

Italian Look for Delancey Street Complex

Masterpiece Of Social Design

By Allan Temko
Chronicle Architecture Critic

Delancey Street has built up so much good will by turning former addicts and convicts into self-respecting citizens that no one except a heartless Modern architect could object to the Italian stage-set design of its nearly completed headquarters on the Embarcadero.

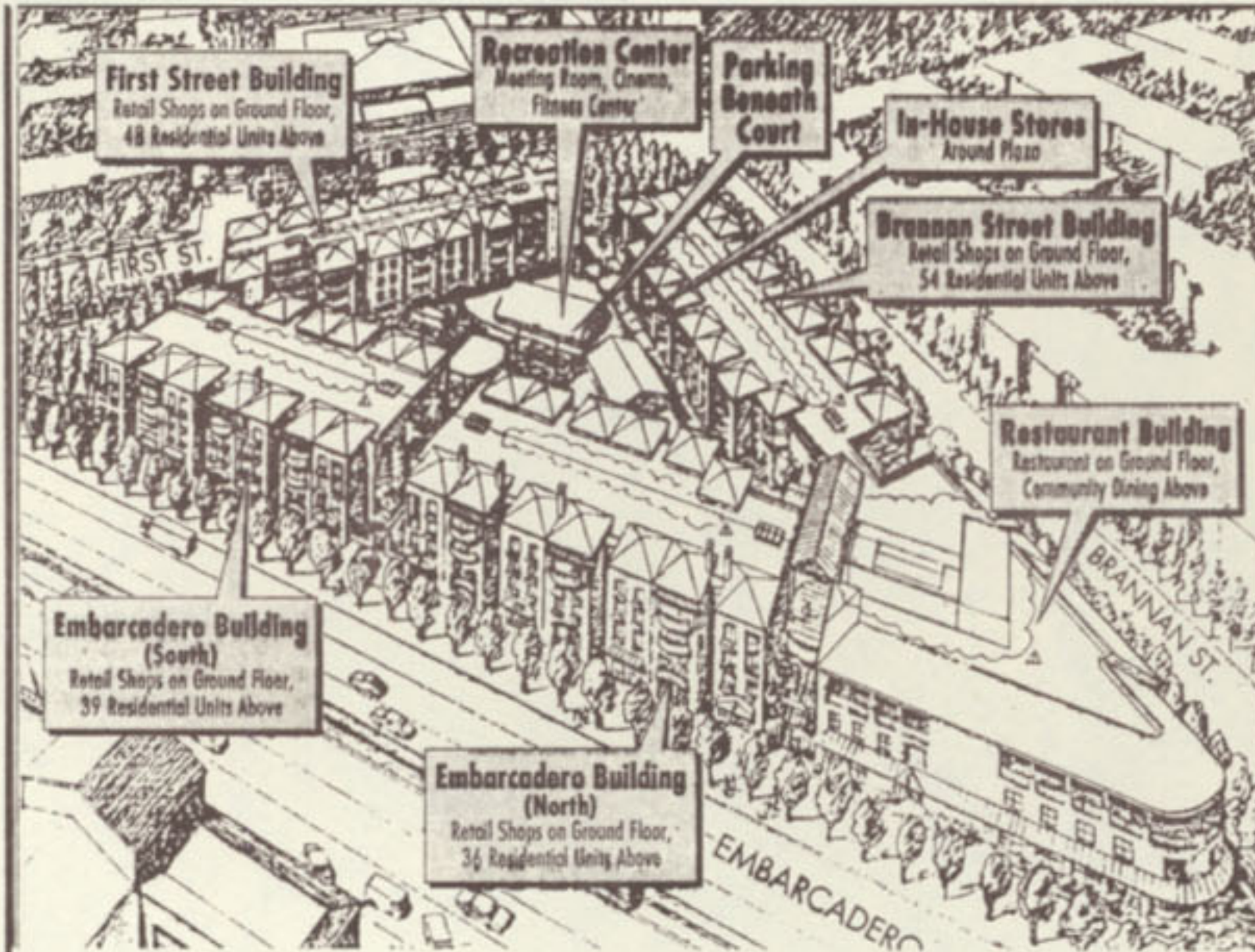
Architecturally, all that this Venetian or Roman street scene needs is a sound track of "O Sole Mio."

