Building Delancey

The hardcore hopeless come here for a last chance to clean up their lives–and build their own treatment center.

Delancey Street
Embarcadero Triangle
San Francisco, California
Backen, Arrigoni & Ross
Architect

Young professionals often come to the gates of this upscale housing complex with its picture-postcard view of San Francisco Bay to ask directions to the leasing office. There isn't one, as it happens. And few of those asking would qualify for an apartment anyway. This is the headquarters of Delancey Street. Almost everyone living here has done hard time. Most are recovering drug addicts or alcoholics, or have committed serious crimes. To stay here, they have agreed to learn social and working skills, take vocational training, and work successfully in the community for a minimum period of time, for no pay. The shortest stay is two years, but most stay three and a half years. Some stay longer.

The 325,000-square-foot complex is the centerpiece of the 21-year-old Delancey Street Foundation's San Francisco operation. Delancey Street is well known in social rehabilitation circles, because it accepts no government funding, and has no professional staff. Instead, senior residents help new residents rehabilitate themselves in "bootstrap" fashion.

Occupying a 2.96-acre triangle of land on the Embarcadero, San Francisco's waterfront drive, the complex is a city within a city. Inside, residents have everything they need to move toward recovery in a secure supportive community. There are 177 two-bedroom apartments, food service, shops, and workspaces for the income-producing businesses that fund the foundation's work. A 500-seat assembly hall, 150-seat screening room, swimming pool, and fitness center fill the center court. Around the outside perimeter of the site at ground level are public retail shop spaces including a popular 400-seat restaurant operated by program participants.

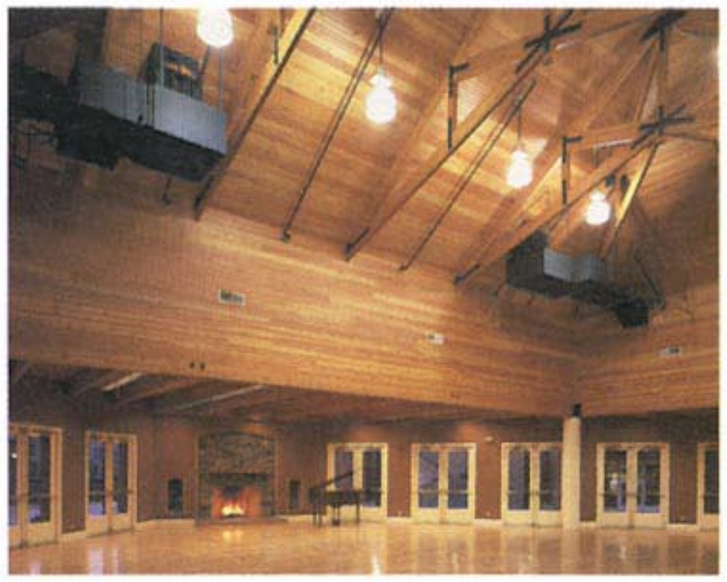
The $31-million complex was designed by Howard Backen of Backen, Arrigoni & Ross, and was built as a cooperative venture between the San Francisco Building Trades Council, Apersey Construction, and Delancey Street residents, using many donated materials and services, but not one cent of public money. "In terms of the technical work," say Backen, "they were equal to any contractor I've ever worked with, primarily because all of those working on it were very smart, and very much into building a really good building. They wanted it to be right and it shows."

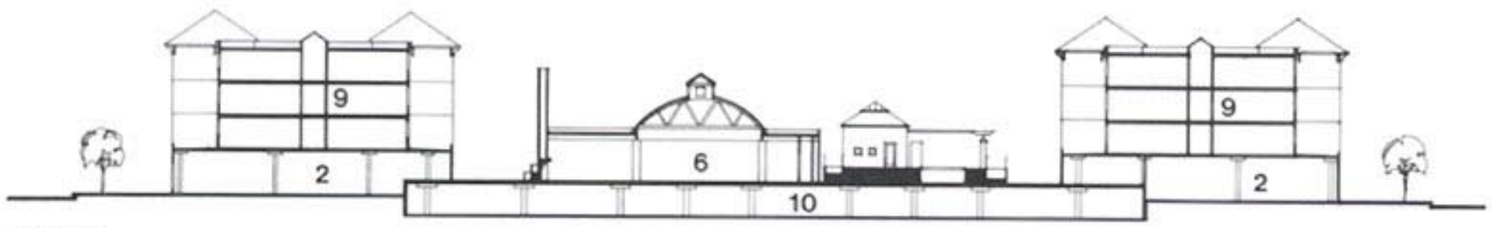
Backen's design is pure San Francisco. "I took them out and showed them the city," he says. "I showed them it's the vertical reference that's important." Although the apartments are arrayed off long, double-loaded corridors for efficiency, the buildings read vertically as individual townhouses. That was crucial, says Backen, because he wanted Delancey Street to look like the rest of the city, not like a typical housing project. (And in fact, few projects in the past 50 years have had details such as Delancey Street's flower boxes, balconies, wrought-iron railings, and wooden eave brackets.)

