

More than rooms at this inn

Architecture of Julian Street project shows care, dignity

STREET people aren't the only ones with a stake in the Julian Street Inn. San Jose's unique shelter for the homeless, now under construction, promises to set a challenging standard for humane, imaginative architecture in the South Bay. Its example could improve designs for everything from rest homes to high-rises.

It's innovative, thoughtful and purposeful — everything good architecture ought to be. It's also something of an experiment. As a result it ran into some financing and construction snags that put it behind schedule. The Redevelopment Agency board, which provided the land and some funding for the inn, should ensure the inn is completed as originally designed.

This is no ordinary shelter. Nothing like it has been built before. Berkeley architect Christopher Alexander's robust design matches a worthy purpose and an

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eloquent design — the rare chemistry that makes great architecture.

That's an unusual blend in architecture today, where glitz, flash and style dominate. The Julian Street Inn has no glitz. If anything, its inventive ornament and simple materials give it a rugged, unpolished elegance. It has character.

The inn, developed by Housing for Independent People, will provide 50 beds for homeless people as a first way station on their road to rehabilitation.

But keeping rain off its residents isn't the only

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There's more than shelter to this inn

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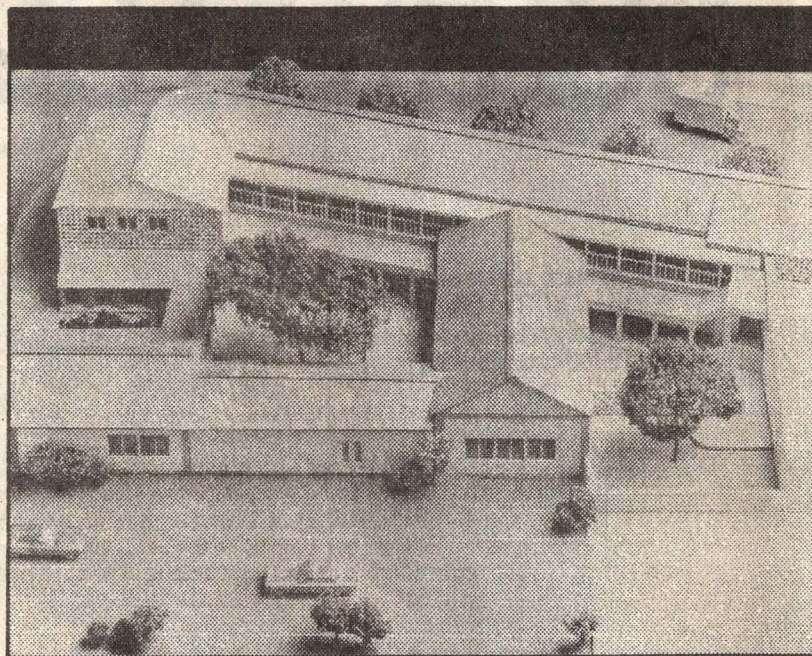
purpose of the design. This building is designed to help residents regain the dignity they need to get back in the mainstream. This purpose is echoed again and again, in sunny porches, in shaded waiting areas, in bits of color and craftsmanship throughout the design.

One of the most handsome elements of the building will be the four large concrete trusses that crown the dining hall. Instead of looking up at the bleak acoustic tile ceiling of an average shelter, diners will gaze at these delightful fan-shaped arabesques, half-Gothic, half-Victorian. Shelter or not, they add one of the most refreshing and original moments in any recent architecture.

These enchanting trusses aren't budget-busting frills. They're necessary structure. But Alexander compels them to do more than hold up the roof: They show residents that someone cares about bringing beauty to their temporary home.

Does a good building make good people? That debate still rages. Architecture alone can't reform anybody. But environments can be either dehumanizing or encouraging, depending on how they're designed. The inn couldn't afford private rooms for each resident, but Alexander and the developer decided not to line up all the beds in one big room like a dreary barracks. Instead they offered small, Pullman-like cubicles, with curtains for privacy.

It's a small detail. Anyone might have thought of it. But small details that add up are a hallmark of



A model of the innovative Julian Street Inn

Alexander's work. To someone who has been sleeping under an overpass for a week, it restores a small bit of dignity. That's a first step on the road back.

Those private cubicles are one piece of the design that might be sent back to the drawing board if the Redevelopment Agency board doesn't reaffirm its support.

If San Jose is lucky, the influence of this creative building won't stop at Julian Street.

The inn's design shows sympathy for the way people live that's easily adapted to other types of housing. What if housing for the elderly

was done this sensitively? Alexander creates moments of privacy and calm in a high-density development — qualities every faceless cracker-box apartment complex in Silicon Valley desperately needs. The communal dining room, laundry and other services easily could be transferred into livable low-cost housing alternatives.

What could a high-rise learn from the inn? We've seen too many acres of granite pasted like wallpaper onto too many 12-story walls around town. The inn's walls play hand-painted tiles off of ruggedly beautiful concrete block. They

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open up an imaginative aesthetic of color and texture that could enliven the entire city.

The quality of the inn is all in its design. This isn't the typical solution. It took vision to rethink the idea of a shelter for the homeless. It takes effort to see those ideas take shape in concrete and wood. It takes patience to refine a prototype like this.

Most architecture doesn't get this sort of attention. That's the problem with it. It's a rehash of shopworn ideas.

But whenever you see real architecture happening, it deserves all the encouragement you've got to make it a success. Ten years from now, all the extra time and effort the inn has taken will show in the quality. The delays will be forgotten. It'll be a landmark. San Jose will be proud of it.

But if the inn is rushed and compromised, that will be felt in the final result, too: one more wasted opportunity.

It's a matter of finishing an experiment in design that will bring dignity to those who need it most. Any experiment requires care and patience. This one deserves a chance to fulfill its promise. ■