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# Lost opportunities in developing urban America

## Commentary

By John King



Mission Bay in San Francisco (above and below) combines housing with commercial, civic, and educational facilities.

Urban America is changing shape before our eyes. What with transit villages, suburban downtowns, New Urbanism, and the like, a landscape is evolving that, theoretically, melds contemporary design sensibilities with the old-fashioned virtues of dense civic life.

Theoretically.

In real life, no such luck. Instead, too many of these “districts” and “neighborhood centers” might as well be shopping malls with the tops peeled off, sardine-can style. The look is wallpaper thin whether it’s long, squat boxes cloaked in brick panels for a “brownstone” veneer, or a stucco march of pastel facades trying hard to hide the fact that just one building sits behind them. If the goal is to be “edgy,” count on splashes of corrugated steel.

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The costumes differ from region to region, but the outcome is the same: low-slung mediocrity without a hint of creativity or conviction. And while there’s no single villain at work, the architectural profession is among the culprits. Big names—the ones that magazines like ARCHITECTURAL RECORD look to for innovative design—aren’t interested in mixed-use urbanity unless they can transform the skyline while they’re at it. Meanwhile, too many of the firms that do step into the breach seem content to bang out product and cash developers’ checks.

Which brings us to San Francisco’s Mission Bay. It’s the sort of district that every city now seems to have: once-derelict rail yards sprouting neighborhoods thick with housing, jobs, and shopping. This isn’t just infill, plugging holes here and there; it’s a whole new urban template where the population skews virile and young. The nightlife is part of the scene. So are beckoning threads of open space, from

creekside walks to a planned dog run and bayside park.

It’s a chance to create something special, a district on par with the past.

Planning for Mission Bay began in 1981 and went through a half-dozen permutations before the land-use plan for the 303-acre site was approved in 1998. The vision is a virtual city within a city: more than 6,000 housing units, five million

square feet of office and biotech space, shop-lined streets, and a 43-acre college campus. A streetcar line opened last year. An elementary school is in the works.

Mission Bay has something else: two thick packets of design guidelines that spell out height and massing, colors and composition, materials and architectural moods (“strong horizontal and vertical elements ... create interesting streetscapes for pedestrians”). Nothing is left to chance.

All this is commendable—as is a requirement that sets aside 30 percent of the 6,090 housing units for low-income residents—and strong guidelines are better than giving developers carte blanche. With two or three exceptions, though, most of what’s gone up is a let-down—formulaic and thuddingly dull.

Along a quarter-mile of Mission Creek’s landscaped north edge, for example, five buildings containing 630 units of housing have gone up since 2001, but the result feels like



# Commentary

a zoning exercise more than a densely populated slice of the city. Buildings start low along the water, pull back a bit, and then step up until they hit the 90-foot height limit. Snap, snap, snap: It's as if a squad of tanks rolled into place.

The overly proscriptive planning doesn't help: It's so focused on thwarting excess that there's no room for innovation or surprise. Consider this warning in the section on architectural details: "Extreme contrasts in materials, colors, shapes, and other characteristics that will cause buildings to stand out in excess of their public importance should be avoided." Other than that, go crazy.

But the real problem in a district like this is lack of ambition. In

leaning from an upper-floor window.

Back on Mission Creek, the newest condominium project is Park Terrace. It bills itself in ads as "sexy and available"; clearly, though, the turn-on isn't the prim outfit of beige panels of glass-fabric-reinforced concrete. Or the chunky silhouette that is three stories along the water and seven stories on top. What you sense is a program being dictated from afar, standard operating procedure of a distant developer, tweaked for local approvals.

The good news is that within a few blocks of Mission Bay, you can find contemporary housing that shows architecture can play by the market's rules and still shine.

The proof is in the work of

only offer privacy, they catch visual fire as the sun slides low at dusk.

Saitowitz's newest building—he's one of the developers—is 1234 Howard Street, which features 18 units in four levels atop a street-level garage. They're in two bars of space linked by a central corridor, so the building looks like an H from above, and the materials are as simple as the layout: a frame of concrete and steel, with glass as clear as California's energy-conservation laws allow. What gives this 50-foot-wide, midblock complex a presence is the final layer: horizontal aluminum blinds covering the floor-to-ceiling windows of each unit facing Howard Street. Since each unit's residents control their own blinds with a flip of a switch, the facade's composition keeps shifting, a thatched collage in eight parts.

Saitowitz's right-angled austerity

matter of the city, even if it isn't as glamorous as a cultural building," says Saitowitz, whose national work includes the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston. "A lot of good architects don't take on the housing problem, and that's a pity. It ends up being handled by corporate-size firms that do everything the same old way."

Mainstream firms can take a cue from architects like Saitowitz—not by aping his style, but by working from the inside out. Stick to the basics: emphasize a few strong moves rather than betting on surface details that won't survive value engineering. Add a few accents that will bring everything else into focus. Stay involved throughout the construction process.

As for our hallowed architectural stars, perhaps a few can make market-rate housing their cause.

Yes, it's nice that Richard Meier



At 1234 Howard Street in San Francisco, Stanley Saitowitz shows how architects can engage the market economy and create attractive infill housing.

the case of Mission Bay, the publicly traded master developer, Catellus, sold off large parcels to other large publicly traded developers such as Avalon Bay Properties, a REIT owning more than 50,000 apartments in 10 states. Avalon Bay has built two towers in Mission Bay, and the second is the homeliest thing in the neighborhood: a thick, 17-story rectangle clad in black tiles at the base and stucco of no discernible color above, topped by a feeble line of spires that look as though they could be snapped off by someone

Stanley Saitowitz, whose Natoma Architects has added several distinctive pieces to San Francisco's evolving South of Market district, a hodge-podge of wine bars and auto-repair shops, immigrant housing and late-night clubs. The biggest and best example is Yerba Buena Lofts, a 200-unit complex from 2001 [RECORD, August 2002, page 116]. There's a machinelike abstraction in the project's concrete grid (which contains lofts stacked five high), but there's warmth as well; the channel-glass windows facing the street not

might be severe to some eyes, but it never looks compromised. That's because he understands the market-rate beast and puts every line of his budget to use. Yerba Buena Lofts' concrete grid provides the walls, floor, and ceiling for each unit, cutting down on subcontractors and construction time. Similarly, at 1234 Howard, the clean floor plans freed up money for the shimmering blinds, a Belgian product that Saitowitz tracked down from a vendor in Florida, where they're used as hurricane screens.

"For us, housing is the main

is designing pristine towerettes for the likes of Nicole Kidman, and that such artistes as Jean Nouvel and Frank Gehry unveil icons for the ultra-wealthy. But they're still just playing to the elite, leaving the rest of us to gape or sneer. So here's an idea: Take a cue from fashion designers. Roll out second labels that offer quality for the sophisticated masses, sharp-looking urbanity for the merely affluent.

Hey, it works for Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan. Why not Robert Stern and Zaha Hadid? ■