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## ARCHITECTURE

### Affordable housing with style

#### EL PASEO STUDIOS IN S.J. FEATURE BOLD DESIGN, RECYCLED MATERIALS

The El Paseo Studios development confirms that good architecture is just as essential in outlying neighborhoods as in downtown San Jose.

El Paseo Studios, which opened Oct. 30, are single-room occupancy units. Geared to the low-income working public, the building offers 98 studio apartments with kitchenette, built-in closets and shelves, plus a bathroom, all in 285 square feet.



alanhess

On Campbell and Hamilton avenues in West San Jose, the building sits in the middle of one of Santa Clara County's many burgeoning satellite urban centers. With shopping, entertainment and businesses, they are taking over the traditional role of downtown. But few architects, developers or cities have begun to take these centers seriously.

Architect Jerome King, AIA, and developer First Community Housing make the right moves to establish the urban nature of this corner. The half-acre lot is an irregular, triangular shape, but King turns this quirk to his advantage by creating a prow-shaped building that anchors the site.

#### Unifies the neighborhood

The four-story structure becomes a bold gateway building between Westgate and El Paseo de Saratoga shopping centers, helping to unify the entire district. Ringing the roof is a hovering boomerang, upswept like the leading edge of an airplane wing. It is lifted high on a series of slender strut-like tube columns, slightly angled and ringing the building, that reinforce the dynamic nature of the building.

Beneath the soaring roofline, the block-like room wings are stacked like high-style cargo containers. They are faced with gray corrugated metal siding and peppered with geometric cut-outs and recessed windows -- a jazzy counterpoint to the sweeping cornice.

Inside, the rooms are stacked in two wings, on either side of central corridors, as in a hotel. Each corridor ends in a window, bringing in natural light and a view, instead of a fluorescent netherworld. The courtyard between the two wings features trellises, vines, trees, tables and awnings.

Central to First Community's goal is "green" architecture -- buildings that are sensitive to their impact on the environment. El Paseo Studios uses many recycled and non-toxic materials. Linoleum flooring, made of organic linseed oil and cork, is used instead of plastic vinyl, eliminating out-gassing -- that "new building smell" that under some conditions can make people ill. Furniture in the building's computer and meeting rooms is composite wheat board. Free bus passes are provided to all residents, and there's a bus stop outside the lobby at the corner.



Supporting First Community Housing in this project was easy because they understand the multiple policy objectives in play and understand that monthly utility bills, long-term structure durability, and occupant health and satisfaction are such an important part of the affordable housing dialogue. This project puts the capital A in Affordable, for affordable rents and affordable utility bills, showing everyone that green building in a residential context is not just a possibility but a probability for future residential design, both affordable and market rate.

Linda LeZotte, City Councilwoman  
District 1, City of San José

Although they are small, the units are efficiently and comfortably designed. Each has built-in cabinets and shelving. Each also has its own heating and air conditioning unit under the window, screened from exterior view by a railing made from recycled grocery bags.

San Jose architect Jerry King has produced consistently good work, including an earlier single-room occupancy building at Curtner and Canoas Gardens avenues. He is also responsible for the two curvilinear store pavilions on downtown San Jose's Paseo de San Antonio, designed with Thomas Aidala.

King and his design team of Mark Munoz, Greg Glass and Teo Speranza have grasped how to design for a suburban city district without resorting to high-rises or high density. Today this area is evolving. In the past, malls were set back from the street, bordering on broad parking lots. Westgate and El Paseo de Saratoga have undergone remodeling, which has moved the malls out toward the sidewalk with small commercial buildings (such as Chevy's restaurant) that now sit along Saratoga Avenue.

The El Paseo Studios building is an example of this natural evolution of suburban form. But most commercial architects and developers don't get it. The worst example is the cineplex at El Paseo de Saratoga. With its enormous entry, it has the right scale to be visible across the parking lot, but its architecture is prosaic and awkward -- an unintelligible Spanish-style, with harsh ornament and oppressive spaces.

#### Housing where it's needed

Non-profit First Community Housing performs an indispensable service by providing affordable housing for service sector workers who can't afford San Jose's preposterous real estate market. By choosing infill properties -- like El Paseo Studios' odd triangular site, which standard developers avoid -- First Community brings housing directly to where it's needed.

First Community, headed by Jeff Oberdorfer, a former San Jose Redevelopment Agency architect, has an admirable entrepreneurial commitment to good architecture and planning. The best qualities of architecture -- sustainable building methods, thoughtful problem-solving, techniques to strengthen the urban fabric -- are seen more often in these non-profit projects than in many for-profit developments. They have made a leap into tomorrow, into the way the valley will look in 10 or 20 years. The region will become denser. Satellite urban centers will become more important. The creators of El Paseo Studios have made a bold and intelligent attempt to define how that future might look.

The question now is: Will anyone follow their lead?

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