

Here's a twist: real buildings have curves

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What a difference a curve makes.

No radical swing, either, just a gracious pivot inward. But when the new commercial building on Berkeley's Solano Avenue slides in that unexpected direction, it makes the jump from well-mannered to memorable.

It also offers visual proof that small touches can make a big difference architecturally -- especially when new buildings are dropped into established neighborhoods.

Too many developers ignore this; the easy out is to mimic what's around you, add a few spray-painted foam columns and call it a day. But with care and thought and a sly bit of verve, a building can play by the rules and still be engaging -- on its own terms.

Certainly that's the case at the corner of Solano Avenue and Colusa Street. A new two-story structure there with storefronts on the ground floor and offices up above isn't quite finished, but it has already settled nicely into place.

That's no easy task, since Solano is one of those neighborhoods that local residents and self-defined regulars treat as their own private domain. It has an old-fashioned feel and a few old-fashioned tenants -- two bookstores, an independent movie house, the incredibly helpful Oaks Jeweler -- though it also has a growing number of chains (Starbucks! Jamba Juice!) and a mix of buildings that, well, the closer you look the more motley they get.

The new 1820 Solano by Berkeley developer Avi Nevo arrives on the scene with a design that at first seems respectful to a fault. The ground floor is clad in terra-cotta tiles; the offices above are framed in stucco that's peach in some areas and tan in others. Two square bays anchor either end of the structure, but the facade in between turns smoothly from Colusa onto Solano.

Except -- and it takes several close looks to figure out what's going on -- the building turns at a sharper angle than you'd expect. The building

starts flush with the sidewalk at Colusa, but it fades back as it reaches the corner and keeps veering inward. By the time it reaches the western bay on Solano, three steps above the sidewalk is a pie slice-shaped sliver of open space.

So what? So this. A building that by all rights should be static, melding into the background, takes on a life of its own.

Once it has your attention, 1820 Solano has other tricks up its sleeve. Some terra-cotta tiles are smooth, some are sandy to the touch, and they're cut in three different sizes. The upper floor's staid stucco is brought to an emphatic end by a stylish metal cornice.

According to architect David Trachtenberg, the pivot was born of necessity. An underground parking garage doubles as the building's foundation, but Solano Avenue drops 4 feet as it heads west. Which left a few clumsy options -- individual steps up to each storefront, for instance -- or one elegant one.

"It follows neither the curb nor the property line," says Trachtenberg, who worked on 1820 Solano with fellow architect Robert Nishimori. "It has its own logic."

The project is still a work in progress. Planters will arrive soon for colorful displays outside the storefronts, and the one tenant signed so far couldn't be better: a new outpost of north Oakland's wonderful La Farine bakery, which should bring just the comfortable bustle that the south side of Solano needs.

"I see this as your basic repair-the-urban-fabric kind of project," says Trachtenberg. But how refreshing to see something done in such a straightforward manner -- and with such ingenuity.

Too many new buildings behave as if they're stage sets, with no design goal except to be innocuous. The initial impact is harmless; the long-term impact can be deadening -- as if you're draping a place in wet blankets.

This doesn't mean every new building should strive for Frank Gehry-like flamboyance. But 1820 Solano shows that even a hint of creativity pays lasting dividends.

All you need is a curve.