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ST. FRANCIS SQUARE: ATTITUDES OF ITS RESIDENTS

by CLARE COOPER

Do the basic design decisions made by architects of housing developments actually coincide with user needs? An attempt was made to find an answer in a two-phase study initiated in 1967 by Clare Cooper and Phyllis Hackett under grants from the US Public Health Service and the Farrard Fund of the Department of Landscape Architecture, University of California, Berkeley. They investigated in depth two moderate income housing projects in San Francisco, one of them being St. Francis Square. The first part of the study was an analysis to determine why and when design decisions are made; the second comprised interviews with the residents. The results of the questioning of dwellers at St. Francis Square are reported here by one of the researchers.

San Francisco's St. Francis Square is a moderate income housing development which was financed under Section 221(d)(3) of the US Housing Code and sponsored by the International Longshore Workers Union and the Pacific Maritime Association Pension Fund. The 299 garden apartments are the design of San Francisco architects Marquis & Stoller with Lawrence Halprin & Associates as landscape consultants.

The three-story buildings, containing mostly two- and three-bedroom apartments, are grouped around three interior landscaped courts. Two streets, Buchanan and O'Farrell, were closed to form a superblock with peripheral parking. Completed in 1964, the development is run as a tenant-owned cooperative with a full-time resident manager and a board of directors elected by the occupants.

Perhaps the most eloquent evidence for the success of St. Francis Square is the fact that most of the residents have lived there for four years or longer and that there is a waiting list of several hundred families who want to move in. An interview survey conducted with a randomly selected sample of 123 families (out of a total of 299) suggests some of the reasons for the success of this particular environment. Asked why they had initially moved to the Square, most residents mentioned the reasonable monthly payments and the opportunity to buy their own apartments. Many referred also to its proximity to downtown and to the fact that the development is racially integrated. Interestingly enough, almost two-thirds of the families were paying less rent before moving to the Square, indicating that their economic reason for changing residence relates to good value for money rather than cheap rent.

After living in the Square for a while, residents found its

chief advantage to be its quality as a place for raising children. Not only are children welcomed (as they are in only one-third of San Francisco rental units), but the environment enables them to play, explore, visit friends and walk to school in complete safety. Observations indicate that the children are by far the chief users of the open spaces, that they never stay long in one place and that use of specific play equipment rarely takes up more than 10 percent of their time spent outdoors. Like all children, they play anywhere and everywhere and not just where the designers indicated "playground" on the plan. St. Francis Square is an environment which allows this to happen safely and with minimal intrusion on adult privacy.

A chief objective of the project was to provide an attractive living environment for middle income families in the city as an antidote to the drift to the suburbs. Although one-fourth of the residents have plans to move to a single-family house, the remainder are pleased to have found a green and quiet spot in the city and intend to stay.

In order to provide quality landscaping and attractive street furniture, the designers deliberately skimmed on the budget for the interiors of the apartments. Seventy percent of the residents rate the landscaping as "very important" when asked to evaluate such features as rent, location, convenience, landscaping, etc. They are especially pleased to have a green and attractive view from their living rooms. More than 90 percent of the residents think that the way the outdoor areas look makes a real difference in how they feel about the place. When asked which they would have preferred, given the option at the design stage, trees or a larger living room, trees or a larger kitchen, etc., more than 60 percent opted for trees.

Both in landscaping and in the construction of the dwellings, the materials chosen by the designers were selected with the knowledge that this was a development in which residents were purchasing their homes. They argued that people who were buying rather than renting would be more careful of their environment and would teach their children to appreciate it too. Therefore, they could afford to use slightly less hardy construction materials and finishes than would be true in a straight rental

Miss Cooper is assistant professor of environmental behavior in the College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley. Her book *Easter Hill Village*, concerned with resident reactions to the design of a public housing project in Richmond, California, will be published by the Free Press next year.

development. The assumptions apparently proved to be correct, and the Square is notable for its excellent upkeep. More than two-thirds of the residents believe this is due to their vested interest and pride in the surroundings.

