“The solution to homelessness is a home,” says David Schnur, director of housing development for the San Francisco–based nonprofit Community Housing Partnership (CHP), while sitting in the courtyard of the new Richardson apartments. “This is not transitional housing—it is permanent. As long as someone pays their rent and follows our basic house rules, they can stay here for life.”

Designed by local firm David Baker + Partners, the Richardson was developed in collaboration with another nonprofit—Mercy Housing—but is owned and managed by CHP. It provides 120 300-square-foot studio apartments as well as a medical clinic and psychological counseling services for the formerly homeless and for those in danger of becoming homeless.

“The five-story, U-shaped building holds glass-fronted retail spaces at the corner and along one street edge. Its massing is carefully controlled by shifts in surface and materials on the façade, moving from zinc cladding with recycled wood insets, to simply detailed white stucco, to a carefully calibrated chartreuse paint. "We expected the zinc piece to get value-engineered out," says project architect Amit Price Patel, "but the slow economy worked in our favor. We got to keep it along with a lot of other more refined and durable materials and surfaces.”

And durability is key behind its gracious urban façade, the building houses a community that can be rough on a building: Many residents have physical or psychological disabilities, while others have been on the street so long that they have forgotten how to care for a permanent home. “As the owners of our buildings, we prefer to upgrade materials to maximize life-cycle and maintenance costs,” Schnur says. “A well-designed and maintained building also adds dignity to the lives of our residents.”

Security is necessary, but is not overbearing. Discreetly placed cameras scan the exterior of the building. No resident has a key to the front door. Instead, they are buzzed into a secure lobby by the front desk—staffed 24 hours a day by trained personnel—before being admitted to the rest of the facility. But nothing about the entry sequence feels institutional: the custom-designed front desk and mailboxes would not be out of place in a high-end loft building. Generous windows connect the lobby with an adjacent lounge, fostering community while allowing oversight.

On the four apartment floors, what might have been drab, double-loaded corridors instead are deftly designed with brightly painted light coves carved into the ceiling at the unit doors. The efficiently laid-out apartments come with durable custom furniture and basic kitchen equipment.

The Richardson sits just two blocks from the gilded dome of San Francisco City Hall. The project initially provoked a NIMBY response from residents of the rebounding neighborhood, necessitating extensive work with various community groups to assuage concerns. The city, however, was a huge advocate for the project from the beginning. The site was granted to the developers by the Redevelopment Agency, and the city waived parking-space requirements. The Richardson cost $26.8 million to build, and that price tag seems high with rents set at just 30 to 50 percent of the income of each resident. Schnur maintains that the quality of the architecture was eminently important in winning over the neighbors. In addition, he says, “Our tenants feel good living in good architecture. They are motivated to keep their lives together so they can stay.” And the Richardson will save the city money as well. Dr. Joshua Bamberger, medical director of the San Francisco Department of Public Health ran the numbers using records for the 120 Richardson residents. Last year, they used $2.4 million in city and other services. With the on-site clinic alone, it is expected that these costs will be drastically reduced. Bamberger looks forward to doing the math again next year, and in so doing, prove the value of housing the homeless.
Named for local activists Julian and Raye Richardson, the Richardson Apartments sits on land left vacant after the removal of a freeway spur. To break up the building massing, the architects employed several surfaces and materials on the façade (this image). The building is topped with a partial green roof (opposite top), planters for resident gardens, and a photovoltaic array and solar hot-water heaters. A courtyard (opposite bottom) provides another outdoor gathering space for residents.
Ground-floor communal spaces, including the resident lounge (this image), feature board-formed concrete walls and polished concrete floors. Extensive glazing allows for views between many of the lower-level spaces (opposite middle), but a pattern applied to the windows of the clinic and counseling spaces (opposite top) maintains privacy. The robust materiality of the public spaces continues in the units themselves (opposite bottom), which incorporate highly durable cabinetry, quality furniture, tiled bathrooms, and easy-to-maintain plumbing. Staggered stud walls between units mitigate sound.
First-Floor Plan

- Offices
- Entrance
- Lobby
- Lounge
- Laundry
- Kitchen
- Community room
- Counseling suite
- Medical clinic
- Courtyard
- Retail

