

WORK STARTS ON NEW
SAN FRANCISCO URBAN CENTER

COMMON GROUND

San Francisco's political and development scene is weird. The only people in the closet are Republicans. Liberals are aligned with downtown business interests and perceived as conservatives. Neighborhoods are so well organized they can stop all kinds of development. Local developers chuckle and call the process "a barrier to entry" for out-of-towners. For several years, a nonprofit think-tank called San Francisco Planning and Urban Research **continued on page 4**



COURTESY PFAU ARCHITECTURE

COMMON GROUND continued from front page Association (SPUR) has been trying to build bridges among these various factions. Although the organization's meetings and events are open to the public, the organization itself has been hidden away in a warren of tiny offices on Sutter Street. For some time, SPUR has wanted to "go retail" and convey transparency while accommodating a growing membership.

In early 2007, SPUR selected local firm Pfau Architecture to design a new 14,000-square-foot headquarters that began construction this month on busy Mission Street in the Yerba Buena Gardens arts district. It will contain meeting rooms, exhibition spaces, a library, and perhaps most important, daylight. Rarely are architects seen as philanthropists, but the varied forms of glazing, tiles, and louvers, not to mention the programs, excited so much interest in the architecture community that many firms pledged tens of thousands of dollars each to get the building constructed. Companies with deeper pockets, such as developers and contractors, have been big donors as well. SPUR also secured a grant from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment and financing through the California Municipal Finance Authority. Individual citizens have made up over 80 percent of the donations, according to the architects. SPUR has now reached the mark where construction can commence and groundbreaking is scheduled to take place in mid-March.

During the time required to secure funding for the \$12.5 million building, construction costs, however, have escalated. The building also became more green and more transparent. According to architect Peter Pfau, the mechanical and lighting systems are now more efficient. The building will also be an environmental showcase, showing visitors how the counters are made from recycled paper, how the handrails are



ART ZENDARSKI

made from recycled sunflower seeds, and how the green roof works. As San Francisco moves forward with a green ordinance (a policy that SPUR has a strong interest in), citizens will be able to literally see what it takes.

According to the architects, two recent refinements to the design include enclosing the Mission Street stairway in glass, so people moving between floors activate the main elevation, and creating a street-level display area that resembles full-size retail shop windows. This display area will feature models and drawings. As Jim Chappell, president of SPUR, said, "In the future, something like the Transbay Terminal competition models could be in our front window, and we could solicit immediate feedback."

Another hope is that citizens will access planning documents for their neighborhoods. As a model for SPUR, Chappell cites Paris' Pavillon de l'Arsenal, where planning information is organized by neighborhood and publicly available.

Despite incremental changes over the last few years, the big idea behind the SPUR Urban Center has not changed. Dialog around planning and development in San Francisco can now be based on factual information that is readily available, rather than on rumor or fear. The transparent building symbolizes that aspiration. **KENNETH CALDWELL**