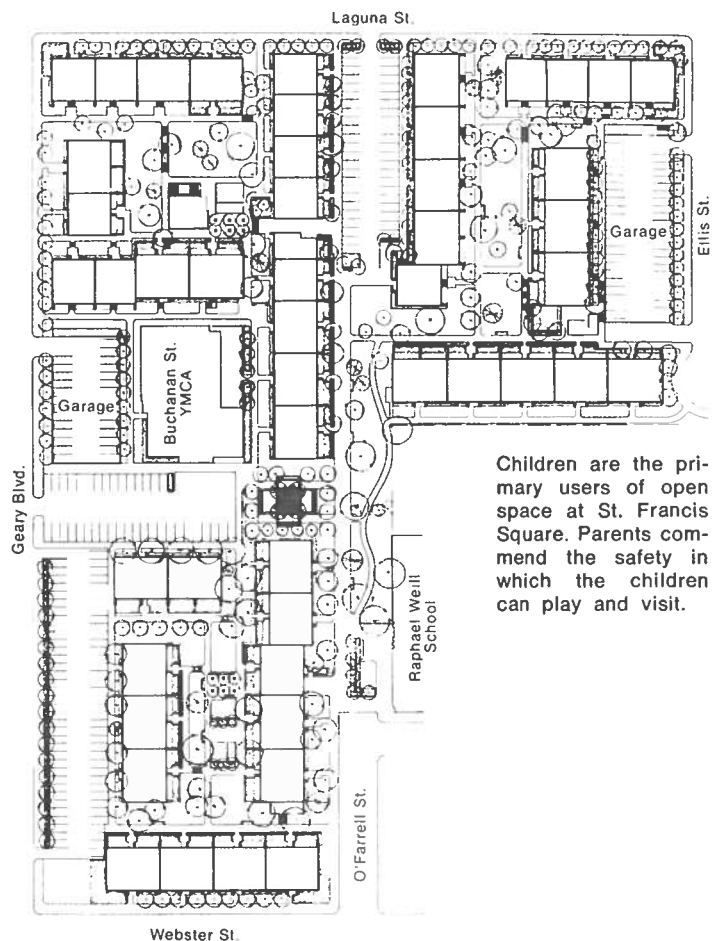
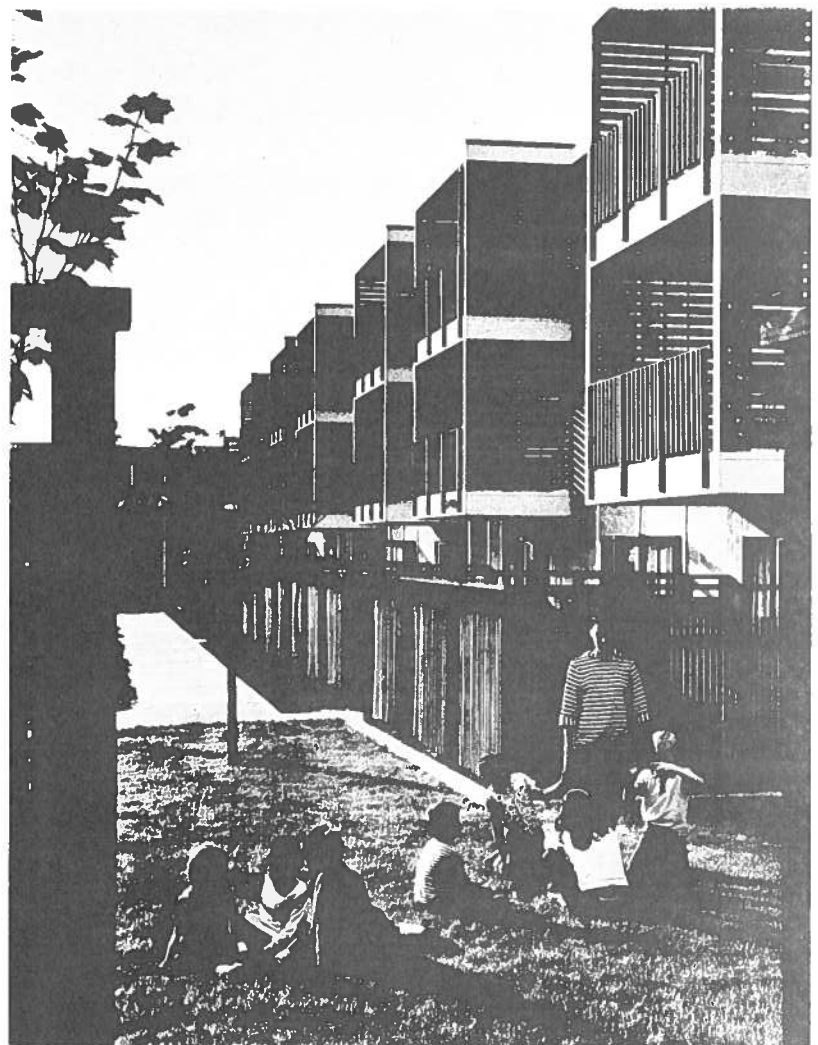
In terms of a social environment, St. Francis Square is viewed by almost everyone living there as a friendly place. Many residents initially met on the stairs, in hallways, at mailboxes and on pathways. As the designers had hoped, these spaces were indeed conducive to casual encounters.

