

Jewish center illustrates challenges of infill

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The Taube Koret Campus for Jewish Life in southern Palo Alto has the look and feel of a lively urban village.

Senior housing looks out on a preschool play yard. Palm trees rise from bulbed planters 6 feet tall. Walkways link a gymnasium to a stylish auditorium, with classrooms along the way and glass bridges above, including one that offers a view of health buffs doing stretches.

The weave of functions and lives continues - until you leave the grounds. Then the 8.5-acre campus becomes daunting and monolithic, as well as the latest local example of how when swaths of a city are rebuilt, the outer edge is the toughest part of the job.

It's a dilemma faced not just by Palo Alto, where one-story Eichlers spread out a short walk away, but any community contemplating the redevelopment of a BART station or leftover industrial land - including such already dense cities as San Francisco and Oakland.

Flawed though it is, there's plenty to like in the ambitious transformation of the former Sun Microsystems headquarters at San Antonio and East Charleston roads on the southern edge of Palo Alto near Highway 101.

Instead of a 100-foot tower surrounded by parking lots - the condition until 2006 - a dozen or so buildings cluster around courtyards and landscaped paths. There's a preschool with 225 children, 193 units of senior housing and the 145,000-square-foot Oshman Family Jewish Community Center. The center includes a cultural hall for everything from concerts to weddings, and an expansive fitness center with indoor and outdoor pools.

Well-packed podium

All this fills a site that now has a 50-foot height limit, while toxic soil required the buildings to sit atop a parking podium. Nor does it stop with the 8.5-acre campus; the podium extends east and will hold 190 units of privately developed housing, an effort that helped fund the \$300 million campus.

The design by Steinberg Architects is straight-ahead modern, boxy and clean, except for a few gestures such as rooflines that flip upward to lead your eyes toward the heavens.

It's the overlap of activities that stands out, a welcome effort to bring the planning phrase "mixed use" to life.

"I want this place to be Silicon Valley today, but also have the characteristics of time-honored urban settings," said Rob Steinberg, who leads the San Jose firm. This includes the emphasis on the walkways between the different activities: "A big role of the buildings is to define the spaces, create outdoor rooms."

Olives along the way

Those "rooms" are the most beguiling element of the design. Landscape architecture firm CMG of San Francisco unrolled a gently surrealistic terrain that includes nine palms in those oversized bulbs, and olive trees in planters that could be abstract concrete hillocks.

None of this is apparent, though, unless a passer-by chooses to explore the campus on foot.

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Otherwise, you're confronted by such sights as the highly visible corner of San Antonio and East Charleston - a busy intersection where the back of the cultural hall displays windowless stucco in abundance. Despite punched angles and shifts in hue to add flair, this could be the side of an upscale cineplex.

The main pedestrian entrance is off Charleston, where the hall's glassed-in foyer faces the generous balconies of senior housing, creating a sort of canyon along the stairway from the sidewalk. But in a part of town with few pedestrians, most users will enter by parking beneath the fitness center.

Taube Koret's sense of detachment isn't unique.

The urban squeeze

For an abundance of good reasons, cities are steering growth toward land left behind by changing times. San Francisco's Mission Bay was a rail yard until the 1990s; Oakland's emerging Uptown district lay fallow for decades despite being one block from BART.

The problems lie where the new meets the old.

The northernmost block of Mission Bay along Townsend Street greets its neighbors with a grilled-off parking podium. The interior blocks of Uptown have an urbane feel despite hokey architecture, but there's no hint of life along busy 21st Street.

Infill is a smart way to grow as our cities mature. The challenge for architects and planners is to make it neighborly as well.

Public opening

The Oshman Family Jewish Community Center's grand opening for the public is on Oct. 18, with parking available at the campus' northern entrance on Fabian Way. For more information, go to www.paloaltojcc.org.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/10/12/BA651A399C.DTL>

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