But this is camouflage. Delancey Street's architecture, beneath its traditional exterior, is a masterpiece of contemporary social design.

For Delancey Street's new home is far and away the greatest halfway house in the country, and probably the world. In plan, organization and mood, the design is tailored to suit perfectly a program that is unsurpassed in making winners out of losers.

Jauntily facing the outer world on the prime triangular site bounded by the Embarcadero, First Street and Brannan Street, the complex of three long buildings also look inward — again, in a very Italian way — to a protected interior court.

DELANCEY STREET'S NEW HOME



DELANCEY STREET'S NEW HOME

Here, among an array of support facilities, workshops, meeting rooms and recreational spaces, with flats and dormitories upstairs, vulnerable people can work out problems within an extended "family" where almost everyone, from murderers to ex-prostitutes, has done time.

'Old-Fashioned' Values

It is a place where Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, or even Frank Lloyd Wright, are not exactly household names. What counts in this unique community are "old-fashioned" values, in architecture and everything else, that all of its members can share.

What's more, they themselves have built their healing environment, performing about 95 percent of the work with little professional help from outside.

In a stunning example of "affirmative action," for many of them

It is far and away the greatest halfway house in the country

had few previous skills except bad ones, they have beautifully finished the stucco facades, replete with loggias and balconies, flower boxes and ornamental ironwork they have made with their own hands.

They have installed the fine copper flashings, gutters and drain pipes. The red-tiled stairs and terraces, like the overhanging tile roofs, are almost all theirs. They have cut and shaped the cedar corbels beneath the eaves.

Inside, the craftsmanship is equally impressive. Union plumbers and electricians provided instruction, but the bathrooms and kitchens, like flooring and fireplaces, were all put in by people who formerly built nothing at all. Stained-glass windows came from Delancey Street's glass shop.

Thanks to its own labor, plus some materials donated or marked down by the construction industry, Delancey Street got about \$28 million worth of architecture for half that much in actual cash.

It also obtained a good deal on the land. The valuable site just south of the Bay Bridge, owned by the port but leased to the Redevelopment Agency, was slated for low-income housing in the midst of upscale residential developments. When ordinary below-market-rate housing proved unattractive to investors, Delancey Street stepped in, cajoled neighboring developers to accept its presence and negotiated an excellent 66-year lease for one of the best spots on the waterfront, opposite Pier 36.

Even so, the project could not have gone ahead if Bank of America, and especially its chairman, A. W. Clausen, had not opened a \$10

million line of credit. Delancey Street is repaying the loan regularly through income from its various businesses and from sales of other properties from a ragtag collection of buildings that it now can vacate.

Although Delancey Street's current "family" of 500 men and women won't start moving in from other places in the city until February or March, and the buildings won't be altogether finished before summer, it is already possible to see why this picturesque but very controlled environment should become a model for comparable institutions everywhere.

Noninstitutional Architecture

If such architecture is to succeed, it must be as noninstitutional as possible — the rationale of Delancey Street since it was opened in improvised premises by the late John Maher in 1971.

Since then it has expanded prodigiously and embarked on a number of profitable ventures. Without taking a cent in public money, although the private sector helps a lot, it has evolved into a partly self-sustaining community, with shops of its own that will occupy the arched Roman storefronts at street level.

The residents will live above the stores, recalling European immigrants who settled in the tenements of Delancey Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

According to Mimi Silbert, the extraordinary UC Berkeley Ph.D. who founded Delancey Street with Maher and now heads the whole operation, the idea is that the residents, after a hard journey, are also newcomers to American life, with a full future before them.

