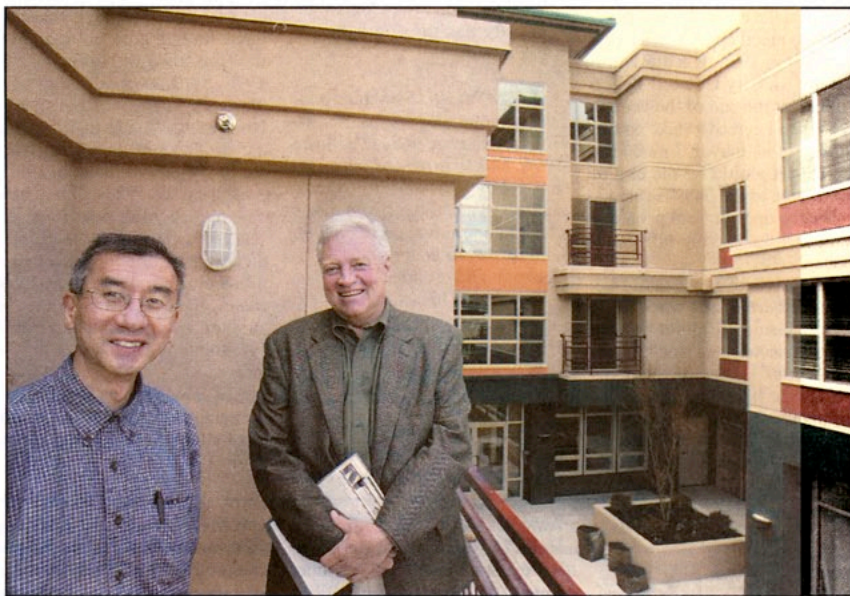


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Julie Peña/Mercer Island Reporter

Newell Court project manager George Ma, left, and architect Roger Newell at the apartments that bears the architect's name: The Newell Court Apartments.

## The project manager and the architect

### Newell Court developers tend to every detail in apt. project

*This is the third of an ongoing series of profiles of the people shaping Mercer Island's Town Center through new construction.*

By Ruth Longoria  
Mercer Island Reporter

George Ma isn't the developer. And he isn't the property owner. But, though he won't take credit for much of the project, Ma is the most visible representative of the Newell Court Apartments, a three-story 40-unit residential and two-retail, mixed-use, complex next door to the Town Center Wells Fargo Bank.

"None of this is to my credit," Ma said. "I'm just the property manager."

Ma manages Newell Court for M5 Investments, Inc., what he said is a Washington corporation with 11 owners — all friends and relatives of each other and living in Hong Kong — where Ma grew

up. The corporation had only two partners when Ma first became associated with it in the early 1980s. He originally managed single family residences in the Chicago area for a few of the owners of M5.

Ma lived in Wilmette, Ill., for nine years before moving his family to the Island in 1992. He has three children, all graduates of Mercer Island High School. He said he moved to the Island because of the superior school system.

Ma, 54, had never built buildings before the Newell Court project. However, he has been with this project since helping M5 select and purchase the property. Since 1998, he has been responsible for everything: from selecting the architect, the engineers and construction team to choosing fixtures, fielding phone calls and meeting with drop-in prospective tenants and business representatives.

"We've got a problem," a woman announced Wednesday morning as she temporarily interrupted Ma's conversation with a Qwest representative, a construction worker and two other people vying for a moment of Ma's time.

After taking a moment to make a phone call and solve that dilemma, Ma moved on to the next problem, and the next one after that. That's part of what he does — solve problems — as a property manager, he said.

He also is responsible for hiring the architect, Roger Newell, of Seattle. Along with allowing the project to be his namesake — which Ma said he had to talk Newell into — Newell is more than just the architect, Ma said.

"I call him Dr. Newell," Ma said. "I've never done anything like this before and he has been my teacher, he has taught me everything."

Ma's enthusiasm and eagerness to do what was best for the project made work easier, Newell said. "It's always nice when a client

said, 'It's always nice when a client follows through on things, but I think because it was George's first project I was able to give him an overview and he did things as I suggested.'"

Newell, 62, is a Seattle native and University of Washington graduate. He has been an architect for 40 years. Many of the architects Ma originally considered hiring are people who previously worked for Newell.

Newell was flattered that Ma insisted on naming the project after him, although this isn't the first project with the Newell name attached. And, having your name on a building makes it a bit more stressful, he said.

"It's always demanding when your name is on it because you're more afraid of making a mistake. But, it does have my stamp on it, and people often say they can tell my style in the buildings I produce," Newell said.

Newell became enamored with architecture as a child. He has always loved to draw and he won awards for art in junior high school.

"It's actually like a hobby," Newell said. "I can sit in my office coloring — I'm doing what I did in first-grade or kindergarten."

In addition to Ma's gratitude to Newell, for his expertise, Ma said he is grateful to the neighbors and surrounding businesses, for their patience during the last 15 months of the seven-year-long process of building Newell Court.

"We've inconvenienced them a lot with deliveries, street closures and dust. But, we'd never have got through this without their patience," Ma said. "The neighbors have been great. They never complained. And this wasn't much to look at, it was an ugly building before the scaffolding went away."

Now, it is much more attractive, he added as he looked up at the forest green, orange and tan structure, and out on the center courtyard with its cement planters, Japanese maple trees and decorative rocks made from large broken, polished pieces of basalt columns.

"With the courtyard, and the landscaping — all Roger Newell's work — we've made this a cozy place. It's warm and inviting," he said. "I'd like to live here, it's nice."

Housing at Newell Court ranges from studio apartments to two-bedroom plus study units. Though the corporation was only able to build to a maximum of three-stories, because of a zoning boundary along the Wells Fargo side of the property, Newell was able to design high

ceilings in the pricier upper units, which also are townhouses. Those units have laundry facilities, fireplaces, granite countertops and a choice of carpet color, wood cabinets and flooring. Prices for the apartments are from \$1,050 to \$2,500 per month. Three of the apartments have been rented, and one of them is already occupied. Ma said he expects to receive several more application confirmations within the next week.

Unlike some new projects in the Town Center, there are no plans to turn the apartments into condominiums in the future. Ma said he will continue to manage the property for the owners and there will be a management company hired to handle apartment concerns.

Ma is happy with how the apartment complex has turned out, but he is a bit disappointed it took so long due to his inexperience. However, he said, he is glad for some of the delays, because it allowed the project to develop and improve over time. Some of the delays came about when he had to make changes for city plan reviewers.

"I need to thank the city inspectors and building officials for catching things that were wrong," he said. "I want the building to be done right, I don't want to cover up things. I can't see everything, but they have good eyes."

Karl Pike, construction manager for the project, said he is impressed with the quality of the Newell Court project.

"They built this to a higher standard and way more quality than rental units. This is like condos, only they are meant to always be rented," said Pike, who lives in Auburn and has worked on many construction projects around the Seattle area, including a complex he is currently building on Queen Anne Hill. Pike said the quality of the building has a lot to do with Ma's business ethics.

"He's a great guy and he's a good businessman," Pike said. "He lives and works in the community and he builds like he lives there."