

Qualified Praise for Solano Avenue Complex

By JOHN KENYON *Special to the Planet* (11-04-03)

In the last two or three years, the popular top end of Solano Avenue has seen noticeable improvement. The Oaks Theater, for ages just a marquee and a pylon, has stripped off its upper-level disguise of ‘mansard roofs’ to reveal a substantial office wing with matching Moorish windows. Round the corner on Colusa (heading north), an old Masonic temple, attractively remodeled as luxury condos, faces across the avenue to the sprawling new Thousand Oaks School, architecturally uninspired but lavishly landscaped and neighborhood-friendly.

Now, finally, after 18 months of tedious-to-watch construction, a striking new building has replaced the abandoned Standard station on the corner of Solano and Colusa across from Andronico’s ‘Park and Shop.’ It is an ambitious 18,545-square-foot complex of shops and offices designed for developer Ari Nevo by the local firm Trachtenberg Architects.

This generous corner site has allowed a more three-dimensionally complete building than most past infill development along Solano, and the architects have taken full advantage.

Essentially, they have created a long commercial frontage of offices-over-shops, bent around the corner in a bold curve and terminated with a strong vertical features—on Colusa, the office entrance; on Solano, on the westerly end, a jaunty little tower. Already decidedly horizontal, the long pedestrian frontage has been further dramatized by facing the shop level with ceramic tile and the upper (office) level with stucco.

Apparently, a limited budget dictated this half-tiling solution, but I personally see it as a blessing. My only reservation is about not totally tiling the little westerly tower to make a more dramatic statement at this important end. As for the handsome tiles themselves, they deserve closer inspection. Notice the interplay of the big square ones (smooth) and varying bands of narrow (rough), and particularly the elegant sill-like top. This subtly varied patterning, along with the positively glowing terra-cotta color, gives the project a level of quality beyond most speculative developments. It almost deserves to be a public building for a more enlightened time.

But before going overboard with joy at the appearance of real architecture on this previously suburban gas station corner, let's look at the new project's weaker side—its relationship to the pleasant residential district next door.

Not many years ago, some brave developer built a decently designed three-story block of condos immediately adjacent to the still-thriving Standard station, evoking some sardonic neighborhood comments. From Gray's Books, of hallowed memory: "Who'd buy an apartment right next to that gas station, for Gods' sake?," forgetting that some units had actual Bay views from their back decks while living merely yards away from bookstores and coffee shops.

Now the north side windows of those same pleasant condos face the blank "utility" wall of retail stores. The architects have at least carried the tiled Colusa frontage around the corner a few feet, and in an inspired move planted a bamboo hedge behind their new sideyard fence. But overall, we are still stuck here with the all-too-common brutal collision of residential and commercial.

No such collusion occurs at the new building's westerly end, where the windowless side of the big end store overlooks the parking lot of Wells Fargo. Architecturally, this is the most dramatic aspect of the design. The big blank wall projects out beyond the corner tower, relieved by a friendly-looking roof terrace. It's all very impressive, but distressingly severe—for in a project noticeably short on street trees, this should be a great wall of greenery. Suitable flowering vines could have been trained onto a wall-sized trellis to create the grandest display of trumpetvine or bougainvillea in North Berkeley.

But the most puzzling feature in Trachtenberg's design is the projecting rail that runs around most of the building just below the flat roof. This assemblage of steel outriggers and mesh has a strangely arbitrary quality. A bit lower, and it could have been a glare-reducing canopy over the office windows. A bit higher, and it would be an updated "Maybeckian" overhang, effectively masking the roof's undistinguished metal edge. Its main function would seem to be the casting of dramatic shadows on the stucco below, but this hardly works on the Solano frontage, which, inconveniently, faces north! Most irritating is the way this substitute classical cornice continues relentlessly across the projecting frontage of the office entrance on Colusa, reducing the effectiveness of that simple dignified facade, while failing to

turn the corner at the garage end. Some Design Review!

This anomaly somewhat takes the edge off the building's truly impressive design achievement, which is the brilliantly handled relationship between twelve modest-sized office windows and five different shop-front conditions below, including rounding the novel but problematic corner. Stand across Solano and give it a hard look. You will find that all these openings are either centered, like the door and window, on the "corner" itself, or line up at the critical edges. Notice also how elegantly the shop-windows are recessed into the tiled wall and the delightful rhythms set up by the little clerestories (small windows) above the shade-giving canopies.

Other masterful touches deserve listing: The friendly pivot-opening office windows and that remarkable dark gray-green trim used throughout, or the translucent panels in the big garage door that make it part of the night lighting; yet despite all the professional skill, this moment in time as uninhabited architecture is the building's most severe test.

To many, it is still an intruder, but when four lively retail businesses and their customers occupy the lower floor, and the offices show signs of life, attention will shift away from static design to human activity. Apparently, the much-admired French bakery La Farine will move in after Christmas, and that's a promising start. Add to it that every month that slips by, the three new street trees on Colusa—Tristanias that grow to about 25 feet—will gradually mask and soften the less lively stretch of the public frontage.

In the context of Berkeley's conservative mindset about new architecture, the Trachtenberg building can be called "politically correct." It is politely contextual. The signature rounded corner is a traditional feature of Solano Avenue, and occurs, for instance, at Frishman's Berkeley Bakery at Peralta, the many-arched white-painted building at Modoc, and at many other intersections.

This streamlined motif, along with the building's distinct horizontality and quite old-fashioned windows, make it, essentially, a Moderne building that could well have been erected, visually at least, in the 1930s. The massive steel-framing inside could then be seen as Seismic Retrofit! It makes one long (me anyway!) for one of those less dignified metal-clad "workshop" buildings on Hollis, in barbarous Emeryville.