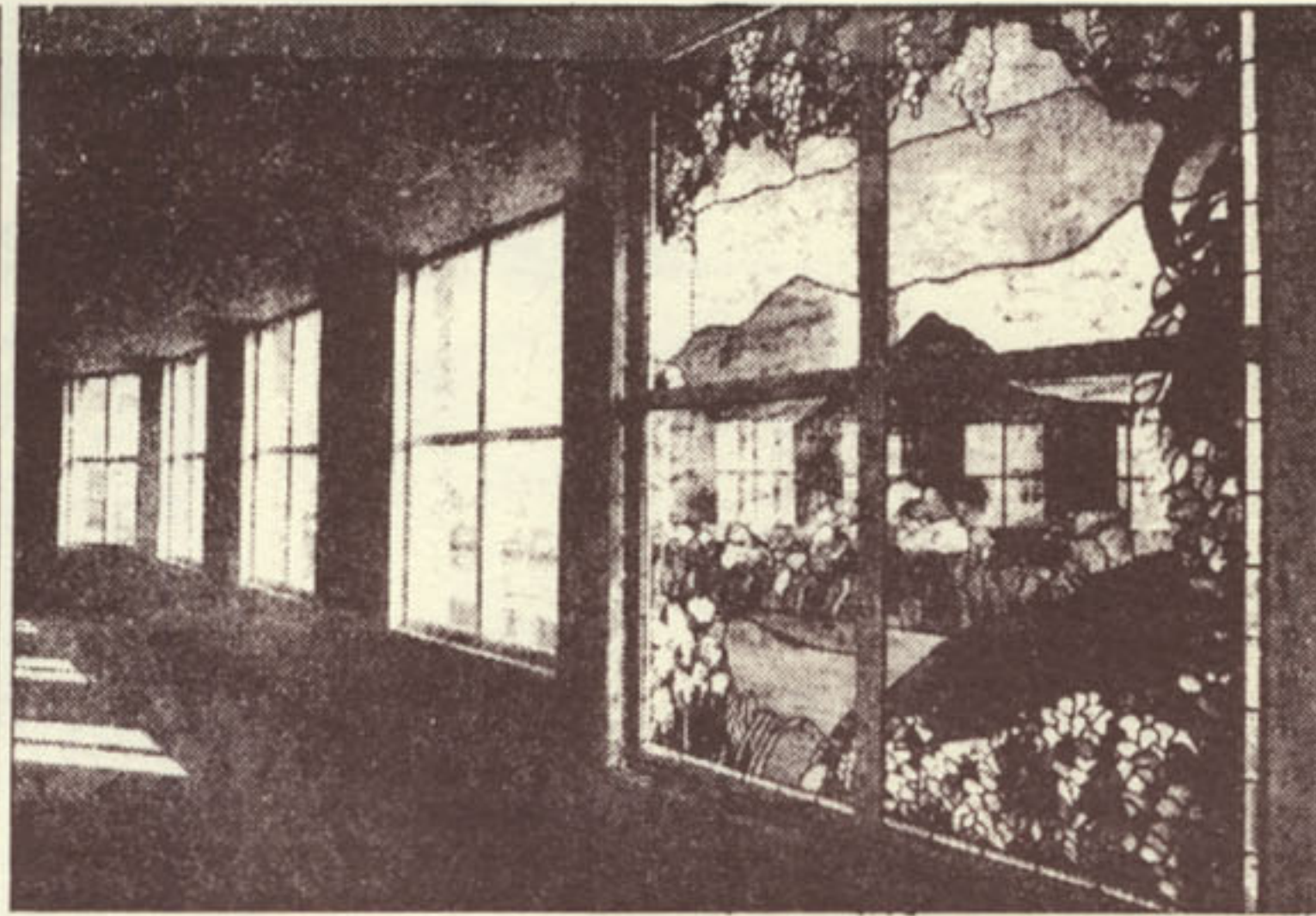
And if she has not actually designed the buildings, it is her thinking that has enabled the architects Backen, Arrigoni & Ross, with Howard Backen as partner in charge, to create the remarkable communal image that suddenly rises up on the Embarcadero.

Seen from the north, the great rounded corner of the main building, where Brannan Street intersects the Embarcadero, is a welcoming presence — and will seem much more welcoming when the construction fence is removed and the ground-floor restaurant opens.

