

Improved Homes for 2 Bay Area Public Broadcasters

By Allan Temko
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Public broadcasting and good architecture usually don't mix, but KQED in San Francisco and KPFA in Berkeley have moved into new homes that are tremendous improvements over the cramped, makeshift — even squalid — premises where they somehow managed to put programs on the air for 40 years.

Neither of the new stations is an architectural marvel, except to

ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

its overjoyed occupants. But each in its own way is a very decent job, done on a budget that was adequate though hardly extravagant.

KQED, an expanding conglomerate which includes local PBS TV Channel 9, a radio station (KQED FM-88.5), the thriving glossy magazine San Francisco Focus, and a large marketing and fund-raising department, had long outgrown its

warren of improvised structures along 8th Street.

Remarkably Spacious

Now KQED enjoys a \$25 million highly organized "professional" environment specifically tailored to its needs. The new centralized headquarters, carved out of a block-long South-of-Market warehouse at 2601 Mariposa Street, is

high-ceilinged and remarkably spacious, if a little dull.

The blank exterior has been subtly but nicely enriched with a new entrance and changed window shapes, and otherwise given a dignified coat of vandal-resistant beige and gray paint.

The interior, on the other hand, has been gutted and rebuilt to standards close to those of the commercial networks, not only in the big corporate office spaces but

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Offices a marvel to overjoyed occupants

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in the state-of-the-art production facilities.

The main TV studio, at 33 feet high, can accommodate virtually any programs KQED chooses to originate, if it ever ends its almost total dependence on other PBS stations and the BBC.

Tiny by comparison with this behemoth of electronic culture, KPFA (FM-94.1) is a radio station only, radically populist in approach and long inured to poverty in upstairs rooms on Shattuck Avenue.

To the incredulity of the staff and numerous volunteers, it is now ensconced in a spirited little anti-Establishment temple. Substantially financed by private foundations and rich individual lefties (but, unlike KQED, by choice without a dime from business corporations), it cost \$2.5 million to build from the ground up, just north of University Avenue at 1929 Martin Luther King Jr. Way.

Dissimilar in Outlook

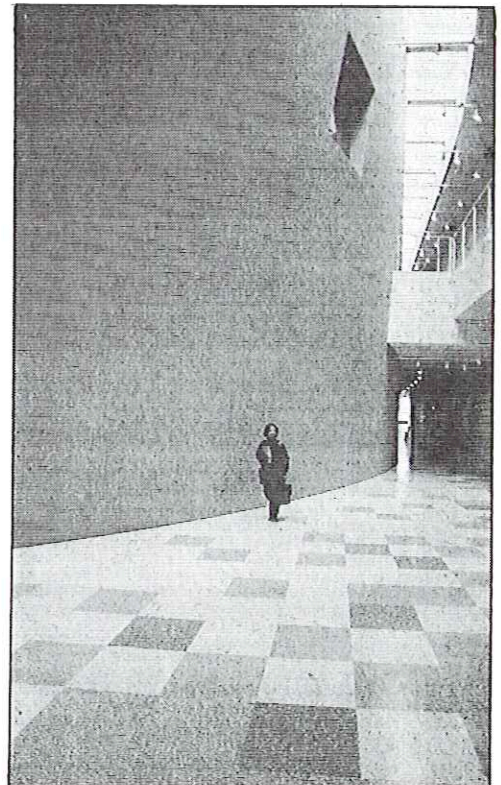
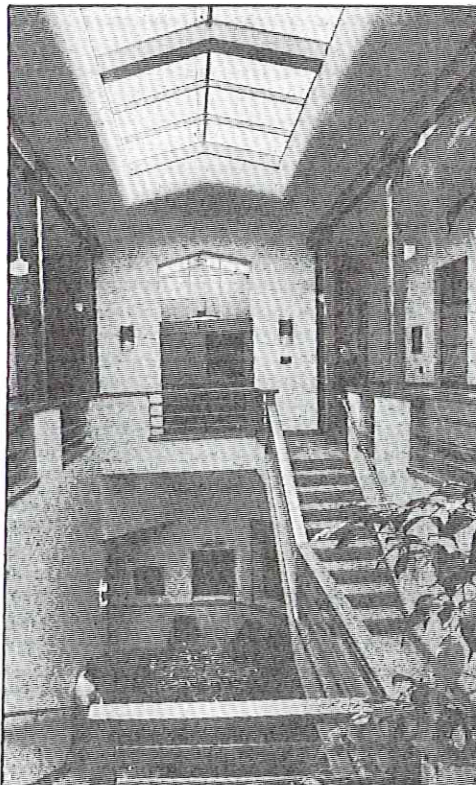
Architecture, of course, cannot fail to express the differences between these operations, which are as dissimilar in outlook as in size.