The cooperative nature of the community starts with the stairway group. Aggregates of six apartments are arranged around a three-story stairway, each with its own back and front door, fire escape and mailbox. This is the primary social group beyond the family itself; one of its members is selected to represent the others at co-op meetings. Many residents reported that they get together with other families to decorate, paint or clean their shared hallway and access areas.

Proximity can also lead to friction, and some families complain of litter dropped on stairs and of bicycles left blocking the way. But by and large, neighborliness predominates among the six families on each stairway. More than three-fourths know all the other families well enough to call upon them in an emergency. Just over a half know at least one family well enough to invite to a party or to ask a favor such as babysitting. As a whole, the Square is characterized by an intense web of visiting and socializing. The number who know no one well enough to sit with is only 2 percent, whereas those who know five or more families is 60 percent. Undoubtedly the layout, including the opening of through-streets to create a superblock, has had considerable effect on day-to-day living patterns. People feel that the arrangement encourages walking and casual encounters and at the same time discourages large numbers of strangers from wandering about.

Parking in peripheral lots necessitates a fair amount of walking back and forth to the apartments. It is evident, however, that the attractive landscaping, quiet atmosphere and pleasant views encourage people to walk around for pleasure, to stroll rather than just to walk purposefully to the parking lot or garage shed. In the morning hours, mothers are there with young children, and older people stroll with dogs; on summer evenings, older children and working adults are the frequent users.

The central sitting plaza was conceived of as the place where residents would gather to chat and meet each other, but



Children are the primary users of open space at St. Francis Square. Parents commend the safety in which the children can play and visit.

less than 10 percent use it. Perhaps this is because the plaza is not particularly attractive (bounded on two sides by the blank end walls of buildings) and is often exposed and windy. Most people sit in one of the three interior squares, half of them in squares other than the one they live in. This is further evidence that residents use the entire site and feel comfortable in areas that would not be thought of perhaps as "home territory."

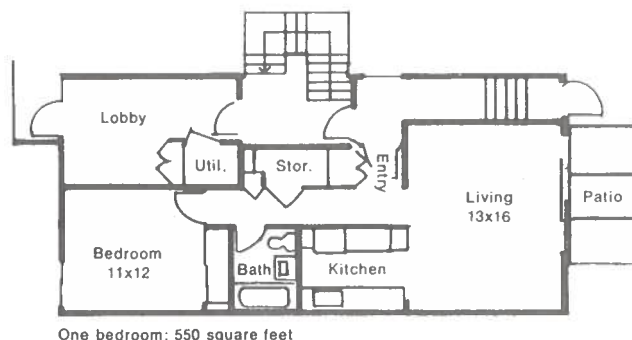
Residents were asked to indicate on the site plan those areas where they felt that they "belonged." Two-fifths of them indicated the whole of St. Francis Square, or the great majority of it. About a third felt that they belonged only in their particular square within the development, and a fourth saw themselves as belonging only in their own apartment or the building in which it is located. Most of the latter group were non-English speaking who did not yet feel enough at home to venture outdoors a great deal.

Just over half the residents can name areas where they do *not* feel comfortable. These tend to be places where strangers come into the Square such as the entrance of the YMCA building and the sidewalks which bound the site. Ironically, the YMCA was incorporated into the original plan in order to encourage people from outside to come in and use it, affording a link between the Square and the wider community of the Western Addition. Most of the residents, however, resent the intrusion of strangers into their territory.

