

Inn offers much more than shelter

AT worst, housing for the homeless is a cold doorway and a cardboard box. Usually it's a bleak warehouse with a roof, a cot and a bit of heat.

But San Jose's newest shelter will be short-term housing for the homeless at its very best. The Julian Street Inn will be a trailblazing shelter that will serve as a model for the humane treatment of the homeless throughout the country.

Run by Housing for Independent People, a private, non-profit agency, the inn is under construction on Julian Street just west of downtown. It is scheduled to be completed this fall. It is both the best and most important piece of architecture in the entire multimillion-dollar domain of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency, which has supplied surplus city land and funding for the shelter.

With just 50 beds, the inn will not solve the problem of street people in San Jose. But the decision to hire Christopher Alexander to design the building is a rare stroke of genius. Architects are more often associated with opulent mansions for the rich than housing for street people. But this building proves that good architecture isn't a luxury. It can benefit anyone, even society's least-fortunate members.

International reputation

Alexander is based in Berkeley, but his reputation is international. His teaching, designs and writings — as author of the influential book "Pattern Language" — have set him in the vanguard of the profession.

That he considered a shelter for the homeless worth his attention shows that he is an architect with a social conscience. That he has talent, too, makes his selection exceptional. His buildings don't showboat. He creates thoughtful and unpretentious places where people can dwell in dignity and comfort.

Dignity and comfort are the keys to the Julian Street Inn's architecture. Unlike most shelters, Alexander's was modeled on a country inn — which is why it was named the Julian Street Inn.

The name is significant. This is not a building for warehousing the poor. So with a clay-tile roof, beautifully gated entry portals and some decoration, the building has the look of a residence.

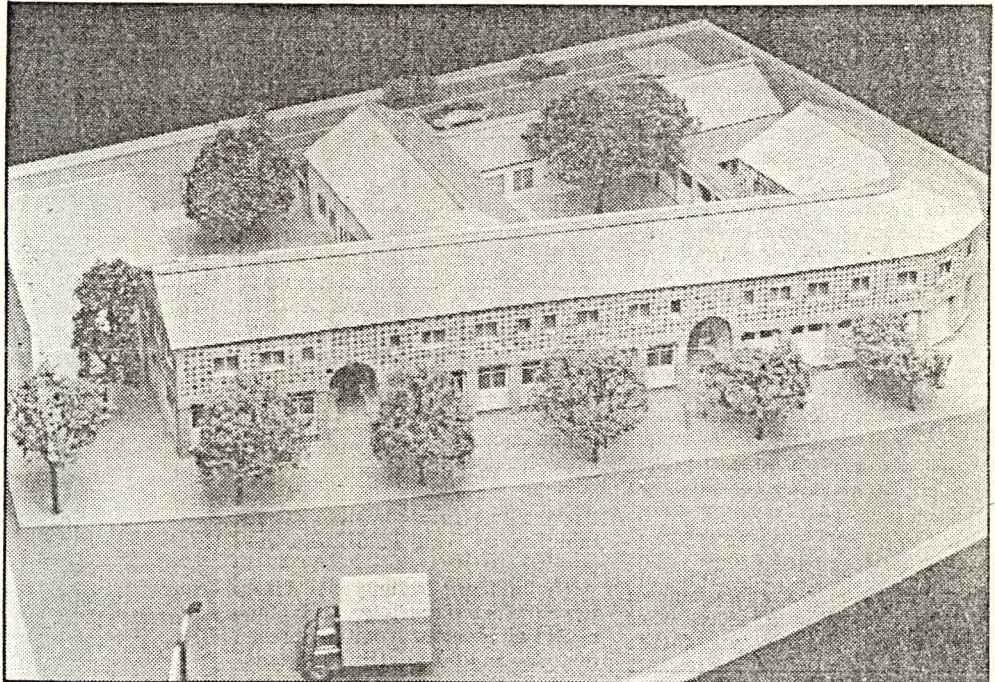
Alexander's architecture doesn't go in for bombast. The inn will be a modest, two-story building. In place of the slick glass or attention-grabbing granite faces of most downtown buildings, the inn's second floor will be covered in a tapestry of hand-painted ceramic tiles that Alexander is producing in his own studios.

It shows the craftsman's human touch that has been lost in a lot of recent architecture.

Why should this shelter be singled out for such quality?

Enlightened self-interest

The Redevelopment Agency's support of the inn is more enlightened self-interest than altru-



San Jose's Julian Street Inn is scheduled to be completed this fall



ism. The inn sits on a prominent entry to the reborn downtown. No city father or mother wants a conventional flophouse marring the view of high-powered visitors.

But it is inside where the building really distinguishes itself. Alexander started by talking with potential residents on the site to learn what they wanted. He says he was motivated by the feeling that he — or anyone — could be homeless at some time.

The people he interviewed turned out to want what everyone else wants in a home, the architect says: a little privacy, security for their belongings, a place to wash and somewhere to sit with friends.

Alexander turned that simple list into a graceful and welcoming building on a reasonable budget.

The entry is a front porch, not just a door off the sidewalk. It's a small court off the street — so that people waiting to come in don't have to line up along the sidewalk. It has a roof for shade or protection from the rain.

Inside, the inn has the lobbies and offices needed to offer counseling. It's designed for single people referred by city or private welfare agencies. Families are cared for in other facilities. Residents will only stay at the inn a few days until they can be sent someplace to help them rehabilitate themselves.

Alexander takes advantage of details to avoid the dismal, sanitized look of most institutions. Wood beam ceilings in the day rooms, tiled ornament on the column capitals, and ornamental cutouts on the wood railings may seem simple. But to someone living in the inn, they show that someone cared about where they can stand or sit or look out or pass the time. For someone living on the streets, these simple pleasures are the most meaningful. They give them dignity.

But the Fairmont Hotel doesn't have to worry about the competition. There is nothing lavish about the dormitory rooms. They provide the simple luxury of privacy: Each bed will have its own small cubicle, window and curtained doorway. The design is so simple it's a wonder no one thought of it before. But it allows residents self-respect. It may be the first encouragement for many to rejoin the world, the architect says.

Porches and balconies will overlook two courtyards protected from the street — places to rest and talk.

Security for the residents' belongings will be provided by a storage building for shopping carts — a design solution well-crafted to the lifestyles of the clients.

The Julian Street Inn honors San Jose. It delivers good architecture to people who really need it. It tackles a problem plaguing cities nationwide with a fresh solution. It gives a world-renowned architect his first opportunity to design a public building in his home region. The design is intelligently planned, creatively crafted and above all humane. This is architecture at its very best. ■

Alan Hess is a Bay Area architect whose column appears every other week in Perspective.