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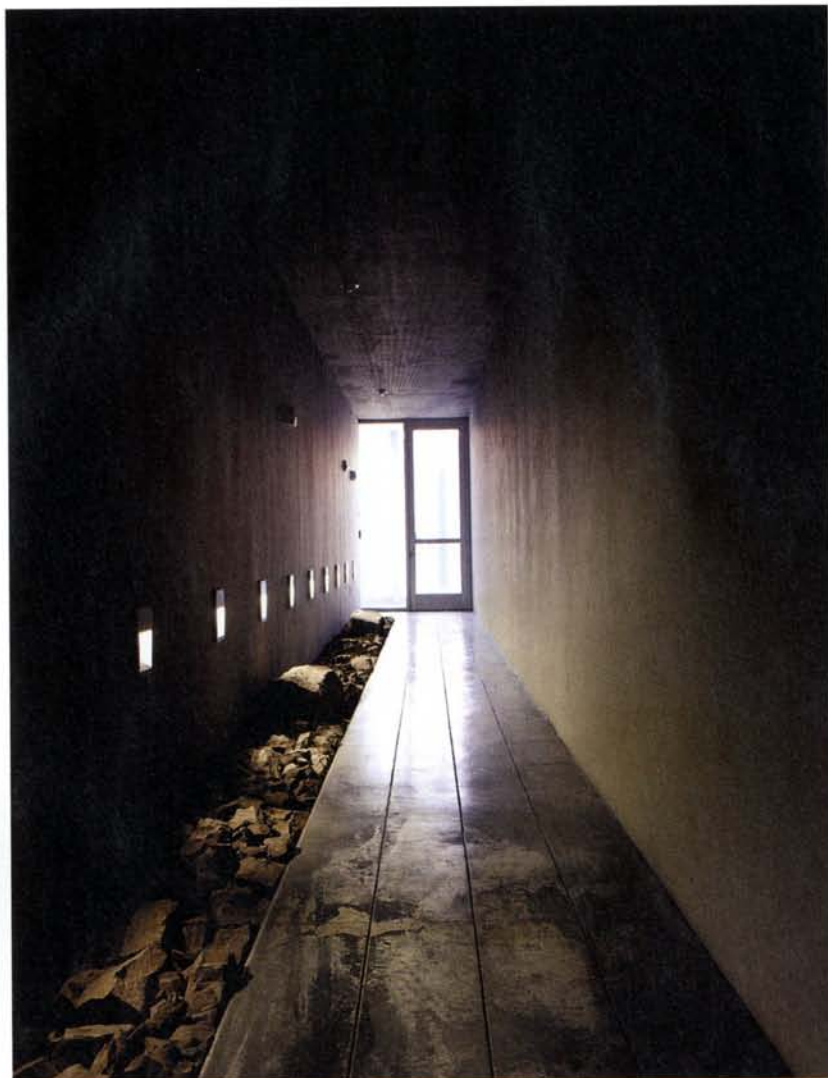
San Francisco Is for Louvers

—It may not be to Queen Anne's tastes, but 1234 Howard is true to its context.



The Howard Street facade of Stanley Saitowitz's building changes depending on its occupants' needs. Each of the 17 units is outfitted with operable louvers that close off and open up to the street (opposite). "You need to score concrete to relieve cracking. We laid the

concrete this way because it emphasizes the linearity of the space," says Saitowitz of the corridor (right) leading to a shared mail room, elevator, and garage. A unit facing Natoma Street (below) looks on to what was once housing for the area's factory workers.



Project: 1234 Howard Street
Architect: Stanley Saitowitz, Design Principal | Natoma Architects Inc.
Location: San Francisco, California



Those nominally acquainted with San Francisco might imagine its skyline to be a Technicolor sea of Victorians, bobbing up and down the city's famed crests and troughs like bright, colorful buoys. But any decent vista reveals a city quite Mediterranean in its palette; though the Painted Ladies are beloved and often meticulously maintained, the cityscape as a whole is off-white. And not every street is hilly. Take South of Market (SOMA): Once the industrial warehouse and lighting district in the 1940s and '50s, the area saw its real estate puff up then quickly deflate as the dot-com bubble burst. Warehouses and converted lofts populate the relatively flat boulevards, whose web of interstate on- and off-ramps make them somewhat unfriendly to pedestrians. Howard Street, for example, leads off of I-80 and hosts a steady stream of one-way traffic—not exactly the iconic picture of San Francisco.

This is not to say that all the housing on Howard is without character. Just look at the sequentially ▶



named 1234 Howard, a 17-unit residential structure designed by Stanley Saitowitz | Natoma Architects Inc. Clad almost entirely in anodized aluminum, it shines—a bright white abstraction of the city's vernacular. The facade, animated by operable louvers, winks at passersby, as if to say: *This is San Francisco.* With frontages on both the congested Howard and sleepy Natoma Streets, 1234 Howard is as much about its immediate context as it is about the city at large.