The peripheral sidewalks are avoided at night because of the high frequency of crime in this part of the city. But inside the Square itself, people evidently are not so concerned about crime. About half said that they walk through the outdoor areas

at night. About two-thirds of the residents thought that if a person were attacked at night and called out for help they would be heard (or seen) by neighbors who would come to the rescue. Some added that this in fact had happened on a number of occasions.

Jane Jacob's observations in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, about "eyes on the street" and the fact that frequent pedestrian encounters help to create a sense of community and mutual trust, are more accurate than many of her critics have recognized. Surveyed in a parallel study, residents of Geneva Towers—comprised of two 20-story slab buildings—were asked where they felt that they "belonged." Three-fifths of them responded "in my apartment," and most of the rest replied, "nowhere." When they were asked if people would come out to



THE ARCHITECT'S RESPONSE TO THE STUDY

by ROBERT B. MARQUIS, FAIA

Post-design evaluation by architects has been largely nonexistent or, at best, haphazard. We seldom study other people's buildings in depth and usually visit our own only when a leak or some other malfunction develops. Even when architects undertake such evaluation, they are poorly equipped to do so, lacking time, objectivity and proper techniques.

When architects are confronted with the design of a new building, they visit similar structures and interview employees and future users. With this superficial information, hard work, talent and intuition (thank God for intuition), they are able, sometimes, to design a good project.

Often the architect thumbs through past issues of architectural magazines or books without ever leaving his office as he seeks information on a particular building type. These references, in general, deal with the technical and functional aspects of design, i.e., how to plan libraries, how to arrange seats, how to allow for projection equipment in an auditorium. There is very little "hard" material on users' attitudes. How does it feel to be in the

building? How often does one go there if he has a choice?

Thus most of our design attention is focussed on the functional and the esthetic. Yet in the final analysis, our buildings must be designed for the real client: the student, the children, the resident, the prisoner, the patient, *the user*. This is why, in my opinion, the long talked about but relatively recent work being done in user need studies is of such value to architects.

Clare Cooper and her associates at the University of California have produced two studies that should have a major influence on the design of moderate and low cost housing developments. The first part of the study, *Analysis of the Design Process at Two Moderate Income Housing Developments*, was issued in 1968 and is obtainable from the Institute for Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720. When Claude Stoller, FAIA, and I started the design work on St. Francis Square over 10 years ago, there was very little information available. We interviewed potential residents, talked to realtors, neighborhood people and redevelopment officials and tried to draw conclusions from similar projects, although we found hardly any that were comparable socially, geographically (in the heart of the city) or economically. We worked largely in the dark and by intuition.

The resulting project, St. Francis Square Cooperative Apartments, fortunately turned out to be a tremendously successful one. It has now been in use since 1963, has received major awards for design and has been published internationally. It is shown to visiting dignitaries and has been used as an example of how moderate and low cost housing should look and work.

The project was sold out in six months prior to completion and has had a waiting list since its inception. It is racially, economically and socially integrated. In short, it is a successful community.

Today there are under construction and on the drawing boards in San Francisco alone 2,000 units of what Justin Herman, then director of Redevelopment, called "St. Francis Square-like units." I would not wish to hazard a guess as to how many are being planned throughout the country. And yet, how many architects designing such housing have studied this successful project in depth? How many know of Clare Cooper's two studies?

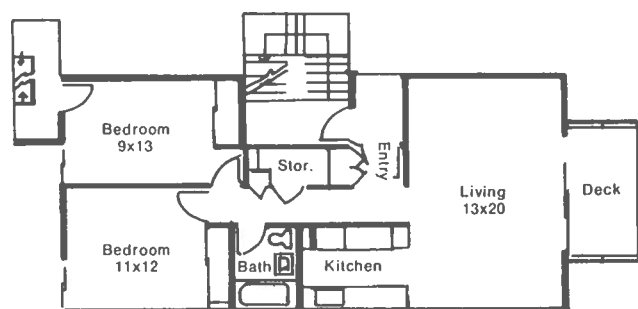
In my opinion, the most important lesson to be drawn from our St. Francis Square experience was our deliberate early decision to invest a large portion of our effort in the total environment rather than in the individual units or buildings. This proved to be, as Clare Cooper's study shows, our most valid assumption. We were constrained by an extremely

help if someone were attacked in the outdoor areas, more than 80 percent replied with an emphatic "no."

