

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

Rehab paradise for ex-cons, abusers

'Sweat equity' built Delancey Street's plush new complex

By Gerald D. Adams
EXAMINER URBAN PLANNING WRITER

The latest residential project along the San Francisco Bay shoreline has a lap pool, fountains, restaurants with bay vistas, a ballroom and health club.

It also boasts a plushly decorated movie theater, and its fancy Mediterranean-style architecture makes its upscale neighbors look almost drab.

But not all the money in the world can rent you an apartment in this complex, the new \$30 million Delancey Street village.

Next month, this rehabilitation institution for ex-convicts and drug addicts will move from its Richmond District tenement into these tile-roofed, terra cotta-colored stucco walls.

As admission-free rehabilitation institutions for felons and drug abusers go, the new complex is believed to be a pace-setter.

"This," said Dr. Francis Rigney, psychiatrist and civic leader who was viewing the place last week, "is beyond rehabilitation. It's close to redemption."

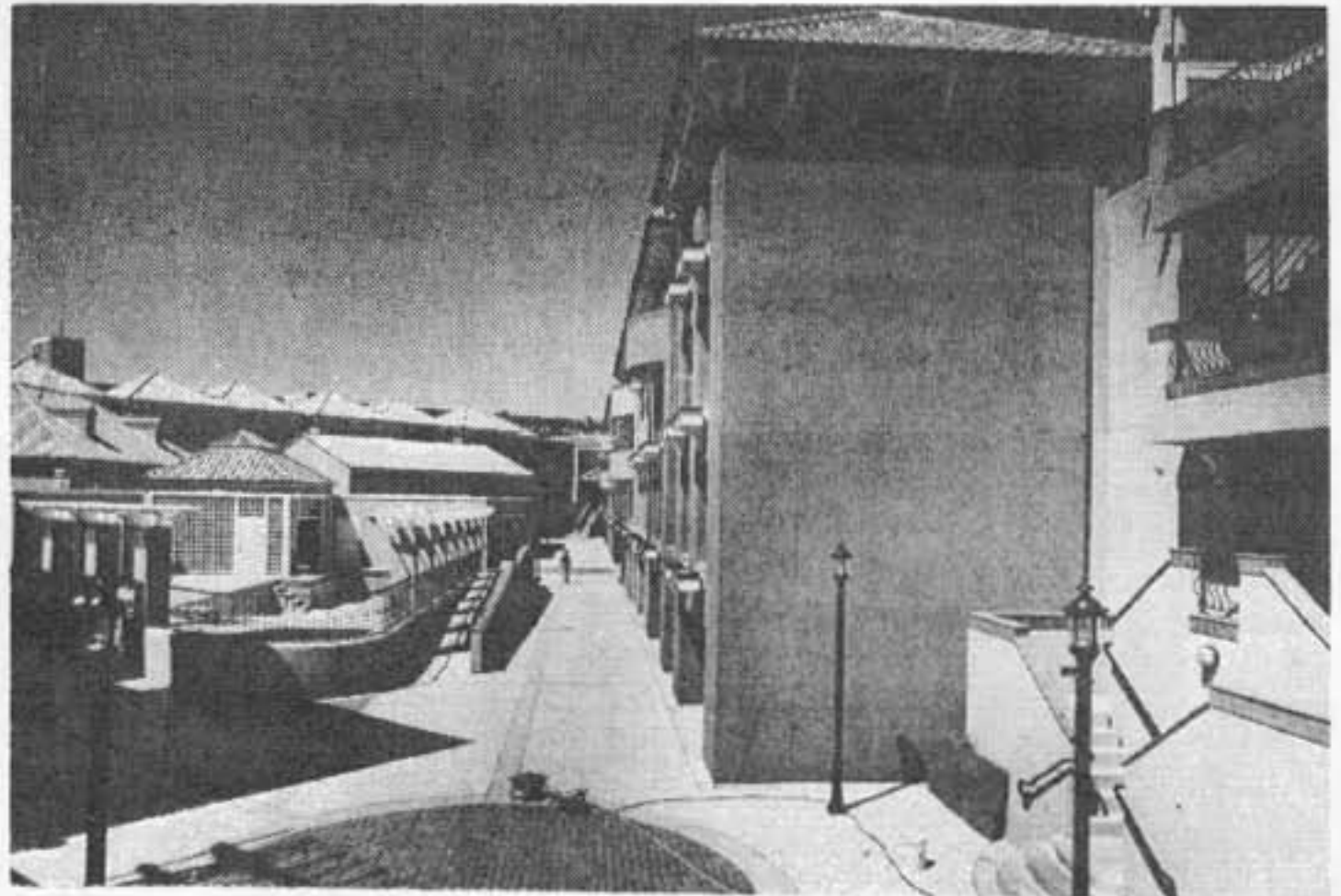
Ex-con sweat equity

Whichever, the complex where 350 to 500 reform-minded ex-cons and ex-drug abusers get schooled, fed and housed shows what sweat equity and an inspired architect, Howard Backen, can create.

