

Distance teaching out of schools' grasp



Nina Riggio / Special to The Chronicle

Serra Elementary kindergarten teacher Jennifer Moless wonders how she'll instruct 5-year-olds via computer screen.

It's the rare San Francisco public schoolkid, parent or teacher who thought our emergency experiment with distance learning in the spring went well. While everybody gave it a good old college try because they had no other choice, the overall results deserved a failing grade.

While many teachers provided an enriching experience, others didn't have technology skills or hardly interacted with kids in real time at all. Some kids lacked strong internet connections or family members with the time or know-how to help.

HEATHER KNIGHT

On San Francisco



Parents lucky enough to do their jobs from home grew exasperated trying to play teacher's aide while working, feeling like they were failing at everything. Parents who had essential jobs outside the home were

sometimes forced to leave small children by themselves all day.

And guess what? Nothing much has changed in the past four months. When San Francisco public schools start up Aug. 17, its 55,000 kids will be learning on screens from teachers who've been given no additional guidance from the school district since March on how to make virtual education successful.

"Distance learning across the country was pretty much a failure," said Mark Sanchez, president of the San

Knight continues on C2

Billowing new tower spruces up S.F. skyline

Even with today's grim need for social isolation, San Francisco's most eye-catching residential tower wants to pull you close.

From the Bay Bridge or the Embarcadero, the 39-story Mira at the corner of Folsom and Spear streets is a flowing stack of tightly wound white metal bays, frozen in motion. Fragmentary glimpses from nearby blocks defy expectations, whipsawed slivers amid the stodgy norm.

Finally, there's the view straight up from the sidewalk — a crisp commotion of stacked angles, precisely arranged but seemingly ready to fly out in a dozen directions at once.

Though Mira has been in the works since 2014, the architectural show still feels fresh as the first residents begin to unpack. But this 392-unit residential complex was also conceived as a celebra-

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High-rise a test of luxury condos during pandemic

By J.K. Dineen

A dozen years ago, luxury developer Tishman Speyer was in the middle of selling units in the Infinity condo complex when Lehman Bros. filed for bankruptcy and the stock market plummeted 20%. More than a third of buyers in contract at the time for units in the South of Market towers walked away from their deposits.

Now the developer is faced with the challenges of selling condos in the midst of a different crisis — a global pandemic. In June, Tishman Speyer opened Mira, the 392-unit tower just off

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

The 39-story Mira tower at the corner of Folsom and Spear streets, designed by Jeanne Gang, resembles a gleaming corkscrew with a flat top. More than 150 of its 392 units are affordable.

BAY AREA



Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Seen from the Embarcadero, Mira tower (tall white building at center right) is a key piece of the neighborhood. Units sell for \$1.2 million, but 40% are affordable.

New eye-catching tower is more than a pretty face

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tion of triumphant urbanism — a far cry from the mood of this troubled summer.

Neither the lethal threat of the coronavirus nor the flare of tensions fueled by America's systemic racism was anticipated when Mira was topped off last year. Now, as workers add pavers and street trees to the newly widened sidewalks, both are as obvious as the bottles of Purell on a table in the stylish lobby or the boarded-up windows at the entrance to chic Hotel Vitale, two short blocks to the north.

The basics of Mira haven't changed: The compact tower is flanked by four- and eight-story wings that extend west to Main Street. In the middle of the three sections there's a private courtyard for tenants.

Retail spaces line Spear and Folsom streets. On the north side will be a reconstituted Clementina Street, mostly for pedestrians, with ground-floor condos and an ample, landscaped landscape.

The architect is Jeanne Gang, who rose to prominence a decade ago for her 82-story Aqua, a statuesque slab in Chicago that was the tallest building in the world designed by a woman. Since her firm Studio Gang has made its mark both on skylines — an even taller Chicago high-rise is nearing completion — and in socially rooted projects such as libraries and community centers. In the Bay Area, the firm's upcoming projects include an expansion at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco and a San Mateo County government office building in downtown Redwood City.

Gang sees a wider role for Mira as well.

While the market rate units start at \$1.2 million and climb much higher, a heartening 40% of the condominiums are reserved for buyers who make between 80% and 120% of the median income in San Francisco, Marin and San Mateo counties. This translates to \$79,000 to \$118,000 for a couple.

The unusually high percentage came in exchange for the city allowing the tower to be increased in height from 300 to 400 feet. This upset some neighbors who already had homes in the clouds, but it's good social policy.

"Mira reflects the goals of San Francisco to have this mix of dwellings," Gang said last week. "It's good to be part of an area that was really conceived as a district."

When the project was unveiled, Gang talked about



Above: Mira twists its way skyward as a flowing stack of tightly wound white metal bays, frozen in motion, setting it apart from neighboring towers. Below: The tower, seen from the Embarcadero, stands out in a distinctive mixed-use neighborhood.

"Mira reflects the goals of San Francisco to have this mix of dwellings. It's good to be part of an area that was really conceived as a district."

Jeanne Gang, architect whose Studio Gang designed the Mira

her admiration for such 1920s landmarks as 450 Sutter St., with its florid terra-cotta bays marching to the sky. She also was candid about taking advantage of the freedoms allowed by computer design.

"What I like about tall buildings (aesthetically) is what you do with the height, the incremental moves along the way," she explained in 2014. "It's not just the extrusion of a single form from bottom to top."

In this case, Gang conceived of "migratory bays." Each floor is chiseled in a way that allows for no less than 30 bays of varying depth. The pattern rotates slightly from floor to floor, making a full revolution every 10 floors.

A flat-topped corkscrew, so to speak.

As gimmicky as this sounds, what makes it work is Gang's focus on details. Though she spent her early years at Rem Koolhaas' often-provocative Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam, her father was a civil engineer and she has described her younger self as "hard-core about math and science." That underlying

interest in structural substance, materiality and craft, sets Studio Gang apart from firms where actual buildings seem less important than their hyper-charged renderings.

That's part of the reason for using metal panels rather than masonry for the skin, a system worked out in part with the facade fabricator, Permasteelisa. They're lightweight, which reduces overall stress on the jagged concrete frame, while folded in a way that minimizes the number of seams where rainwater would run down to stain the facade.

This sharp but sleek approach also benefits the developer, Tishman Speyer. Those angled bays mean that every unit has at least one corner window — all the better to nab bay views that might lure potential buyers.

The benefit for the rest of us is the visual pop on the skyline — a voyeuristic kick made more satisfying by the thought that went into it.

The repeated sequence of "migratory bays," for instance, adds a discipline beyond the random pop-outs or voids of other towers in the works here



and elsewhere. You can look for the 10-story segments, unpack the pattern in your mind, or simply enjoy the odd shifts of glinting metal and folded shadows.

This doesn't mean Mira is great architecture. That's for the future to decide. A clever aluminum skin is no match for the tactile richness of those 1920s towers that Gang admires.

As for the wings, one is clad in red metal while the other wears sandy porcelain tiles. City planners pushed Gang to mix things up visually, and they were right, but the choppy forms down low feel like afterthoughts.

Cities like San Francisco are hardy — blows that look fatal in one era are all but forgotten in the next. The Embarcadero

Freeway that once crossed a portion of Mira's site was torn down after being damaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. Gang's tower joins nearly a dozen nearby that have risen in the decade since the 2007-09 recession.

A year from now, perhaps, those ground-floor retail spaces will hold cafes and boutiques. Young residents will rub shoulders at the communal table in the lobby.

In the meantime? During my tour of the tower, here's what I liked best beyond the clear bay views — most units come with a balcony, ensuring virus-free air.

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