Directly above the public restaurant is Delancey Street's own lofty dining hall, reached not from the street but from the interior court. On the level above, the facade opens in a deep-set loggia, with theatrical balustrades sweeping around the curve of the building. It serves a spacious social room for the residents, with one of the finest views in the city of the Bay Bridge, but at the same time the loggia establishes a vigorous three-dimensionality that travels down the strongly modeled facades, extending 280 feet along Brannan and 390 feet along the Embarcadero.

Both of these long perspectives could seem arid, as the flat bare-bones Modern of the Bayside Village apartments in fact appears on the other side of Brannan Street. But the facades are saved from monotony by robust projections and indentations, slightly varied from one another, that give the effect of row housing.

These are not row houses at all. Behind the facades are ingenious living arrangements that vary from rudimentary shared flats for fresh arrivals to gracious apartments, overlooking the bay, for the most senior residents. It is a little like the old Ivy League system of assigning the worst rooms to freshmen and



At the new Delancey Street complex, located a First and Brannan streets, the stained glass windows were produced 'in-house'

the best to seniors, as a reward for lasting the course.

The logic of the Delancey Street program is strikingly revealed when one enters the courtyard through the rather grand entrance on the Embarcadero or the corner gardens at the far end of the site. The center of the court is occupied by three key buildings: a central meeting hall for rap sessions and socials, a fitness center and swimming pool, and a cinema, equipped with the latest technology by Lucas-Films.

The perimeter of the court is lined by rows of "practice shops," which provide goods for Delancey Street residents and serve as training facilities. The rears of the practice stores meet the rears of the exterior stores, which serve the public.

Clever Architecture

This is clever architecture. The question is whether it is to be con-

sidered fine architectural art.

Backen, Arrigoni & Ross are among the leading residential designers in the country. They are not only excellent Modernists, but also avowedly "eclectic" and "contextual" architects, and even "historicists" on occasion, not only for Delancey Street but at Jordan Winery, say, where they have unashamedly imitated a French chateau, in reinforced concrete.

Even though they have done tens of thousands of units of commercial housing, none of it, I'd say, comes close to Delancey Street's feeling of community in which people help each other to live with great kindness and candor.

Could the same be achieved, or surpassed, in richly organized Modern architecture — instead of ersatz Italian traditionalism? Neither Backen nor Delancey Street, confronted by overwhelming social realities, was willing to take the chance

Ex-Users Get a Fresh Start

Almost everyone arrives at Delancey Street via the criminal justice system, although a few get there directly from the mean streets. Usually, one enters this haven instead of going to the pokey, or after having served time — sometimes for terrible crimes. These transgressions invariably had some connection with drugs or alcohol, or both, for the community consists entirely of ex-users.

About one-fourth of them are women. The percentage of deprived minorities is high. The general educational level is low. Yet a phenomenal 70 percent complete the basic two-year course, consisting of useful tasks and technical training, general education, cooperative living, rap sessions, gutsy self-analysis and other uplifting pursuits. Dropouts generally make it on a second try, bringing the overall success rate close to 90 percent.

Some residents choose to stay four years. Eventually, having learned crafts and trades and acquired what Delancey Street's president Mimi Silbert calls "traditional American values,"

virtually all of them make their way pretty well in the world.

Most graduates hold regular white-collar or blue-collar jobs in many different fields, including the construction industry, for which 250 current residents have become more or less qualified by working on the new headquarters. After learning retail and wholesale businesses in vocational "training schools" that produce half of Delancey Street's income — moving and trucking, Christmas tree lots, handicraft shops such as the stained glass atelier, and most lucrative, distribution of various products imprinted with university names and seals — many former residents set up successful outside businesses.

But they never really leave Delancey Street. When crises arise, the community stands ready to help materially and spiritually, sustaining former residents in tight spots. In return, those who have made it keep in touch with the community, which they assist in innumerable ways. It is a little like going to Yale. You can graduate, but you always remain part of the place.

-Allan Temko