

Hotel Via a modest winner near ballpark

Newest King Street structure has details that shine

For all the attention focused on flashy towers and big-name museums, it's the cumulative success or failure of more modest buildings that matter most to our cities in terms of design.

The misfits are formulaic, if not inept or downright rude. The good ones bring small but lasting pleasures.

JOHN KING
Place

Which brings us to San Francisco's Hotel Via, a 12-story structure that opened last week on King Street across from AT&T Park. The architecture is straightforward but

satisfying, with details that shine and nothing that makes you wince when you take a closer look. And if that sounds like faint praise, then you don't know how tough it can be to build some types of buildings in some parts of San Francisco. The newcomer sits on the

King continues on D5



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Sunscreens above each window send shadows across the facades of the Hotel Via in the South End Historic District.

Playground arson has kids shut out

Community rallies after vandals torch beloved S.F. children's spot

By Alison Graham

Climbing to the top of a hill in Golden Gate Park, 4-year-old Hugh Horner grabbed a piece of cardboard and rode it to the bottom of a concrete slide, coming to a stop in front of a pile of melted plastic and black ash.

The playground in front of him was sectioned off with yellow caution tape and a metal barricade, which he hoisted himself up on to peer through its bars.

The top of the green plastic slide was melted, almost a fourth of it on the ground in a hardened puddle. The smell of burned plastic still hung in the air of Koret Children's Quarter, which many believe is the oldest public playground in the nation.

"Why would someone do that?" he asked his mom, Megan, who was standing next to him.

"I don't know," she said.

The playground's platforms were burned black and hanging askew from the rest of the structure.

Police and firefighters responded to a fire just after midnight Sunday at the playground near the southeast corner of San Francisco's urban oasis. The incident is still under investigation but is believed to have been the act of vandals. No arrests have been made.

The San Francisco Recreation and Park Department estimates the damage could total up to \$1 million. Officials are waiting for a more thorough examination of the destruction before setting a timeline for repairs.

The playground was first opened in 1888 as the Sharon Quarters for Children. It underwent a major \$3.8 million renovation in 2007 and reopened as the Koret

Playground continues on D7



Photos by Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Above: A father and son look at the play structure, apparently burned by vandalism, from the other side of a barricade.

Left: A slide is now a tangle of twisted plastic after the Golden Gate Park fire.

"This will help us repair our wonderful playground."

Mayor Ed Lee, after preschoolers donate lemonade-stand proceeds



Baby falcons on S.F.'s PG&E building given new jewelry

By Alison Graham

With scratched and bleeding hands, Glenn Stewart picked up a 25-day-old peregrine falcon on Thursday and attached a small band around its leg. The bird squawked and squealed as its parents violently circled their nest — atop a high-rise in downtown San Francisco.

After Stewart, director of the Predatory Bird Research Group at UC Santa Cruz, attached bands to the baby falcons' two siblings, he stood up and the little birds fell silent. A fluffy, white feather stuck out of a wound on his hand.

The three birds hatched earlier this month outside the 33rd floor of the 34-story Pacific Gas & Electric Building at 77 Beale St., and the bands are marked with numbers that will allow researchers to follow each falcon's movements and nesting patterns.

The falcons, one male and two females, are part of a long legacy of birds hatched and raised atop the PG&E building and on other

Birds continues on D3

Ex-AC Transit finance chief convicted of embezzlement

By Sarah Ravani

The former chief financial officer of AC Transit was convicted of embezzling more than \$500,000 from nonprofit groups affiliated with a prominent Oakland church.

Lewis Clinton was convicted Tuesday by an Alameda County Superior Court jury on seven charges, including grand theft, money laundering and tax evasion.

During a three-week trial, prosecutors said the 60-year-old Clinton stole \$590,000 from the Allen Temple Baptist Church in East Oakland from 2007 to 2013, while he was the CFO of AC Transit.

Clinton spent the pilfered money on house loans, travel, car expenses, his children's private school tuition, a golf club membership and other personal expenditures, according to prosecutors.

After the jury announced its verdict, Judge Scott Patton ordered that Clinton be immediately taken into custody and held without bail at the Santa Rita Jail in Dublin.

Conviction continues on D4

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BAY AREA

New Hotel Via a modest winner near AT&T Park

King from page D1

edge of the South End Historic District, an area defined by workhorse industrial buildings from the early 1900s. To its east is the Garcia and Maggini Warehouse, built in 1913 and a city landmark. To the west, across a snug alley, three stocky 21st century buildings ape the red-brick tone of the district and the Giants' ballpark, with varying degrees of success.

The architectural setting brings one set of constraints. The hotel function brings another: Operators want packed-in efficiency from floor to floor, maximizing the number of rooms and minimizing any quirks that might trim the profit margins.

