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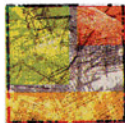
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## DATEBOOK

## A SOMA complex with a coffee shop and lively mural proves that affordable housing doesn't have to be ugly housing

There's an over-enrolled school of thought that claims affordable housing drags a neighborhood down. But the corner of Eighth and Howard streets in San Francisco shows how much brighter the truth can be.

Instead of hunkering behind the bleak walls and tight grates that adorn market-rate lofts nearby, the newest building on the corner opens up with a glassy ground floor containing a grocery store and po-



**John King**  
Place

litically correct cafe (soy protein frittata, anyone?). Upstairs are 88 small apartments — and a facade where the stucco around the metal bays doubles as a canvas for a four-story-high abstract mural that brings to mind a pastel circuit board.

Even the entrance has style: a small courtyard that announces its presence on Howard Street with a fence that's a collage of thick glass and rusted steel, while maples and

palms peek out from inside.

"We approached this like we were doing a house for Larry Ellison," says David Baker, the architect for the one-acre complex that also includes 74 family apartments framing a private terrace where children can play. "It's important when you do a big piece of the city that you make sure to enhance the environment. Future generations have to live with it."

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CHRIS HARDY / The Chronicle

**Radiating confidence:** SOMA Studios and Family Apartments.

E2 San Francisco Chronicle

## A housing complex that grabs the eye

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The prosaically titled SOMA Studios and Family Apartments opened more than a year ago; it was developed jointly by two nonprofit firms, Citizens Housing and the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation. All 162 units are reserved for residents earning less than 50 percent of the city's median income, which translates roughly to a \$45,000 income limit for a family of four.

While I liked the project from the start — needed housing and all that — it didn't really *grab* me until last fall, when the Harvest Urban Market opened on the ground floor and I happened to be walking up Howard Street from the west at dusk. The market glowed like an airy mirage; above it danced the mural's syncretic mix of orange and yellow, lime green and sky blue.

The vision would be startling anywhere. Here, in a drab stretch of the South of Market district where long blocks are flat and gray, it jumps out and shines — radiating confidence that a community can blossom.

The architecture is first-rate: Baker hit a nice balance between standing out and fitting in. While the upper walls are splashy, the steady march of bays above the sidewalk keeps things grounded. The retail space has a taut rhythm all its own, with a procession of thin concrete columns separated by 11-foot stretches of floor-to-ceiling glass.

As for the upper-floor studios along Eighth Street, the metal bays have standard rectangular windows — but the windows on the stucco walls are slender slits, some vertical and some horizontal. Residents get shafts of light in their sleeping areas; the rest of us see a snappy pattern of solids and voids that becomes an energetic backdrop for the mural.

The best thing about the complex, though, may be the tone that it sets. As this stretch of the South of

Market neighborhood adds housing units to a mix that already ranges from blue-collar firms to Sixth Street's skid row, SOMA Studios says that a civil community landscape can emerge.

That belief isn't reflected in the architecture of the lofts and condominiums that sprang up in the district in the late 1990s. Judging by appearances, most view their surroundings as hostile territory.

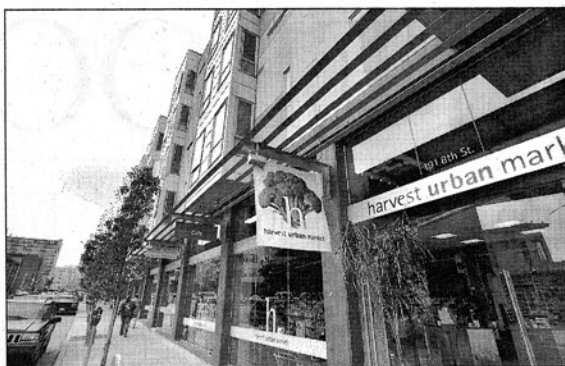
You see this in the lofts that are SOMA Studios' counterpart on the east corner of the block. The upper floors of the complex designed by Sternberg Benjamin Architects has a sharp industrial look emphasized by the corrugated steel framing the large bay windows. But the bottom 12 feet are deadly: walls painted a stark gray, with a metallic mesh protecting the windows. The security gates to three ground-floor units are so dense you can barely see through them. The only relief comes around the corner on Seventh Street, where the lobby has a glass wall framed by yellow tile.

There's no denying the corner at Seventh and Howard streets is rough. The dark paint along the sidewalk is a recent response to persistent graffiti, and architect Mitchell Benjamin told me this week that the developer added the grating to the windows after several break-ins. When I walked by on Monday, a drunk was passed out against one young street tree.

All that said, the lofts at Seventh and Howard — like so many of their counterparts — send a message to the neighborhood. And that message is: Stay back.

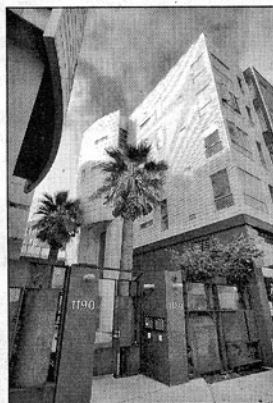
But an approach like this only makes things worse. Sidewalks lined with blank walls are sidewalks where you'd rather not be.

Down the block, by contrast, colorful banners announce the pres-



Photos by CHRIS HARDY / The Chronicle

**The housing complex** at Eighth and Howard streets is home to 88 small apartments — and the Harvest Urban Market.



**Palms** welcome visitors at the entrance of the complex.

ence of Urban Harvest Market and there are tables on the sidewalk outside the cafe. The plate-glass windows offer great views of organic corn and other produce. You always see people inside.

And that's just gravy on the main job at hand: providing shelter to people who couldn't necessarily afford decent housing on their own. There are 300 residents, including 22 families in three-bedroom apartments. The tenants can grab coffee

or take sweets back to their private plazas set atop the retail podium and a 66-car garage for tenants tucked behind it.

The reason that SOMA Studios and Apartments works so well isn't that it has a worthy purpose. It's that there was a spirited desire to make the corner come alive — from the striking steel-and-glass entryway designed by local metalworker Larissa Sands to that infectiously exuberant mural by Jane Martin.

"It's not the vision I have for all of San Francisco, certainly," laughs Martin, founder of Shift Design Studio. "But so much of the surrounding area is dingy that we wanted to add a fresh bright spot. It's an effort to give something back to the streetscape."

The effort paid off. If the neighborhood is lucky, other developments will follow suit.

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