

# REMOTE CONTROL

LONG-DISTANCE REMODEL OF A PIONEER LOFT

Text by Ramona d'Viola, photos by ilumus photography



SOFTWARE developer Jeffrey Niebling recently moved from San Francisco to this loft in downtown San Diego's East Village.



ABOVE: A row of colorful hand-blown glass enhances the view from Niebling's loft. BELOW: The loft's interior designer, Esteban Lopez.

When software developer Jeffrey Niebling, a San Francisco native, followed his brother James to the warmer climes of San Diego — it didn't take too many sunny, 75-degree days to convince him to put his northern California home on the market and head south earlier this year.

Niebling rented a 1,100-square-foot "concrete box" in the six-story Pioneer Lofts building, which sheltered one of downtown's original artists' colonies. The unit was in less-than-turnkey condition.

Because of work obligations in San Francisco, Niebling was unable to move in immediately. Relying again on his family connections, he asked his brother, an interior designer, to help him design his new living space.

Given the distance between Jeffrey and his new home, James' business partners, Esteban Lopez and Merrilee Ekstrom of Esteban Interiors, were prompted to utilize an AutoCAD-based application that would allow Jeffrey to participate in the design and decision-making process — virtually.

"I couldn't fly to San Diego every week to choose colors or fabrics — so using the





**WHILE still in the Bay Area, Jeffrey Niebling (right) used AutoCAD-based software to communicate with his designers – brother James (center) and Esteban Lopez (left) – during his loft's interior redo.**

CAD application was a perfect way to see their vision as it applied to my apartment," says the Internet engineer. "I'm not afraid to use technology — and I trust my brother. He's helped shape my tastes."

Credited as being the visionary of the trio, Esteban Lopez is a master of color and textures. The former landscape architect is particularly adroit at conceptualizing unexpected design solutions with remarkably beautiful results.

"Sometimes we don't understand his ideas until they are done," says Ekstrom. "But when the pieces all come together, they're always perfect. It comes from his ability to envision a mature landscape, while he's planting the seedlings."

For the Pioneer Lofts project, the team designed "rooms" into the open floor plan by defining areas with colors and angular, retro-modern furnishings, then added accents of color with clusters of vintage hand-blown glass from Vetro — the company's glassware showroom. When the sun passes over the Pioneer on its way west, a splash of colors paints the glossy cement floors in a rainbow of hues from the row of glass displayed along an enormous north-facing window.

The loft's color palette is dominated by entire walls painted in rich tones of chocolate brown, contrasted with pale

robin's-egg blue. "People are afraid to use color," says Lopez, who added buttery yellows, sanguine crimsons and sage-y greens to create an interior redolent of nature in the decidedly urban setting. "For us, color is a major element in our approach to design and décor."

Jeffrey Niebling did not see his new home until it was finished — and furnished. "I loved it," he says. "It was beyond what I had envisioned."

For Lopez, a native New Yorker, the company's interior-design packages are proving advantageous in maintaining relationships with customers on the East Coast. The three-year-old company, located in Little Italy's design district, has since developed its initial CAD prototype into a complete set of design templates. "Based on our success working remotely with Jeffrey, we've created customizable design packages for every room," says Lopez, "It simplifies the process and allows us to work with clients on both coasts."

Marrying art, style and technology, the trio has created the next niche in modern design services. "People want to be a part of creating their living spaces," says Lopez, "and collaboration always yields better results."

## Inside Downtown

### Wakey Wakey Eggs & Bakey:

You know what they say about the most important meal of the day? Be it a bowl of cereal, over-easy huevos, or crisp Belgian waffles, options for this most essential of meals has never been better for residents of San Diego's urban villages.

The Busalacchi restaurant dynasty has opened its latest Little Italy endeavor, Zia's Bistro, promptly filling the dearth of real breakfast service on India Street. The heartbeat of la dolce vita, Zia's serves lunch and dinner, too, but come early, practice your Italian, sip espresso and eat a breakfast just like your Nonna would make you. 1845 India St., 619/234-1344.

Café 222's well-known waffles are slices of heaven (as well as millinery ware) and the coffee will propel you into Tuesday. Longtime downtowners, legions of newcomers and the occasional auspicious tourist know how lucky they are to have the hectic, eclectic Café 222 on the block. Look for a line around the same on weekends. 222 Island Ave., 619/236-9902, [www.cafe222.com](http://www.cafe222.com)

### Get Your Own Glass:

If the interior of your high-rise can be summed up with the word "taupe," it's high time to add some highlights. Little Italy's Vetro is San Diego's source for vintage, hand-blown, near-one-of-a-kind glass. Ease into the spectrum in style with brilliantly colored, sculptural pieces from around the world. 1760 Kettner Blvd., 619/546-5120, [www.vetrocollections.com](http://www.vetrocollections.com)

### Australian For Beach:

From Oz's east coast to ours, the folks from down under bring their legendary Bondi Beach experience to San Diego. As if our own beautiful beaches weren't enough. Bondi Bar & Kitchen opened this summer, adding

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