Despite all this, Hotel Via manages to enrich its surroundings while adding fresh twists.

The 159-room hotel is clad mainly in tiles of earthy terra-cotta and topped by a narrow crown above the corner where King meets the private alley. The entrance is on the alleyway. Along King Street, strollers pass a hotel bar with 19-foot glass walls.

Those last two touches enliven the pedestrian scene, even if you aren't paying \$15 for a "signature cocktail" or ducking down the alley to check in at the "beyond boutique" hotel, where room rates start at \$199. Commotion on game days aside, the long block of

King between Second and Third streets can be a plod. This brings a shot of syncopation to the slow rhythm.

There's also more to the facade than thin-skinned terra-cotta. Metal sunscreens above each window send angular shadows slicing across the facades on clear days. On the alley, the thick bay that holds the elevators is clad in white metal and punctuated by deep windows, a visual anchor that adds heft to the smooth tiles on either side.

The design is by Stanton Architecture, which makes a specialty of urban hotels. Its most recent was the underwhelming disheartening Hampton Inn on Mission Street, a 15-story mid-block tower that looks like a zoning envelope brought to life.

But at Hotel Via, Stanton worked with a veteran local developer and builder, David O'Keefe, who emigrated here with his brother from Ireland several decades ago and purchased the King Street site in 2006. His firm plans to hold onto the property. The O'Keefes also went the independent hotel route rather than hand off control to the big boys.

Pride of ownership is involved.

That pride translates into such functional flourishes as how the hotel handles its ventilation screens and gas meter.

In the former, the air



Photos by Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle



The 159-room hotel is clad mainly in tiles of earthy terra-cotta and topped by a narrow crown.

circulation systems that often are announced by large metal grills here are

tucked behind custom terra-cotta tiles that are the same size as the reg-

ular tiles but punctured by 25 small slits. As for the gas meter, which is required to be accessible from King Street, Stanton and O'Keefe concealed it behind a suave roll-up door that wears a coat of weathered green to match the window frames of the rooms above.

These aren't details that turn heads. But they tie up loose ends, polish things off. The architecture is integral to the structure, not simply wrapping applied to the buildable space that's allowed. Even the most awkward design feature, that angled crown marking the corner of the hotel, doubles as a windbreak for the guests-only rooftop lounge (yes, the views are killer).

Inside, predictably, things liven up. The lobby design by Craig Walters includes a check-in counter with

atmospherically lit onyx panels. The wall between the lobby and the public bar is molded glass that looks like a slab of melting ice. The corridors' walls are skinned in what feels almost like a tight metal mesh, and there are fire pits and draped cabanas on the roof.

It'd be great if there were hints of such freedom outside. That's rare in highly visible and tightly planned neighborhoods like this.

But well-crafted buildings these days are also too rare. Newcomers like Hotel Via deserve attention — if only to nudge other developers and architects to step up their game.

Place is a weekly column by John King, The San Francisco Chronicle's urban design critic. Email: jking@sfgate.com Twitter: @johnkingsfchron

Fleeing S.F. driver held in crash that hurt 2, police say

By Sarah Ravani

A 20-year-old driver slammed into a car and injured two people Wednesday night in San Francisco while trying to dodge a police traffic stop, officials said.

The man, whose name was not immediately released, was driving east on Anza Street toward Fifth Avenue in

the Inner Richmond neighborhood when police tried to pull him over at 9:30 p.m. for not having license plates on his car, according to the San Francisco Police Department.

The car did not stop but sped away, police said.

The car ran a red light while turning right on Balboa Street and hit a

vehicle occupied by two men, ages 31 and 61, both of whom were taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, said police spokesman Officer Robert Rueca.

"There was lots of damage to the vehicle," Rueca said, adding that the driver's speed was unknown.

The suspect was arrested at the scene on suspicion of evading a police officer, Rueca said.

Sarah Ravani is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: sravani@sfgate.com Twitter: @SarRavani

Thief with socks on hands sought by Fremont police

By Filipa Ioannou

Fremont police are on the hunt for a man who wore socks on his hands during a break-in at a cell phone repair store before making his escape into a drainage canal early Wednesday, officials said.

The burglary occurred about 3:42 a.m. at a store on the 40900 block of Fremont Boulevard, according to the Fremont Police Department.

Fremont Fire officials witnessed the man robbing the store with socks on his hands and a shirt wrapped around his face, but he fled into a drainage canal that runs between Fremont Boulevard and Lincoln Street before he could be apprehended, police said.

The suspect is described as slender and between 5 feet 7 and 5 feet 10, and was last seen wearing a black-and-white short-sleeved shirt,

black pants and black baseball hat, according to Geneva Bosques, a spokeswoman for the Fremont Police Department.

Two iPhones and a pair of Beats earbuds were taken, Bosques said.

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