"I'm very interested in the texture of San Francisco and the traditional scale; 1234 Howard is just a different interpretation of this general character," says Saitowitz. "The vertical massing that's very much part of the city's fabric, these slices of building, and the idea of the bay window and repetition—with this project it's just twice with a void in between. So it deals with all the texture of the city but in a more abstract, unsentimental way."

The "twice" to which Saitowitz refers are the two simple rectangles that stand beside one another



The “nighttime” quarters of the penthouse unit, clad almost exclusively in white, are the analog to the dark-toned “daytime” space. The master bathroom (top and bottom left) is outfitted with Kohler fixtures and custom pieces. The oversized tub is graced with a generous skylight above it. The bedroom (far left, top), like the rest of the unit, is sparsely furnished with an Extraded by Fabien Baron for Cappellini.

It opens to a private courtyard (far left, bottom) and illustrates Saitowitz’s vision for open space and ample cross breezes. “Typically lofts and apartment units are quite deep, and they just have light coming in from one direction,” says Saitowitz of his plan for 1234 Howard. “So here, they basically have light along their long dimension.”



and are linked by an exposed aluminum grate courtyard. San Francisco code requires that 25 percent of any residential lot be left unbuilt to serve as a yard. Saitowitz opted to orient this open space down the middle of the lot so that each unit could benefit from the potential of natural light along its long side, instead of just from the front and the back that is common in most loft dwellings. The lot, which formerly housed a typical one-story warehouse and a two-story office building, had awkward dimensions: 50 feet wide and 165 feet deep, with facades on the parallel Howard and Natoma Streets. “This allowed us to have a drivethrough at the base of the building, so it’s almost like an alleyway going through the block; the building links both streets,” says Saitowitz.

The 17 units—four per floor, plus penthouse—are situated so that the two-bedroom units face Howard and the one-bedrooms face Natoma. “Really, I think in the city—where one is confined to less square footage—this becomes the main luxury. Just to have the feeling of openness and space instead of lots of little rooms, like a program or predetermined idea about how to use the space. Here it’s like taking the character of a loft, but in a horizontal style,” explains Saitowitz, who interprets “rooms” loosely, in that many have only two walls.

The unconfined feeling is augmented by an austere palette—which couldn’t be a greater departure from the candy-colored Victorian style. This, Saitowitz claims, helps occupants bring in more of their personal touch: “The basic approach is to create a quite neutral type of palette, so that the occupants can determine the style by the way they select their furnishings. It’s like creating a blank canvas, where they can actually enhance the character by ▶



the way they inhabit their space.” The penthouse unit, however, maintains Saitowitz’s pristine vision, with its low-profile decorating sensibility. And the contrasting light and dark engineered-bamboo flooring (the “nighttime room” is finished in light wood while the “daytime room” is swarthier with its darker-hued grain). Every unit is outfitted with high-end appliances and fixtures by the likes of Bosch, Sub-Zero, Dornbracht, and Kohler.

Because Saitowitz was so spare with his materials and form, slight flourishes feel all the more outstanding. In the case of 1234 Howard, the most interesting detail is indisputably the series of operable louvers on the Howard Street facade. “I like the idea that buildings can describe their occupancy—like in older cities, where people used to hang their washing out. Here it’s done in a much more subtle and measured way. The louvers animate the facade so it’s not a static thing,” he explains. Residents can independently control the slats, which protect the south-



The "daytime" living quarters in the penthouse are dark, from the floor to the furnishings. The library is formed simply by two custom bookcases enclosing the space (far left, top). The dining table (left) is by Jasper Morrison for Cappellini (with an Aalto vase by Iittala on top). The chairs are by Ag Fronzoni also for Cappellini. The central open space at 1234

Howard is traversed by footbridges and shared courtyards (far left, bottom). At night, city lights illuminate the interior space. The operable louvers allow residents to darken the unit if desired. The penthouse living room (bottom left) is furnished with Ile Club by Piero Lissoni for Living Divani. The Metropolitan Riverside Park City Lights rug is by Merida. **i**

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facing fenestration from the sun and cancel out heavy traffic and noise. They enable residents to, in Saitowitz's words, "redraw the facade, which [expresses] the way that they occupy and transform their space."

For all that the loudly painted and distinctively flourished Victorians define the San Francisco of tourist guidebooks, it is hard to deny that the houses frequently become parodies of themselves. Many are split into warrenlike flats and inhabited by anonymous groups of renters, none of whom are reflected in the kitschy color scheme splayed across the facade. Meanwhile, on Howard Street, someone has just returned home and is turning down his louvers for privacy while someone else is having a dinner party; from the street you can glimpse the guests circulating throughout the room. The crime of ornament is that over time it obfuscates the character inherent to each person, each building. For 1234 Howard, it seems, the slate is clean. ■■■