

Buildings that catch S.F. spirit

► GEMS

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partner Nourse provided development expertise — while architect Scott Parker helped translate what Doroan calls “my puppy” into a formal design. The mix of buyers so far include painters, graphic designers, a lithographer and a small architecture firm.

Campuslike feel aside, there’s also a conscious effort to connect to the neighborhood. One studio along Folsom is the new home of Youth Speaks, a nonprofit that offers after-school arts programs to local teens. The space also will house evening events organized by the City Lights Foundation.

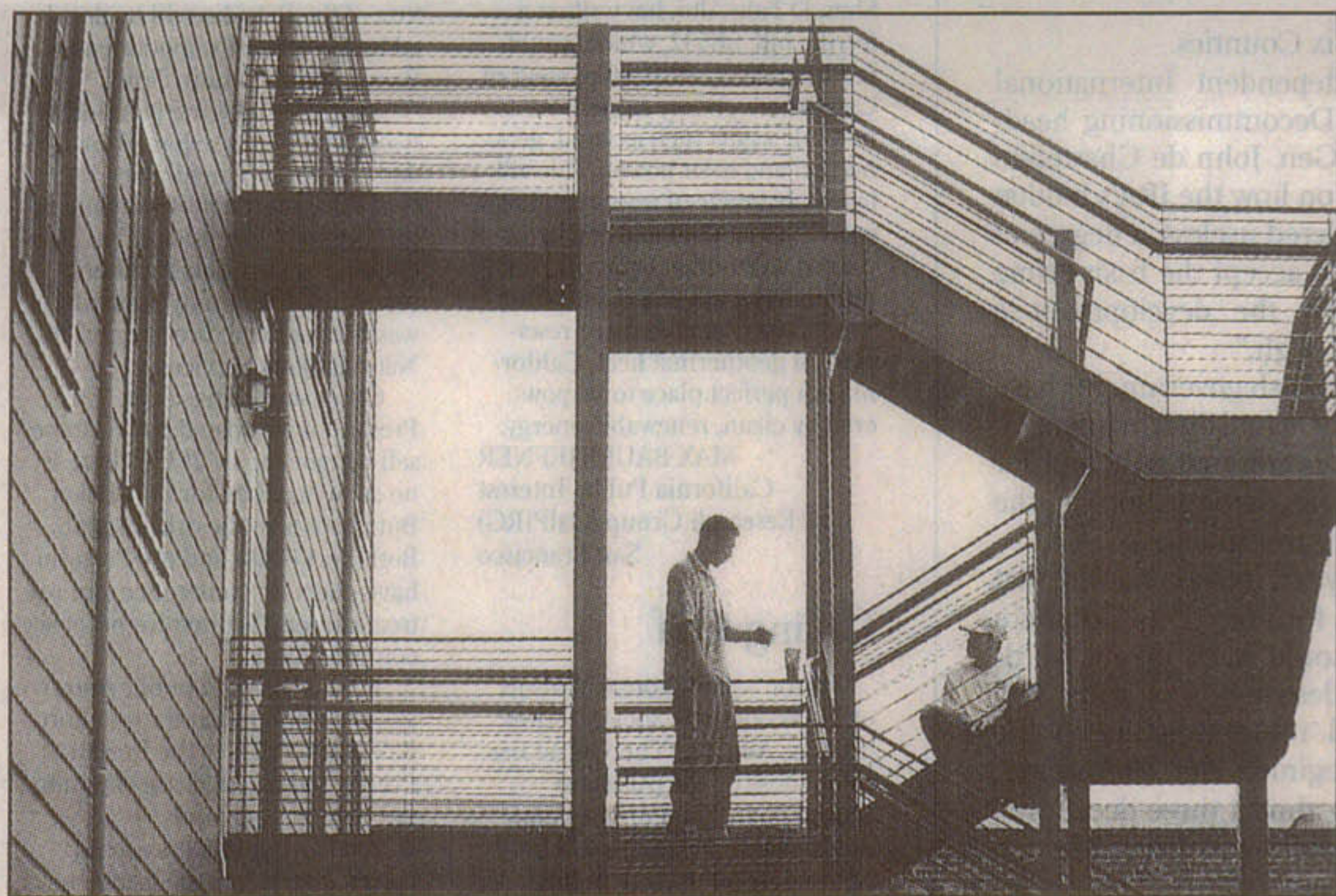
“When Jillien first called us, she was interested in having a bookstore there,” says Nancy Peters, one of the owners of the legendary North Beach bookstore. “It was the wrong time for us to try something so ambitious, but we loved the idea of City Lights being involved in the Mission.”

Things aren’t nearly so complex at a new building on Stockton Street called Baymark on Nob Hill. Developer Awbrey bought a piece of land approved for condominiums near the Ritz and the California Street cable car line, then decided to try and live up to his surroundings.

“I figured I’d never have another chance to build in a location like this,” says Awbrey, whose prior projects are in the South Bay. “I wanted to do something dramatic.”

Working with designer Janet King, Awbrey created a 10-unit building that, he says with pride, “most people don’t seem to realize is brand new.” The six-story structure has a limestone-covered base, Corinthian columns framing the entrance and elaborate molding around the central windows that mark each floor’s lobby. Outside those windows: railings copied from an 18th century Parisian gate.

Innovative, it’s not — the innards of the railings are fiberglass, for instance. The moldings and columns are precast concrete. The limestone is “reconstituted,” which means that you apply water



Photos by MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

Tenants talked on the open staircase inside the courtyard at the Allied Box Factory on Folsom Street.

to pulverized stone and apply the result like stucco.

The purist would dismiss all this as a charade, mimicry that’s a century out of date. But part of a city’s identity comes from the images that people carry in their minds — and Awbrey’s vision captures the idea of Nob Hill as a genteel place apart, a district that’s spiritually as well as topographically above the fray.

Even if this is mimicry, the attention to detail is remarkable. One example is the limestone-coated base. The limestone was slathered on an inch thick, then cut into precisely with handsaws to give the appearance of rows of distinct blocks.

“Boy, was it dusty,” Awbrey recalls. “Took two weeks to do it.”

To see what could have happened instead, stroll two blocks to Bush Street, where the Orchard Hotel opened last fall. That new inn has bay windows and other “old” touches — but it’s basically a drab stucco box in three shades of beige. High school stage sets have more personality.

Awbrey happily cops to the fact that his design would make a fan of modern architecture cringe: “If something’s tried and true, why put out there something different that people will hate?”

Each project took longer than expected. Each relied on improvisation: Doroan reacts to a compliment of the funky loft corridors by explaining how “Dan said we had ‘X’ amount of money to finish the floor, so I got construction-



Gabe Crane hauled a box up to the studio that is the new home of Youth Speaks, which offers after-school arts programs to local teens.

grade plywood and experimented with stains and patterns.”

Each project also arrived as the housing market started its dive. At what’s now called the Box Factory, half the units remain on the market at prices ranging from \$350,000 to \$750,000. The four available Baymark units include a \$2.8 million penthouse.

In other words, Awbrey and

Nourse and Doroan took risks — risks that still may haunt them. But for the rest of us, who walk down a street or take in a view, San Francisco’s tapestry of buildings now is bit richer. And that richness helps keep San Francisco distinct.

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