There is much to be gained by designing the kind of place people want to be in, especially for people who have been hard-core criminals and substance abusers. "But there is always a temptation to institutionalize—not to add that little bit of detail, so you can put in another room, and try and maximize the number of people you can warehouse," acknowledges Backen. "Delancey Street works because it doesn't do that. These people are just like any other human beings. How comfortable can we make them? How much light and air should be in the space? These should be no different here than they are in any other high-quality housing project. Everybody is trying to figure out why it works. The bottom line is that Delancey Street is a damned nice place to be." *Charles Linn*

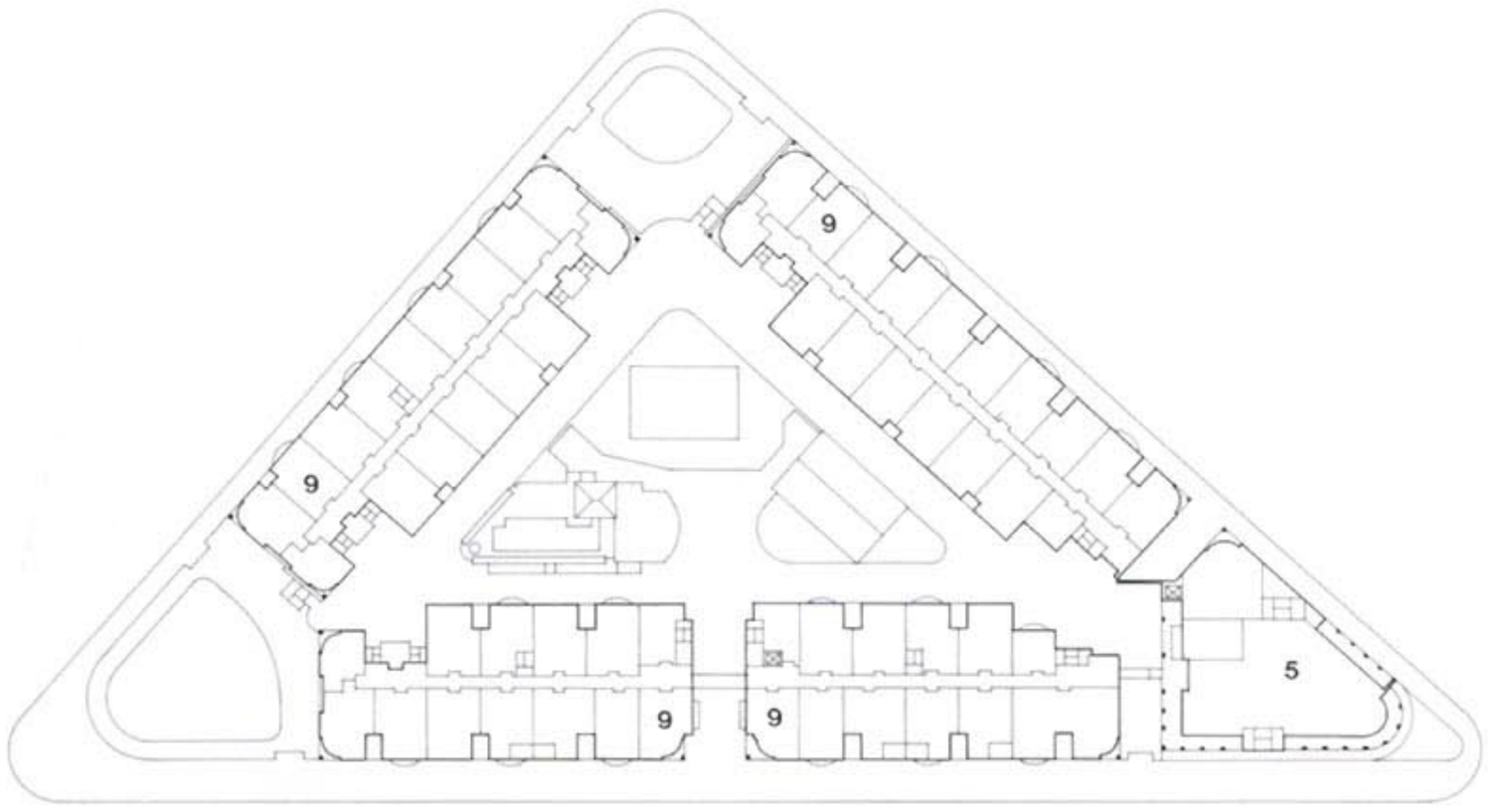
Bob Swansen photos

Like most low-rise buildings in San Francisco, Delancey Street has wood-frame construction over post-tension deck, and is sheathed in cement plaster. Retail shops (above) fill the ground floor of Delancey Street's rowhouselike perimeter buildings; dwelling units occupy the top three floors. The project's multipurpose room, screening room, and swimming pool are all located within an interior court (opposite).

