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Once Convicts, They Now Build for a Better Life

By Ruth Ryon, Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO - Ex-convicts and drug addicts are building themselves some housing, shops and restaurants on a prime downtown block near Fisherman's Wharf.

Impossible? Ridiculous?

That's what most people said before construction started last summer, but now Delancey Street's Embarcadero Triangle, a \$30-million development on three acres leased for 63 years from the city's redevelopment agency, is taking shape, and there are more comments like Jack Scott's:

"I've been in the construction business for 30 years and this project is going as well as any I ever saw.

"I've also seen a lot of local general contractors look around and then walk away in amazement that this can be done so neatly, correctly and in the time allotted, by people with essentially no construction experience."

Running the Project

Scott is the project manager, and Apersey Construction is the contractor.

"We hired them to be sure all goes right, but it's Ammirato who really runs thing," said Mimi Silbert, president of the Delancey Street Foundation, which she describes as "a self-help re-education center for people who have hit bottom," people like John Ammirato.

"I started shooting dope when I was 13, and I'm 34 now," he said. "When I was 17 or 18, I got married. Then I was in and out of trouble all through my 20s, until I came out here from New York in 1981. I had no address. I was just running. Then I heard about Delancey Street." He became a resident.

Most residents make a two-year commitment to the 17-year-old program, which is named for a well-known New York street and aims to stop drug and alcohol abuse and crime while teaching at least three vocational skills and high school and advanced courses. The average stay is four years, but many residents stay nine or 10, not much, considering some were prison inmates for as long as 20 years and others were functional illiterates.

Ammirato was neither, but he needed drug counseling and lacked a completed formal education.

"I pushed him to go to school, and then he didn't take a test there that he didn't get under 99%," Silbert recalled. "He zoomed ahead and got his general contractor's license."

Now he's in charge of the 250 men and women Delancey Street residents who will have worked on the four-story, 330,000-square-foot Embarcadero Triangle, on the Embarcadero between 1st and Brannan streets, by the time it opens in the fall of 1989.

Silbert says the building, which will have three levels with 177 apartments for Delancey Street residents above a ground floor of shops and restaurants - to be managed primarily by the residents.

Before construction started, Scott and the general contractor estimated that at least 60% of the labor could be performed by residents in training, but at the end of February, with 25% of the work completed, the residents had provided more than 80% of the labor themselves, Silbert said.

"I think it's probably the largest sweat-equity project going," she said. "We're also doing all the ancillary services - like accounting. We're dealing directly with all the subcontractors, and we're ordering all the products and materials."

Many of the materials are being donated. "We have 20 people on phones throughout the country, calling manufacturers and distributors, asking them to give us products, and we think we'll end up with more than \$2 million worth," she said.

As an example, she pointed out that much of the 600 tons of reinforcement bars supplied by Tamco Steel, of Southern California, was a gift, as were significant portions of the general contractor's and architect's (Backen, Arrigoni and Ross) work.

Lawyers handling the project's legal work, any subcontractors and a few people supervising Delancey Street residents on the job also volunteered their services.

The project is being handled much like the San Francisco-headquartered Delancey Street Foundation itself, which accepts no government funding and "has no staff," as Silbert puts it.

The residents run the organization, which provides food, clothing and shelter at no cost, in return for their work, on a space available basis.



JAMES PEARSE / For The Times
Mimi Silbert, the psychologist developer.



Silbert heads the foundation and is developer of the Embarcadero triangle.

Silbert doesn't take a salary. Once described as "the only key member of Delancey Street's hierarchy who never had a drinking or drug problem of her own," Silbert is a criminologist and psychologist who was graduated from UC Berkeley and was a student of philosophy under Jean-Paul Satre in Paris.

She is a member of the California Board of Corrections. She has practically devoted her life to Delancey Street from its inception and lives with the residents in an old Pacific Heights Mansion.

Is she the Mother Teresa of Delancey Street? "I think she would deny herself the mayonnaise," she said as a resident served her a shrimp and avocado salad.

"We teach our residents how to set a table, make a lunch and go to the opera, because one of the troubles with poor people is that they don't know how to do the little things that entertain the middle class," Silbert explained.

The residents also learn financially rewarding skills.

"We earn our own money and receive donations of goods and services," Silbert said. "We learn through vocational training schools, we teach each other what we know, and we pool the income."

Delancey Street has several enterprises, including a moving and trucking company, which teaches residents how to pack and box things and how to drive a diesel truck. "And we are the largest distributors in the country to college book stores of imprinted hats and shirts," Silbert added.

Nationally, Delancey Street has about 700 residents in five locations: a ranch outside Santa Fe, N.M., which includes juveniles as well as adults; Brewster, N.Y., Santa Monica; Greensboro, N.C., and San Francisco, which has about 350 residents and several facilities, two of which Silbert recently sold to help finance the new building.

When first faced with the prospect, she didn't even have \$30,000, let alone \$30 million, but she thought even then that Delancey Street labor and donated materials would save over half of the cost of construction. Since then, she also got \$3.5 million from a city program requiring office developers to provide housing or an in-lieu-of fee.

"Now I'm about \$2 million short," she said, "but I'm in the process of fund-raising. We don't do fund-raising for our regular operations."

She just announced at a press conference that she obtained a \$10-million bank loan "as a bridge if there's a need."

She's hopping there won't be a need, but while fund-raising she has encountered some skepticism - people saying, "What do you mean that there are 75 Delancey Street people no on the job?"

"It's hard to understand," she admitted - even now that the project is getting such laudatory remarks as Bill Witte's. At a press conference announcing the \$10- million loan, Witte, the city's deputy mayor, said, "To put together a development in this time frame in this city serving this population with this much support is unprecedented, even with the most experienced developer."

It's hard to understand how a psychologist can take on the role of a real estate developer for the first time at age 46, but Silbert also chalks that up to the Delancey Street philosophy that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Besides, she figures: "What you need as a developer is a tough belly and a crazed vision, and I already had those two qualities, working with Delancey Street."