with the convex canopies above each of the 12 pool tables providing protection from exposed pipes while serving as eye-catching and unique design elements.

elements in their natural finishes, Suyama manages to add to Belltown Billiards' raw character and illustrate his own passion for detail at the same time.

The pool tables occupy the center of the space and are set one foot lower than the front bar and perimeter dining areas, serving as a sort of theater for those uninterested in playing. (Fifty percent of the customers at Belltown Billiards come only to enjoy the food and drink.) Constructing the pool area was not easy. Links poured over 200,000 lbs. of concrete to level the floor, but insists this was nothing compared to the restaurant and kitchen requirements.

"There is never enough storage space in restaurants," Links remarks. "Belltown



Billiards is no exception, so we used every possible nook. One of the most innovative elements we added was a scaled down version of a walk-in cooler. It's 8 ft. x 8 ft. and 6 ft. tall. You step into it to get what you need."

The Goods are extremely pleased with the restaurant and bar, and are learning more about the billiards business every day.

## To level the floor for billiards took just 200,000 lbs. of concrete

At first they were concerned about competition between their two restaurants due to their proximity. Happily, Good reports that business is booming in Belltown Billiards with the 20- to 30-year-old crowd at the same time reservations have increased upstairs for those seeking a more elegant night out. "I think our biggest challenge was

A street railing, entry way and friendly signage (below) reveal to passersby that Belltown Billiards is not your typical pool hall. However, since it is located in a basement, the billiards parlor cum restaurant does retain a degree of mystery. Pedestrians in Seattle's Belltown district must get close enough to peer through the bank of windows to take note of the entertaining surroundings awaiting them. Once inside, they find comfortable dining areas (opposite) tucked into the perimeter of the space, providing the perfect setting for watching the action, whether it is on the pool floor or at the bar.

to dispel the old perception of the shady pool hall," he admits. "We've been really successful in getting people to recognize what a fun and comfortable environment we're providing, along with great food."

Want pool lessons? As the presiding house pro, Links quips that the equipment and instruction are first-class. However, don't put serious money on anything other than the delicious Italian food. Good says that Belltown Billiards is strictly for recreational sport, and he never wants to see pool sharks or wagering on the premises.

The absence of sharks skimming across Belltown Billiards' green felt surfaces doesn't mean some objects won't sink all the same. Steven and Jennifer Good and

ware: Schlage. Glass: LOF, Perkins Glass. Windows: Republic Storefront. Window treatment: AGS Inc. Railings: AGS. Lounge seating: 49 Productions. Dining seating: Falcon. Banquette seating: custom by Fred Links. Upholstery: Carol Tate Upholstery. Dining table bases: Falcon. Architectural woodworking and cabinetmaking: Fred Links. Signage: designed by George Suyama, made by Rocket City Neon. Planters, accessories: custom by Fred Links. Security: Honeywell. Plumbing fixtures: Chicago Faucets, American Standard. Client: Steve Good, owner, Belltown Billiards. Architect: George Suyama Architects. Mechanical engineer: Lodestar Heating & Cooling. Electrical engineer: Thorstensen Electrical Inc. General contractor: Fred Links. Lighting designer: George Suyama Architects. Photographer: David Story.



Fred Links can look forward to watching countless solid and striped balls dive for cover night after night. And where else will the beverages in customers' glasses go but down, down, down? ☞

#### Project Summary: Belltown Billiards

Location: Seattle, WA. Total floor area: 5,860 sq. ft. No. of floors: 1. Total staff size: 20. Cost/sq. ft.: \$100. Wall finishes: flakeboard, MDO, birch plywood, Dal Mosaic Porcelain. Paint: Parker, Olympic, Kelly Moore, McCloskey. Wood stain: Daly's Stains & Aniline Dyes. Laminate: Nevamar. Dry wall: U.S. Gypsum. Flooring: red oak. Carpet/carpet tile: Karastan. Ceiling: Lamb Design, Composites, Inc. Lighting: Cliff Campbell, Hubble, Abolite. Doors: S&M Doors. Door hard-

