

Three questions for Bernardo Fort-Brescia

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Considering that his architectural firm is based in Miami, Bernardo Fort-Brescia is putting a bold stamp on San Francisco. His energetic modernism is seen at Trinity Place, where a former motel will be replaced by towers containing 1,900 apartments; Mission Bay,

where his apartment block for Avalon Bay resembles a stack of colorful cubes; and the Infinity, a pair of glassy clover-shaped condominium towers near the Embarcadero. Touching down in San Francisco for two days recently, Fort-Brescia was happy to share with Chronicle urban design writer John King his thoughts on how cities can grow in assertive ways.

Q: San Francisco is notorious for its conservative architectural tastes, yet your buildings here have been well received. What's the story?

A: Just because a city has great buildings of historic value, that doesn't mean it can't accept new ideas.

You have to separate style from substance. A city has a texture, and a building can fit in perfectly well because of those elements, such as how it works on the street. A building is content as well as form and looks.

Architecture should be a way that people can trace the history of a city. If you try to simulate the past, you're lying about the moment in which a building was conceived, how we live in our times.

Q: The Infinity is part of an area (Rincon Hill) now zoned for high-rise residential buildings. How do you design such a district to feel like a real neighborhood, rather than a bunch of towers?

A: There's only so much an architect can do. That's why there are planners and planning departments.

In San Francisco, the Planning Department is strong and independent minded. It really sets standards, and that's good. At the same time, (architectural) conformity is a dangerous goal if it leads to too much that looks alike and not enough surprise or self-expression.

American architecture is about plurality. We're not governed by a monarchy. This isn't Paris, where Napoleon III had Baron Haussmann design the entire city.

Q: What San Francisco buildings do you wish you had designed? Which ones do you like the



best?

A: I like the new museum, the de Young. ... The Crown Zellerbach office building is a classic of a certain period. ... Gosh, I haven't walked around to see the most recent buildings. I should. I like to be up to date.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/05/02/BADR1D1S0B.DTL>

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