Typical Apartment-Level Plan

- Elevators
- Terrace
- Apartments

Project Credits

- Project: Drs. Julian and Raye Richardson Apartments, San Francisco
- Client: Community Housing Partnership, Mercy Housing California
- Architect and Interior Designer: David Baker + Partners, San Francisco—David Baker, FAIA (design principal); Peter MacKenzie, AIA (principal-in-charge); Amii C. Price-Patel, AIA (project architect); Brit Epperson, Amanda Loper, AIA; Sara Mae Martens, Angela Thomson, John Thompson, AIA
- M/P Engineer: Tommy Siu and Associates Mechanical Engineers
- Electrical Engineer: FW Associates
- Structural Engineer: Structural Design Engineers
- Civil Engineer: Sands
- General Contractor: Cahill Contractors
- Landscape Architect: Andrea Cothran Landscape Architecture
- Lighting Designer: Horton Lar Brodgen
- Affiliated Government Agency: San Francisco Redevelopment Agency
- Owners’ Representative: Design Studios Gonzalez Castro
- Associate Architect: Baker Vilar Architects
- Security Systems: Teletech Security
- Solar: Sun, Light and Power
- Interiors Furnishings and Equipment: Fee Munson Ebert (common spaces); Market Design (residential units)
- Public Art: Evelyn Reyes/Creativity Explored
- Clinic/Health Services: UCSF Citywide Case Management Program; San Francisco Department of Public Health
- Work Training: Toolworks
- Acoustical Engineer: Wilson Irvig & Associates
- Waterproofing Consultant: Gale Associates
- Size: 65,419 square feet
- Cost: $26.86 million (construction)

Materials and Sources

- Adhesives, Coatings, and Sealants: 3M; Sikagard; United States Gypsum Co.; usg.com; Sika; sika.com; BASF; basf.com; Sherwin-Williams Co.; sherwin-williams.com; DuPont; dupont.com; General Electric; hilti.com; Hilti; hilti.com; Holcomb; Dow Coming Corp.; dowcorning.com; RD Taylor and Co.; rdtailey.co.uk; Surtec; surtec.com
- Concrete: U.S. Concrete; us-concrete.com; Headwaters Construction Materials; headwaters.com; Hanson; part of Heidelberg Cement heidelbergcement.com; West Coast Aggregates; wacon.com; BASF; basf.com
- Exterior Wall Systems: Fortifiber Building Systems Group; fortifiber.com; Vaproshield; vaproshied.com; Georgia-Pacific; gp.com; Vycor; www.na.graceconstruction.com; Fry Reglet; fryreglet.com; Stockton Products; stocktonproducts.com; Western Metal Decorating & Finishing; western-metal.com; Structur Wire Corp.; structurawire.com; Sto Corp.; stocorp.com
- Furniture: Ohio Design; ohiodesign.com; Mueller Nicholls; mmbuild.com; Pacasa Studios; Baltix Sustainable Furniture; baltix.com; Steelcase; steelcase.com; Emerco; emerco.net
- HVAC: FAMCO; famcofm.com; Runtal; Runtal America; runtalnorthamerica.com; US Aire; metalindustriesinc.com/usair; Greenheck; greenheck.com; Twin City Fan & Blower; mfc.com; Laars Heating Systems Co.; laars.com; United Enter Tech; unitedenter-tech.com; Modine Mfg. Co.; www.modine.com; Danfoss; danfoss.com; Lighting: Philips Day-Brille; daybrille.com; Birchwood Lighting; birchwoodlighting.com; Spectrum Lighting; speclight.com; National Specialty Lighting; nslusa.com; Prudential Ltg.; prufite.com; HK Lighting Group; hklightinggroup.com; Evergreen; evergreenlighting.com; Cooper Lighting; cooperlightning.com; Dalsal Industries; dalsalindustries.com; B.K Lighting; bklighting.com; WF Harris; holophane.com; Brownie Lighting; brownie.com; Seagull Lighting Products; seagulllighting.com; Lithonia Lighting; lithonia.com
- Metal: Rheinzink; rheinzink.com
- Roofing: American Hydrotech; hydrotechusa.com; Johns Manville; jm.com
- Seating: Green Waste Recycle Yard; greenwaste-recycleyard.com; Eggli Landscape Contractors; eggglilandscape.com; Modern Outdoor; modernoutdoor.com
- Site Products: Concreter works; concreterworks.com; Creative Pipe; creativepipe.com; Forms+Surfaces; formsurfaces.com; Rasmussen Iron Works; rasmussen.biz
- Windows, Curtainwalls, and Doors: Arcadia Architectural Products; arcadiaproducts.com; Nanawall Systems; nanowall.com; Safiti First Fire-Rated Glazing Solutions; safiti.com; U.S. Aluminum; www.usalum.com; Oregon Doors; oregondoor.com
- Door Components: doorcomponents.com

For a full list of Materials and Sources, visit architectmagazine.com.