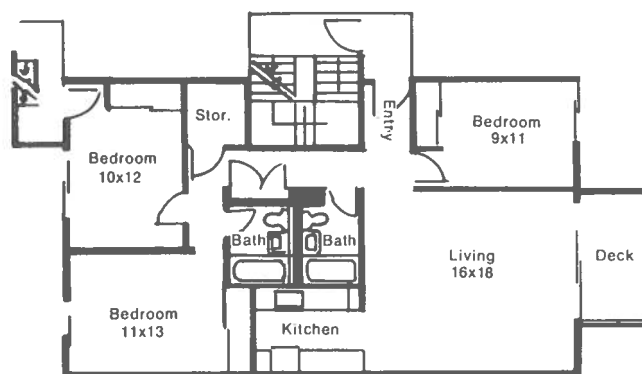
At St. Francis Square, three kinds of facilities are provided communally: parking, garbage and trash areas and laundries. In the original design, garbage sheds with collection cans for six families were provided outside the back door of each building, and there was a communal trash area in the center or at the end of each square. In the two squares where the trash areas were placed in full view of all apartments, they proved to be an eyesore and were relocated against the end walls of buildings by a work team of residents. Many of the garbage sheds at the back doors were similarly relocated because the smells annoyed residents with adjacent patios or balconies. The sheds were relocated in service areas in the corner of each square adjacent to the

laundry room and maintenance store. This move means that some residents have to walk farther, some 350 feet. Far from being a hardship, some residents view this as an opportunity to get out of the apartment, to wander through the square and to see what's going on.

Communal laundries were provided so that space in the kitchens could be reduced, more total units afforded and construction costs reduced. The designers felt, too, that the laundries might be a place where women could meet with each other. Assuming that mothers might bring young children with them, a play area was provided outside the laundry room in one of the squares. The use of the laundries for socializing has not materialized. Relatively few residents report meeting people through conversations in the laundry, and only a fifth say that they stay



Two bedroom: 840 square feet



Three bedroom: 1,050 square feet

limited budget, and every design decision had to be weighed on a scale of benefits; when these favored the total environment and the residents as a whole opposed to the individual unit, we followed this direction.

Individual "architectural" features were de-emphasized. Massing of buildings, spaces between units, outside spaces enclosed by units and movement through the project all became paramount. Split level plans and other complex arrangements were rejected in favor of simple units: three stories high, six units to a central stairwell (three on each side) with these linked into buildings and arranged as subcommunities of approximately 100 units around and facing into a central space. Pitched roofs and complicated fenestration were abandoned; much money and effort were spent on decks, terraces, landscaping, walks, fences and graphics.

Some of these choices, deliberately made, have come back to haunt us, such as insufficient storage space, the small size of units and, most important, the lack of dining space in the kitchen. On balance, however, the design decisions and the priorities we assigned to them proved to be correct.

The sponsor's chief interest was to produce a project that would demonstrate that redevelopment, which at that point in time was called "Negro removal" by its critics, could be used to provide moderate cost housing.

Up to then, it had only resulted in expensive highrise units. There can be no doubt that we succeeded in this objective as the entire housing element of the subsequent redevelopment in San Francisco's Western Addition Two and Hunters Point is devoted to moderate and low cost housing with garden-type units.

In fact, there are many who credit or blame, depending upon their politics, St. Francis Square with saving redevelopment in the city, stating that if this example had not been produced, further redevelopment would have been stopped at the polls.

The sponsor's other objective was to combat the trend of middle income families moving from the cities. How successful we have been in achieving this objective is put in some doubt by the study, but it cannot be questioned that this desire led us to some interesting and valid design decisions. In order to design a project that would retain some of the advantages of suburban living in the central city, we made important decisions about density, traffic and the relationship of the individual units to the project.

We decided that the most economic way to take care of the required cars (one per unit) was in parking lots and to place these generally on the periphery of the project. Recognizing that people would be forced to walk some distance to their units, sometimes in the rain, we decided that the advantages far out-

weighed the disadvantages. They were economy of construction, reduced height for the three-story walkup apartments, parking lots that could act as buffers on busy streets and, most important of all, the elimination of the need for vehicular traffic into and through the project.

