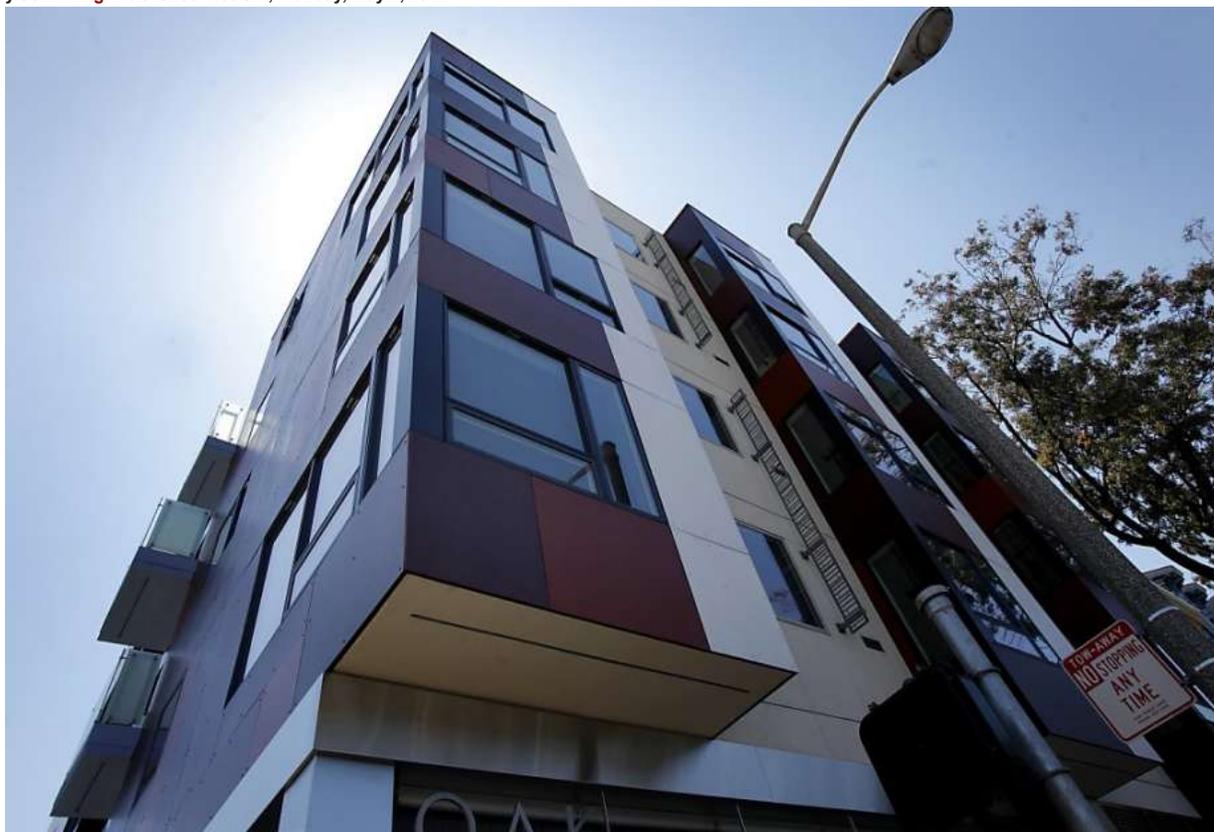


## Octavia Court apartments a milestone for area

By **John King** Published 4:00 am, Monday, May 2, 2011



A low income housing complex at the corner of Oak and Octavia Streets in San Francisco, Calif., features fogged glass windows, a dappled red facade and blue tiles at street level.

Here are two reasons to celebrate Octavia Court, the 16-unit apartment building that opened last month at Octavia Boulevard and Oak Street in San Francisco.

The first is the handsome snap of the building itself, an oasis for developmentally disabled adults that meets the high standard of architectural quality set by other affordable-housing projects in the Bay Area.

The other is that it signals the start of the final phase of Octavia Boulevard's transformation from a shadowy path beneath a freeway to the centerpiece of Hayes Valley, one of the city's most intriguing neighborhoods.

"It feels like things are turning a corner," says Douglas Burnham, an architect who has been working on projects along Octavia since 2005 and finally has one under construction, an unorthodox set of customized shipping crates to be used by vendors where the boulevard meets Hayes Street.

Six crates are now at his site. Two contain an ice cream shop called Smitten that just opened to long lines. Two contain space for Ritual Roasters, a coffee vendor that should open this month. The two others hide less-glamorous details, like waste bins.

By fall there should be two dozen crates in all, filled with everything from local art to the service counters of a beer garden. But Burnham calls this effort Proxy for a reason: He considers it "temporary inhabitation" of land that someday will contain housing.

That change is fine with Burnham, who designed mixed-use buildings for a pair of blocks along the boulevard that are just 16 feet wide. The plans were approved in 2008, but then the economy changed.

In other neighborhoods, the recession meant fenced-off lots. Octavia's story is different. There's a temporary farm on one large block, community gardens on two small ones and now Proxy. All with local blessings.

"More than any neighborhood I know, this one wants to make positive things happen," Burnham says.

No kidding.

The boulevard exists because neighborhood activists rallied in the 1990s to have the city tear down the elevated freeway that cut above the space for 40 years, destabilizing the blocks around it in the process.

The outcome of the struggle? The freeway came down and a neighborhood-healing boulevard took form, complete with shrubs and trees in abundance. From the start, though, plans also made room for housing along the way - at all price levels. If the vanished freeway made gentrification inevitable, housing for less-advantaged populations could be created as well.

That's why it's a nice twist that Octavia Court arrives first on the scene.

The five-story structure was designed by Ellipsis A+D and Ignition Architecture, and it isn't designed to turn heads. The look is modern, with right-angled bays and a flat roof topped by angled rows of solar panels.

What makes it shine is the care that went into the details. The bays are accented with wood-patterned resin panels that alternate among four shades of reddish-brown. The wall along the sidewalk is clad in blue ceramic tiles that mix textures and hues.

Even the metal screen that hides open-air corridors on the upper floors has panache; it has the sheen of a woven cloak, not an industrial grate.

"We were striving for a sense of patterning and quilting, and this was a beautiful canvas to work with," said Ignition's Veronica Hinkley Reck of the design team's approach after it was selected in 2008 by developer West Bay Housing and the San Francisco Redevelopment Authority.

Not every move comes off. To set off the staggered window pattern of the bays, for instance, the architects shifted to white resin panels. Given the amount of boulevard-bound traffic that backs up on Oak Street, we'll see how long they stay white.

What's important is that this is a building that not only does good but also looks good. It sets a tone of quality that city planners should insist on when for-profit housing developers return to the boulevard.

"The difference between market-rate and affordable housing developers is that the latter are looking for durability and life-cycle costs," said Ellipses' Greg Klosowski. "They're holding onto this property. They want materials that will last."

People who care about Hayes Valley have had the same sort of goal all along. They're open to creativity and change - and as Proxy and Octavia Court show, that openness is paying off.

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