There is no question which got the more inspired design. KPFA, smaller and poorer, was able to satisfy its relatively modest needs in a charming building by the Berkeley firm of Denny Abrams and Richard Milliken. The project designer was young David Trachtenberg, then on their staff, who has since opened his own office.

Apart from a gabled, half-classical facade that needn't be taken seriously, although its retrograde historicism seems at odds with the station's avowed "progressive" ideals, the rest of the building turns out to be a creditable piece of regionalist Modern architecture, meant for the balmy Bay Area.



The new KQED building, carved out of a South of Market warehouse at 2601 Mariposa Street



PHOTOS BY FREDERIC LARSON/THE CHRONICLE

A view of the atrium at KPFA (left), and the high-ceilinged and spacious interior of KQED

The interior is almost residential in scale, intimately organized around a two-story atrium sporting a retractable skylight.

This lofty hall, 30 feet high, can thus be opened to fresh air, as well as to an elating view of the station's transmission tower, which lifts 50 feet higher above the roof as a rational technological sculpture.

Around the perimeter of the atrium on the upper level are a variety of offices and meeting rooms, which are usually open in a welcoming way. The lower level consists largely of broadcasting studios and control rooms that are of necessity closed. They are incomparably superior to KPFA's previous facilities, but there is no attempt to achieve technical perfection at the expense of human vagaries.

People with plenty of hair — their T-shirts emblazoned with uplifting slogans — seem always to be milling about, sometimes munching bagels from a table in the entrance hall set with high-calorie goodies.

Berkeleyan Flavor

So there is a wonderful friendliness about this tabernacle of funky left-wing politics, obscure ethnic music, and bellicose feminism of a distinct Berkeleyan flavor.

Although the staff made an effort at serious housekeeping in the beginning, they have since relaxed into a cheery bohemianism. Cables are liable to be strung over ceiling lighting fixtures, which is a no-no, and after a few months the place has a very lived-in look, rather like a commune.

But the building is designed to take hard use. The exposed structure is simply framed in fir. The colors are warm. The concrete floor is stained a soft amber. The Sheetrock walls are painted a *faux* terra cotta, which recalls the deeper earth colors of the facade outside that are deftly set off by green tile.

So KPFA is a modest instant landmark, unprepossessing but with a clear identity on a nondescript street. KQED, on the other hand, hardly stands out in its industrial surrounding. Originally built in 1986 as a bare-bones "condo" warehouse, but never used before it was purchased by KQED, the building fronts calmly on a muni trolley-bus storage yard across the street, which at long last is being fenced to ward off the Michelangelos of the nocturnal graffiti gangs.

Yet KQED also has an unmistakable civic presence. An Art Deco-ish fin projecting above the newly glassed-in entrance carries its name, but that sign is weak compared to the overall mass of this once-featureless block of a building which has been enlivened by new rows of high and low windows. Fitted flush to the concrete walls, the sensitively proportioned big panes of glass set up a fine geometric rhythm along the side elevations.

Chilling Effect

One only wishes that there had been some more money to do the interior with the same touch of class. In spite of generous contributions by corporations, foundations, and individuals — most notably Madeleine Haas Russell — there is a somewhat chilling effect in the spartan entry.

That is partly because of the need for security in a neighborhood that can be rough, but also because of inexpensive materials that could look all right in a small building like KPFA's. But they simply look cheap in a large structure that because of its very bulk can not escape a certain monumentality.

In fact, the detailing verges on parsimony. And as soon as one ascends to the main floor by elevator (there is no proper staircase to go up one story to the main floor), the bleakness of the two-story main hall comes as a decided shock.

The space measures no less than 30 feet high to its skylight, and more than 150 long, but it seems oddly pinched. That's because the huge curving wall on the right, painted a strange yellow, bears a startling resemblance to the hull of a ship that seems to have crashed through the outside wall and come to rest when it bumped into the end of the hall.