Thus we were able to have the through-streets vacated. The vacated streets made it possible to develop a superblock with three blocks of housing and the school in the fourth one. Children could play and ride their bicycles without ever crossing a street; walks, sitting areas and a variety of spatial experiences could be linked together; and the three blocks of housing could be knitted more easily into one community.

In order to strengthen this concept, units were mostly designed to face into the blocks. Each central stair also opens into the central spaces, the density having been determined by the three-story limitation.

Clare Cooper's study of resident attitudes shows how well these design decisions worked; it also points out where they failed. I do not wish to present such studies as a panacea. They cannot be fed into a computer to get a successful design. There is no substitute for talent or intuition. If properly used by the architect, however, such studies provide a valuable tool to evaluate past successes and, more important, past failures. □

there while the clothes are in the washer or dryer. The majority of children who use the play area come there on their own.

A communal feature which was not provided due to the limited budget was an office or meeting room, and a converted ground level apartment has been used for these purposes. The architects are currently designing new office and meeting facilities to be located on one of the Geary Boulevard parking lots.

Unlike most multifamily housing developments where residents like their apartments but complain about the design and maintenance of the outdoor areas, the reverse is true at St. Francis Square. Very few residents have any adverse reactions to the site planning; only 2 percent mentioned poor play facilities and only 1 percent complained about parking or maintenance. But when asked what they would warn prospective residents about, most place "problems with the apartment" at the top of the list.

One of the biggest problems revolves around the activities of cooking and eating. The kitchens are rated by the majority of the residents as too small, even though they find the actual arrangement of facilities to be convenient. In one-bedroom apartments, the kitchens are 8 feet 11½ inches by 7 feet 7½ inches; in the two- and three-bedroom apartments, they are 9 feet 2½ inches by 7 feet 7½ inches. The problem is compounded by the

feet in the two-bedroom and 16x18 feet in the three-bedroom apartments) do not seem to vary with the real needs of the families accommodated. One cannot necessarily agree that a family of four requires four times as much living room space as a family of one, but it does seem that they would want more than the 1.4 to 1 ratio indicated here. About a third of the residents think that their living room is too small, especially since it has to double as a dining room. Those with complaints are mostly larger families where the living room accommodates a variety of activities simultaneously, such as playing, studying, watching TV, serving dinner, etc.

In four-fifths of the households there is at least one person who has to study at home. Some use the bedrooms, some the living room and in households where two or more have to study, both of these rooms are used. In just under a tenth of the apartments, one of the bedrooms has been converted into a study.

Another problem is lack of space for hobbies. Some believe that the lack of a garage is the chief difficulty; others mention that poor soundproofing inhibits the playing of musical instruments and stereos. Not having a garden or yard is a problem for those with green thumbs.

Lack of storage space is another difficulty encountered in



To provide an attractive environment in the city, designers of St. Francis Square had to skimp on interiors. Residents like the green view from the living rooms, and more than 90 percent of them say that the outdoor areas make a tremendous difference in their feeling about the place.

fact that no dining area is provided in either kitchen or living room. In most households, the dining table is placed in that part of the living room which is closest to the kitchen. There are preschool children in a third of the families, and the carpeting causes problems with spilt food which is difficult to clean up. When asked what extra room they would choose to have added to the apartment if this were possible, the first choice is for a dining room. The architects wanted to provide a dining area in the kitchen, but 10 years ago the Federal Housing Authority worked on a "room point count" system and would not allow (count) such space toward mortgage maximum.

Living room sizes (13x16 feet in the one-bedroom, 13x20

apartment living, especially for bulky items which in a single-family house are often kept in the basement or garage. There are no dead storage lockers or other spaces for keeping trunks, suitcases, skis or other rarely used things. Despite a fairly generous supply of closet space, cleaning items such as brooms, mops, vacuum cleaners, pails, etc., are frequently kept on the balcony or on the patio. About a half of the families at the square own one or more bicycles. Because there is no lockable storage space and there is the possibility of unattached bicycles being stolen, these too must be kept inside the apartment or on the patio or on the balcony.

