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# Pollen at Play

by Jen Wong

**Project** 12th Street Studios, Austin

**Architects** Pollen Architecture and Design

**Design Team** Elizabeth Alford, Assoc. AIA, and Michael Young

**Photographers** Photography Victoria Samnubaris and Julie Pizzo Wood

Nestled behind a continuous masonry wall that lines a corner property in East Austin lies a cluster of grey stucco buildings that offer glimpses into a vibrant inner life. Ochre-stained, slatted-wood doors, in need of no signage, announce themselves as entries to the 12th Street Studios. A careful composition of sloping roofs hints at rich internal interactions among unseen inhabitants. Polycarbonate clerestories reveal an underlying wood-frame structure and airy interior spaces; in the evenings, these volumes float, glowing beacon-like above the street.

It has been nearly 10 years since Pollen Architecture and Design founders Elizabeth Alford, Assoc. AIA, and Michael Young completed the complex at the intersection of East 12th Street and Navasota. And while the buildings have settled into their surroundings — the opuntia cacti and fig ivy have grown, and graffiti tags have come and gone — there remains a mysterious reserve. What goes on behind those walls? What could be concealed behind that veil of polycarbonate?

Prior to founding Pollen Architecture, Alford maintained a solo practice in Austin and New York, and Young was a full-time artist, exhibiting throughout the United States and internationally. Their partnership has

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its origins in the first year of their marriage, when Young would peek curiously over Alford's shoulder as she sat at the drawing board. Young's unique viewpoint as an artist led the couple to fruitful conversations on detailing, materiality, and elevational composition, and he became increasingly involved in the renovation of their home. Eventually, Young began working full time with Alford, and their collaboration was formalized with the founding of Pollen Architecture and Design in 2008.

Today, the firm includes two other people: co-founding principal Dason Whitsett, AIA, who contributes a passion for systems thinking and building technology, and designer John Algood. Together, the team continues to cultivate the sense of curiosity and interest in tactility and construction that





acted as the firm's original impetus. Pollen's intimate size and the academic teaching experience of the three principals have encouraged an impressive level of hands-on experimentation in their explorations. The 12th Street Studios serve as an ideal testing ground, providing the inspiration and facilities necessary for Pollen's exploratory type of play.

**The compound comprises** four independent structures: three enclosed buildings that align along a north-south ipe walkway, and a solar-panel-topped pergola that occupies one of two arid landscape courtyards. The most prominent structure — a tall, narrow volume that inserts itself into the southeast corner of the perimeter wall — serves as Pollen's studio. The building, which contains ample workspace, a meeting area, Alford's mezzanine office, the firm's material library, and a kitchenette and bathroom, makes full use of its 1,400 sf, with the double-height work area bathed in diffuse light by a north-facing polycarbonate window wall. Across the walkway is a building that contains two 400-sf spaces, one occupied by a landscape architecture firm and the other by Young's painting studio. This

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structure has north-facing clerestory window walls in polycarbonate and large pivot doors that open on a porch adjacent to the front courtyard. The courtyard displays a series of low steel planters that showcase a diverse collection of soils and cacti. A theme that transitioned from Young's paintings to Pollen's work is the indexing of shapes, colors, and textures in curated assemblages of inspirational materials or objects. This strategy can be most clearly seen in the facade of the workshop.

Located along the alley parallel to East 12th Street, the workshop is a simple, unconditioned building whose exterior walls are composed of twin-wall polycarbonate sheets. The vertical ribs of the polycarbonate have been filled intermittently with varieties of sand, many taken from an extensive collection Young has cultivated since the 1980s. The sands originate in locations as diverse as Death Valley and the greater Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. According to Young, "The sand is a natural fingerprint of a place." The modification transforms an economical material into an elegant curtain wall system with the added performative quality of thermal mass.

Using sand was decided after construction on the studios had already started. Pollen develops full-scale sectional mock-ups for each project, and one day Young poured some sand into the polycarbonate tubes on a whim. The mock-ups are, for him, "a form of thinking something through."

This embrace of unforeseen possibilities is characteristic of Pollen's work and has led to other investigations that utilize everyday materials in inventive ways. In some cases, material explorations not tethered to a specific project have become integral starting points — or, in Alford's words, "kickers" — in subsequent projects. Scattered about the compound are assorted mock-ups of different materials and methods: bricks of acrylic-impregnated felt that can be milled like lumber; concrete shingles poured from CNC-routed molds utilized in Alford and Young's Balcones residence; routed wooden boards filled with colored resin; rubber cast into metal honeycomb; and digitally printed concrete slabs embedded with carborundum. These experiments, along with the sectional mock-ups, feed a dialogue that drives



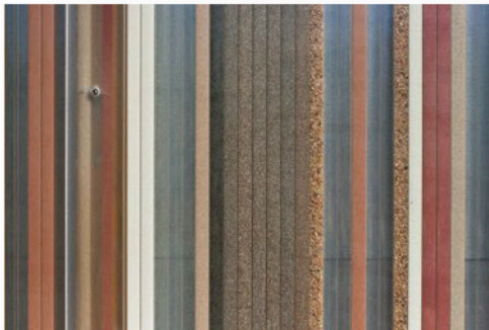
**Previous spread** *A north-south ipe walkway serves Pollen's studios, at right, and two rentable artist studios.*

**This spread** *Polycarbonate window walls and clerestories fill the workspaces with natural light while maintaining a veil of privacy and muted views. Outside, the arid landscape courtyards are home to a variety of native cacti.*



**This spread** *Material mock-ups from previous and future projects inhabit the compound.*

**Clockwise from top right** *The photos show rigid felt blocks; colored resin embedded in CNC-routed lumber; sands from Young's extensive collection; a close-up of the striated workshop facade; inspirational prototypes in the studio; concrete "printed" with carborundum; cast concrete shingles. Pollen's compound has settled into its East Austin surroundings naturally and is a reflection of growing emphasis on art and design in the neighborhood.*





Pollen's work. "They are a form of communication between the two of us and our team," says Alford. As projects progress, the wall sections are used to work out key details in a back-and-forth negotiation.

Material investigation is an important driver in Pollen's work. Young sometimes refers to their approach as "warm geometry," a term which at once describes a dedication to the tactility of materials, and an aesthetic warmth paired with geometric relationships. Says Alford: "We like to heighten the juxtaposition between something that has a particular

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material presence — a sense of its origins — and an abstraction in the form of a clear geometry. Buildings are essentially displaced materials imported into architectural form."

Pollen indulges in a level of hands-on experimentation uncommon in the budget-bound world of architecture, and their genuine curiosity about economical and atypical materials leads to inventive solutions. Currently, Pollen is developing plans for the lot adjacent to the studios, and it is with anticipation that we look forward to the next iteration.

Jen Wong is director and curator of the University Co-op Materials Lab at The University of Texas at Austin.