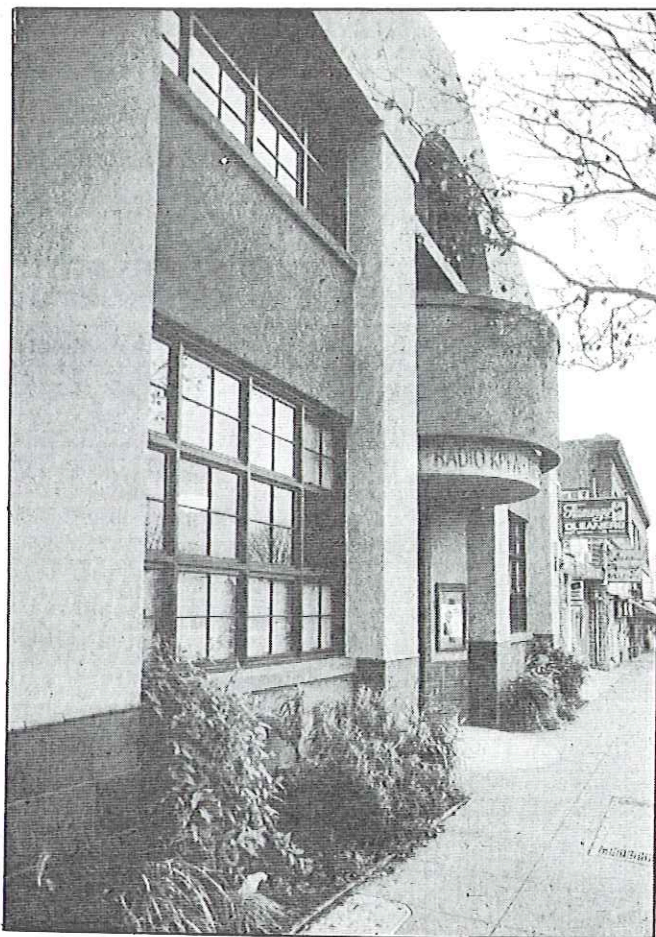
Someone wickedly called this "the Titanic School of Architecture," and it is passing curious what the architects, Gensler & Associates, were thinking about when they concocted such an enormous surface, which is broken only once, close to the bow, by the window of the office of KQED's chief Tony Tiano.

Even Tiano at his captain's post of an ill-furnished office, however, has a view only of a bare and usually unpeopled space, where chairs and tables and plants are brought in only for parties and special occasions. Perhaps fortunately, no one else on the staff has an office directly overlooking this marine disaster, with its expanse of ugly vinyl flooring in several shades of speckled gray.

No Conviction

It occurred to me that the architects had dimly recalled great curving walls of famous buildings, possibly the magnificent convex and concave surfaces of Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp. But at KQED there is no conviction behind the gesture, no joy in the space, no indications that we are in the heart of a vast communications enterprise, until we step into the studios on the left, or go up the stairs straight ahead to enter the upper level of well-lighted office spaces that are an exhilarating 19 feet from floor to floor.

Here the Gensler team, headed by Charles Kridler, Kevin Schaeffer, Robert Wheatley and John Scouffas, achieved something of the comfort and lucid organization of the sleeker commercial premises that the firm created elsewhere in the city for KPIX (Channel 5) and KGO (Channel 7).



Station KPFA's new building has a distinct Berkeley flavor

Incidentally, the Gensler organization, headed by M. Arthur Gensler, has been a conspicuous benefactor of KQED over the years, sponsoring the "Great Performances" series and making a major pro bono contribution to the design of the new headquarters.

Yet the results lack pizzazz. Perhaps the fault lies somewhere between the architecture and the mood of KQED's top management, for I have rarely seen drier spaces for so-called creative people this side of engineering firms.

Everything is done correctly, to be sure. The high and low windows, so handsome on the exterior, here make excellent sense by breaking up the long walls and varying the quality of light. The main spaces are filled with staff workstations. Glassed-in offices for managers and other types who need privacy are farthest from the windows, along the inner walls.

But the fun of KPFA — or even of KQED before Tiano took over — seems to have evaporated. There is a disturbing thought, indeed, that at KQED — as federal support for public broadcasting diminishes — the distance between commercial and noncommercial broadcasting is narrowing.

Voyage Under Way

In fairness to KQED, the staff only moved in a month or so ago, and has hardly had the chance to give the place a less impersonal quality. There are few plants, let alone art on the walls. The shake-

down cruise, to borrow another nautical term, has just begun. But the voyage is under way.

Something like 250 people are putting on TV and radio programs, producing a profitable (tax-exempt) magazine, raising funds, arranging educational activities for school children, and in a healthy change even originating a new local program — the talk show "Q."

How well they do depends partly on the performance of the building — so large that there are expanses of unoccupied space — which offers extraordinary opportunities. For the moment, though, the perspective from Tiano's isolated office is that of an unending McNeil-Lehrer show.