Although residents regard the balconies as important out-

floor space, a tenth have enclosed them with glass paneling and sliding doors to enlarge their living rooms by this much space. Although not specifically designed to be modified in this way, the shape and design of the balcony fortuitously allows this remodeling at no great expense. For most people, however, the balcony or patio is much too valuable a space to be enclosed. Most feel that these open spaces are private enough for their needs. In order of importance, the chief uses are: sitting outside; gardening and raising plants, barbecuing, doing small domestic repair jobs, building or repainting furniture, having parties and keeping children in. Even if rarely used for any specific activity, most people believe that this semiprivate outdoor space makes the apartment 'seem bigger,' enabling them to wander out for a little fresh air or to call out to children below or to watch some activity in the square. These spaces form pleasant halfway points between completely private and completely public space and thus become psychological bridging points between the two.

As well as functioning as bridges, the patios and balconies are also barriers that separate the private interior from the public open space. The existence and clarity of this separation is a crucial element in the success of multifamily housing, providing not only a degree of visual and aural privacy but also (at ground



Interiors are attractive, but there is no dining room. Most people would choose one if they could make an addition to their homes.

level) making burglaries a more hazardous undertaking. In row house public projects such as Easter Hill Village in Richmond, California, and Hunters View in San Francisco, where no fenced yards or patios separate the fronts of dwellings from completely public space, breaking and entering via ground floor windows is a fairly common occurrence.

More than two-thirds of the residents of St. Francis Square said that they would not trade in their balcony or patio for extra interior space, such as a larger living room or more storage space. The only features for which more than a few people would have traded the balcony/patio were space for a washing machine, private garage, separate dining room and a larger kitchen.

In view of the fact that the construction costs of St. Francis Square were only \$11.50 per square foot (in July 1962) and that relatively low cost materials were used, it is hardly surprising that two-thirds of the residents report hearing sounds from neighboring apartments and from the public halls and stairways. Most do not feel that this is any great problem, however, and consider that some noise is inevitable in apartment buildings. Some feel that a low degree of sound from next door or upstairs is actually pleasant. Those who are bothered tend to be older and without children. Few people mentioned being bothered by traffic noises, despite the fact that most of the bedrooms face onto busy streets.

In terms of outside noise other than traffic, the chief problems seem to arise from older children at play, groups of teenagers singing or shouting at night and dances and band practice at the YMCA building. Almost everyone reports hearing young children and toddlers playing in the squares in the daytime, but very few find this bothersome. In fact, when asked if there were any sounds that they rather enjoyed hearing, residents cite children playing as the most important; others include music, people, parties, fire engines, lawn sprinklers, dogs, rain and crickets.

The decision to provide a variety of apartment sizes at St. Francis Square is an important determinant in accommodating a population that varies in family size and in the life cycle's stage from young single adults to elderly couples. People can move within the development as their space needs change. About a tenth have moved since coming to the Square, most of them in order to have more bedrooms and some to be in different locations. The fact that there is a variety of outlooks and sizes and locations gives the residents a freedom of choice as their needs change. The decision to move within the development rather than elsewhere not only relates to equity in their property but is also an indication of satisfaction with the living environment.

Residents include many who were attracted to the development by the socializing or community-based activities and by the heterogeneous nature of the population. At the time of the survey, over two-fifths were racial or ethnic minorities (28 percent black, 15 percent Oriental and 1 percent Mexican-American.) Only half of the families were "standard" nuclear ones: 21 percent were single-parent families, 10 percent were childless couples and 11 percent were nonmarried adult households. To live at the Square residents have to conform with government regulations for housing financed under section 221(d)(3) of the Housing Code. A family of four cannot earn more than \$9,200 gross. The occupation range of employed residents suggests that this does not necessarily result in a narrow homogeneous group. One-third of the male household heads, for example, are in managerial positions and about a tenth each in professional, clerical or sales jobs; just under a tenth are laborers, factory operatives and private household workers.

In designing an environment which combines the esthetic advantages of suburban living with the convenience of an inner city location, the creators of St. Francis Square seem to have hit the spot with the present residents. It is a success because its residents are part owners and because it provides a total environment which is pleasing and functional. Undoubtedly one of the key decisions was to concentrate more energy and money on the site plan and landscaping rather than on apartment interiors and to create an environment that is both safe and interesting for children. Recent evidence of its social and economic viability is the announcement that the St. Francis Square Co-op is considering becoming the sponsor of a new housing development for moderate income families in the Mission Redevelopment Area of San Francisco. □