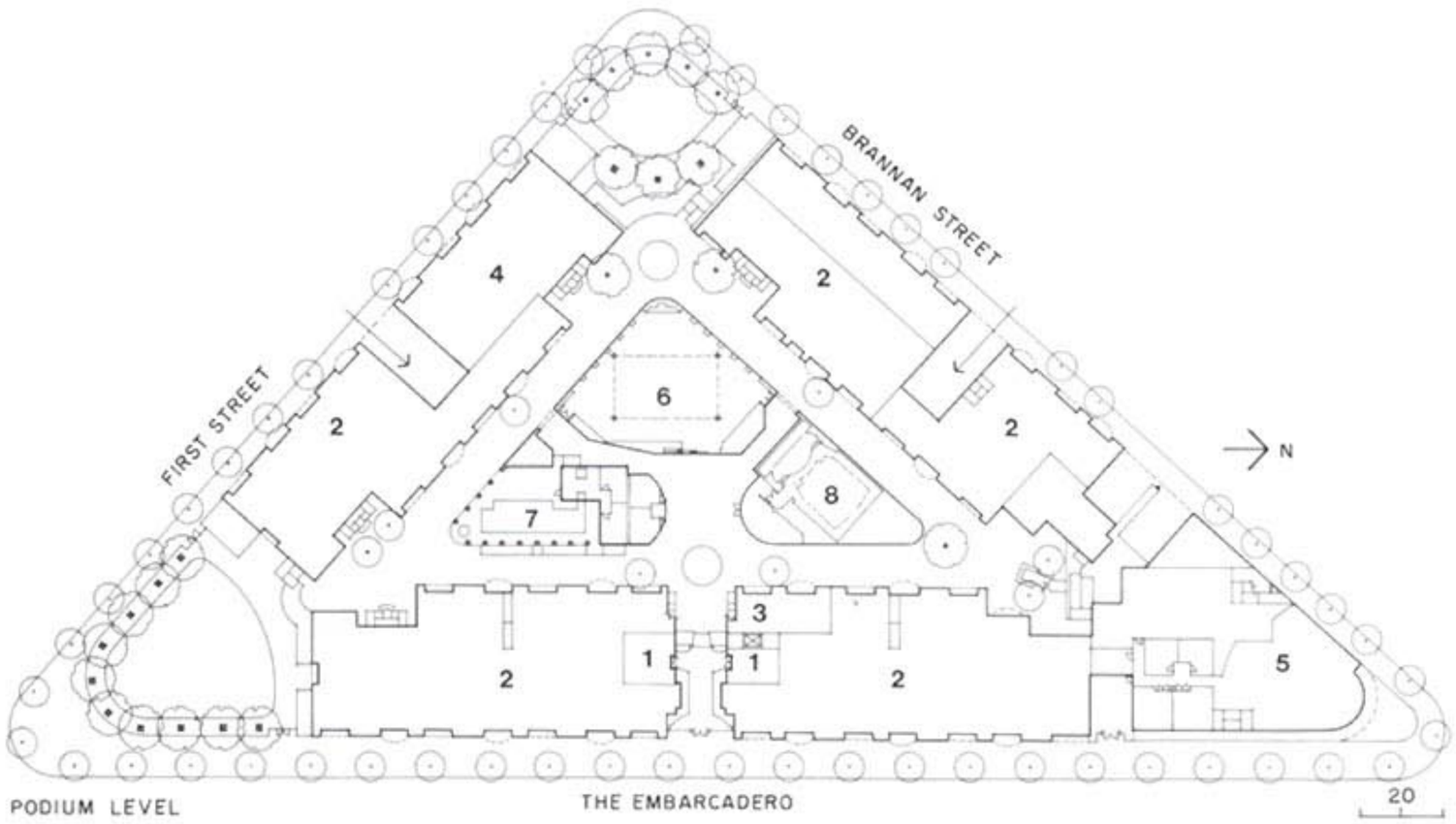




SECTION



UPPER LEVEL

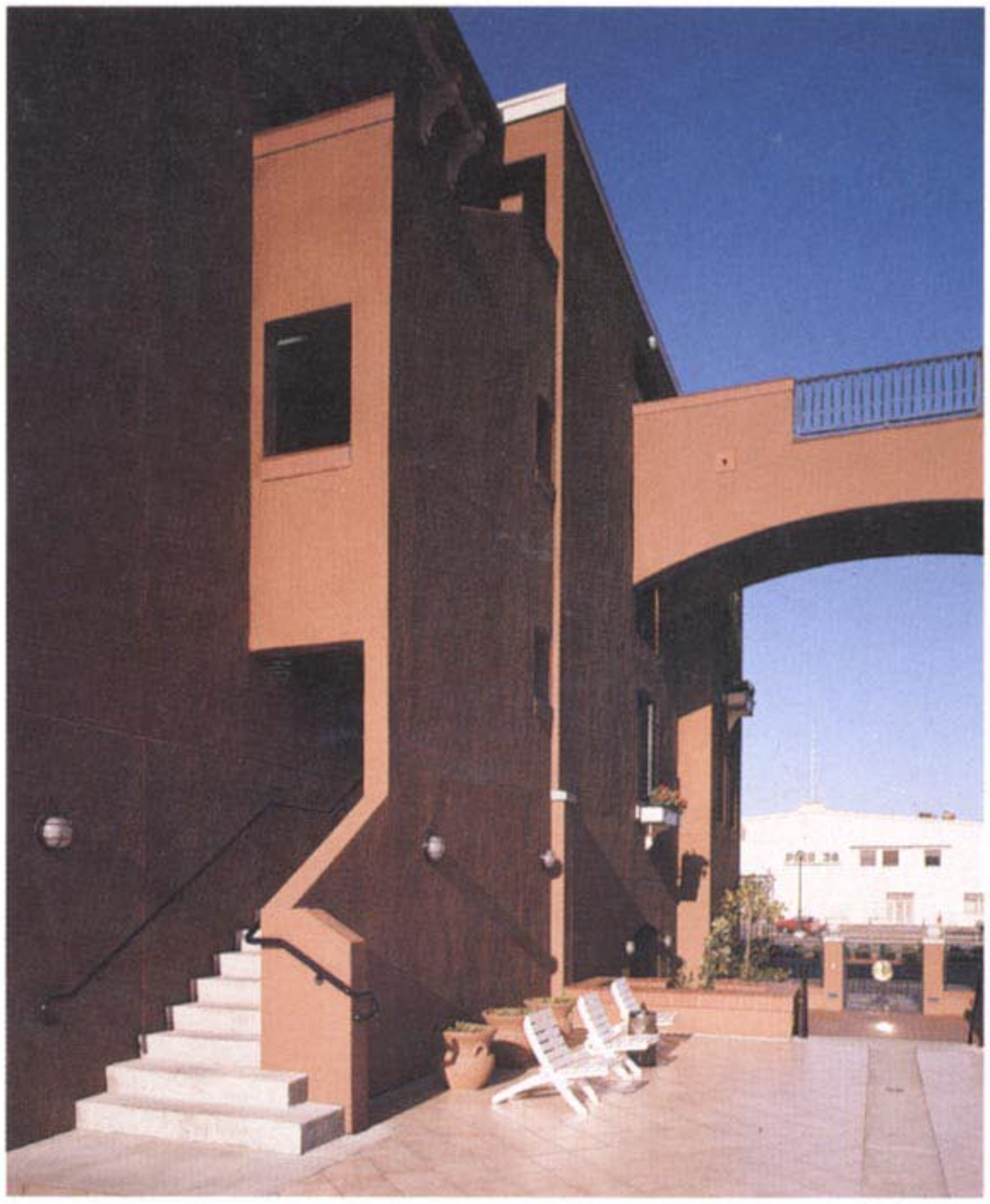
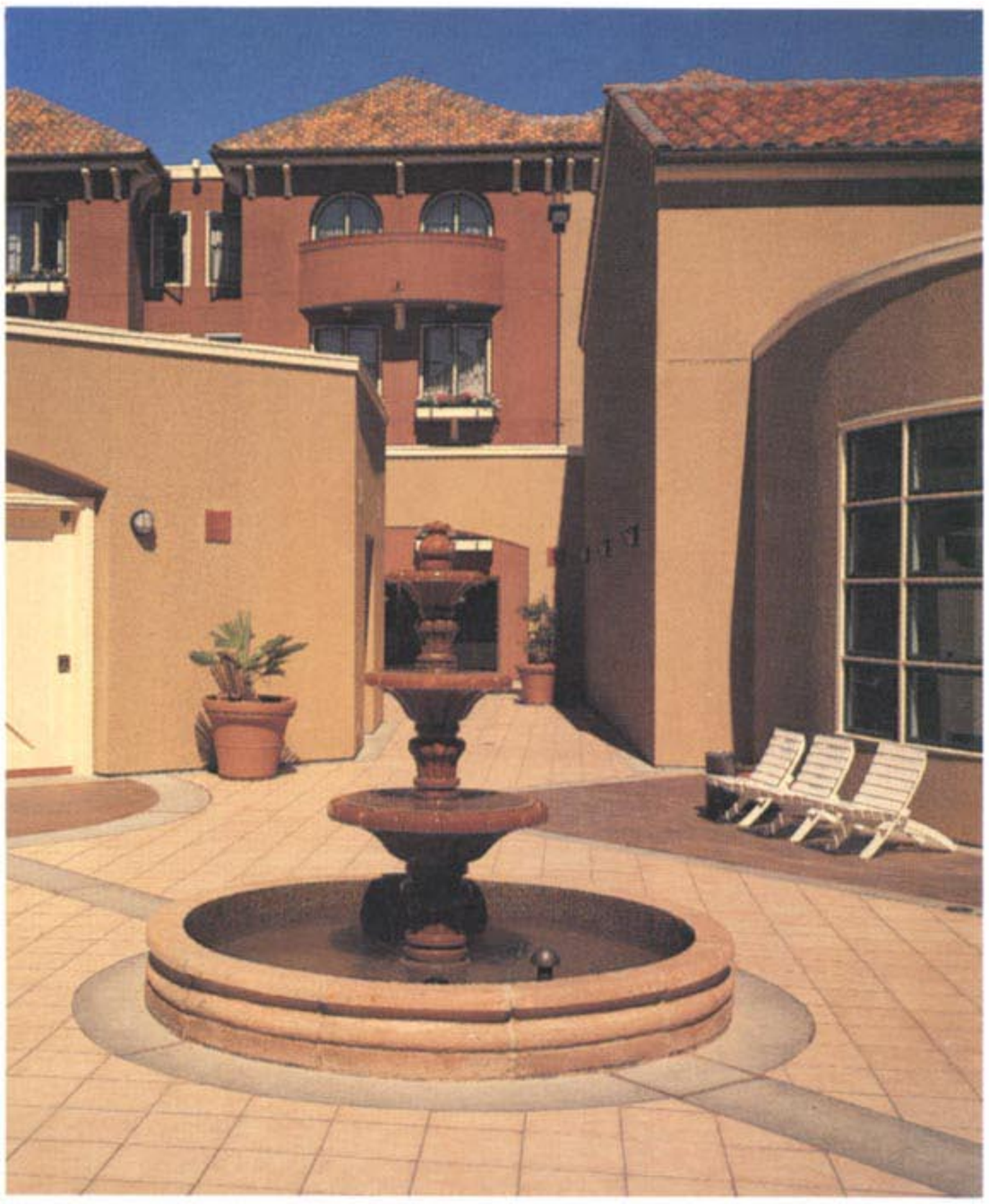
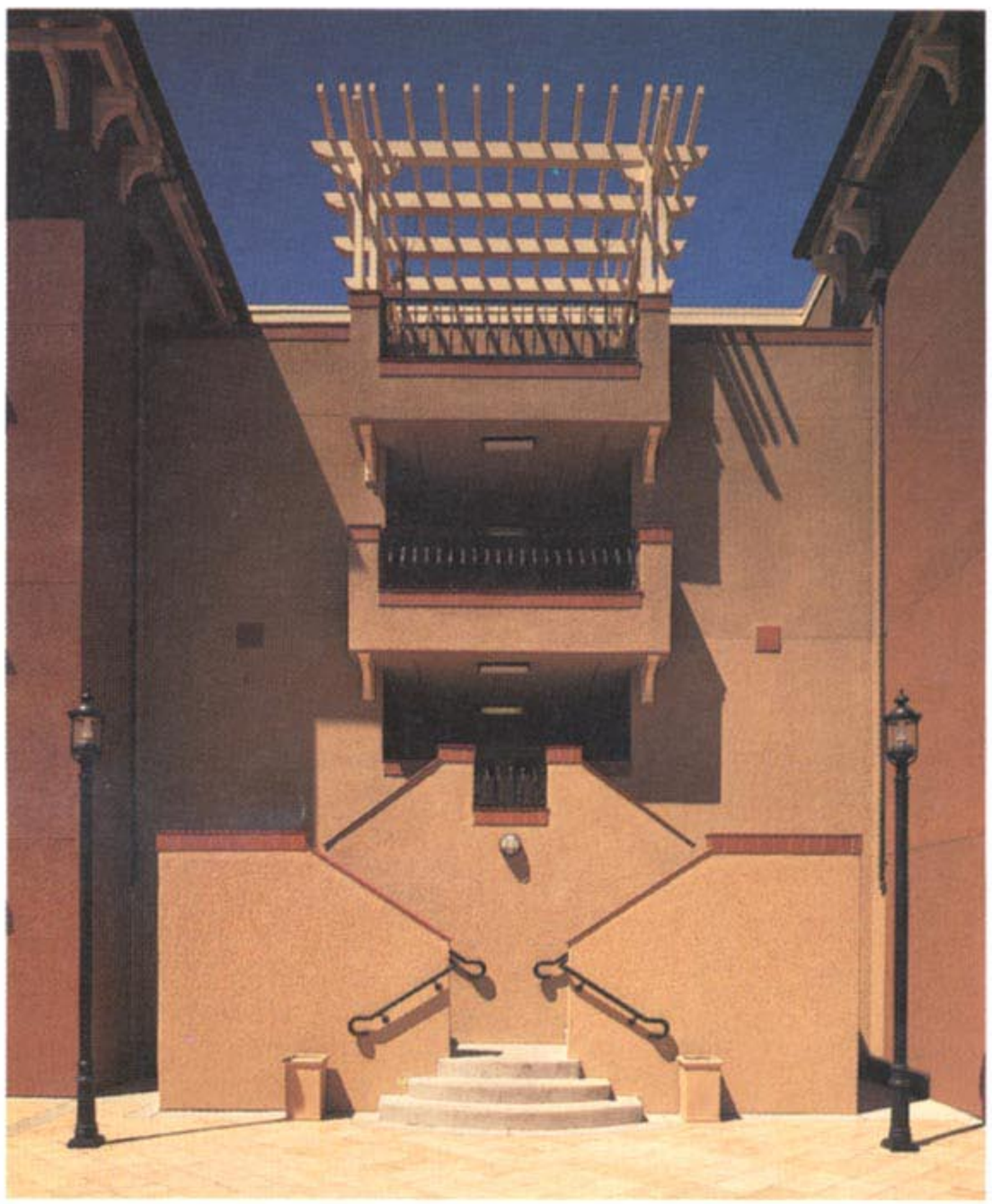


PODIUM LEVEL

THE EMBARCADERO

Left: interior views of a typical dwelling unit and the multipurpose room. Because Delancey Street's design changed during construction depending on what materials were donated, a scissors truss was substituted for the bowstring truss shown in the section.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: a skybridge connects two of the perimeter buildings; a fountain just inside the gate; balconies, arched windows, and flower boxes on a dwelling unit facade; a stairway to a pergola inside the courtyard.

Credits
Delancey Street
Embarcadero Triangle
San Francisco, California
Owner: *Delancey Street Foundation*
Architect: *Backen, Arrigoni & Ross—Howard Backen, partner-in-charge*
Engineers: *Robinson, Meier & Juilly (structural); The Engineering Enterprise (electrical); Ajmani & Associates (mechanical)*
Consultant: *Harrah's Theater Service (screening room)*
General Contractor: *Delancey Street Foundation*

1. *Lobby*
2. *Retail*
3. *Mail*
4. *Health club*
5. *Kitchen/restaurant*
6. *Multipurpose room*
7. *Pool*
8. *Screening room*
9. *Living unit*
10. *Parking*