When a public open house is held next month, here is how it will look:

From a sidewalk just south of the Bay Bridge, you'll enter through wrought iron gates, passing twin fountains to reach a triangle of traffic-free, tiled streets decorated with wrought iron balconies and geranium-filled window boxes.

In the middle of the triangle, double doors lead to a cavernous,



Delancey Street Foundation's president, Mimi Silbert, right, says of the new facility, above: "Why should not poor people build a beautiful environment that makes them feel better?"

wood-paneled ballroom that can also serve as a basketball court and meeting hall.

In another pavilion is a mauve and gray-decorated cinema with foam-rubber seats for 150 persons. It is equipped with the latest in Dolby and George Lucas-brand THX sound, all donated equipment.

Then there is a tiled 50-foot swimming pool plus two Jacuzzi pools, one indoors, one out.

Jackets and tablecloths

In the dining room, residents will sit at tables for four. Except for those who want a fast-food meal, there will be no cafeteria lines. Residents are to be served. And males (the population will be about 5 to 1 male over female) will be expected to wear jackets at dinner, which by the way will be served on tablecloths.

Everywhere, there are gorgeous marine panoramas, even in bed-



rooms, some of which have bay views surpassed only by those at the exclusive World Trade Club farther up the Embarcadero.

Not since Delancey Street first moved into Pacific Heights has it caused such a sociological stir as its arrival amongst South Beach's \$1,400-a-month apartments. So how did a community of criminal types ever hook onto a slice of San Francisco's much coveted waterfront?

"We were desperately looking for developers," recalled Frank Cannizzaro, the Redevelopment Agency's project director, of a time back in 1981 when the agency was figuring out what to do with the debris-filled, dilapidated Rincon Point-South Beach urban renewal area.

Because 15 percent of all hous-

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER

ing in the project had to be affordable to low-income people, "We figured that Delancey Street would help us achieve that very well," Cannizzaro said.

But are the extras — the ornamental balconies, pools, cinema and decorative items — a bit much for a population of reforming crooks?

Developing self reliance

"That question," snapped Mimi Silbert, Delancey Street Foundation's unpaid president, "is totally irrelevant.

"The public should understand that this is a home that people have built for themselves while learning skills and developing self reliance.

"Why should not poor people build a beautiful environment that makes them feel better?"

As to hiring Backen, "He understood my ideas that the new facility should have rounded edges, be warm, homey and pretty," she said.

Nor does she see the swimming pool as a luxury.

"That is because our population is terrified of water," she said. "Swimming is a sport completely alien to ghetto people, so residents learn to swim here."

Similarly, the health club with Nautilus equipment (also donated) was installed "for abused bodies that are in terrible shape," Silbert said.

Traditional facilities too

The cinema, which doubles as a video-screening theater, answers Delancey Street's need for a communal television viewing room (no

sets are to be allowed in bedrooms).

And there are the more traditional instructional facilities.

To teach vocational skills, there is an automotive service shop, the restaurant kitchens and computer classrooms.

To help residents join what Silbert calls "mainstream America," there are classrooms for tutoring basic English language skills, for teaching art and music appreciation, as well as etiquette, ordering restaurant meals, writing checks — "things that people ordinarily learn from their families."

Although Silbert estimates the value of the new complex at about \$30 million, she notes that it was constructed for about \$14 million, because of money saved through using the unpaid labor of residents, who worked under the tutelage of union workers. Of that amount, \$10 million was supplied by an unsecured loan from the Bank of America, the remainder from sale of two of its properties.

Money to pay some \$250,000 annual rent to the Port of San Francisco will be raised through the institution's restaurant, shops, household moving and Christmas tree sales businesses, which garner an estimated \$1.8 million annually.

To be admitted to Delancey Street's "curriculum" (most stays last 3½ to 4 years), candidates have to pass a kind of reverse-snobism test. "We pick the worst," Silbert says. "You have to be in bad shape — typically, a hard-core drug addict, functionally illiterate, unskilled and trapped in a ghetto existence."