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The Making of a Market

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## THE MAKING OF A MARKET

Let me begin with what would normally be a conclusion: The Rockridge Market Hall in Oakland is an enormous success.

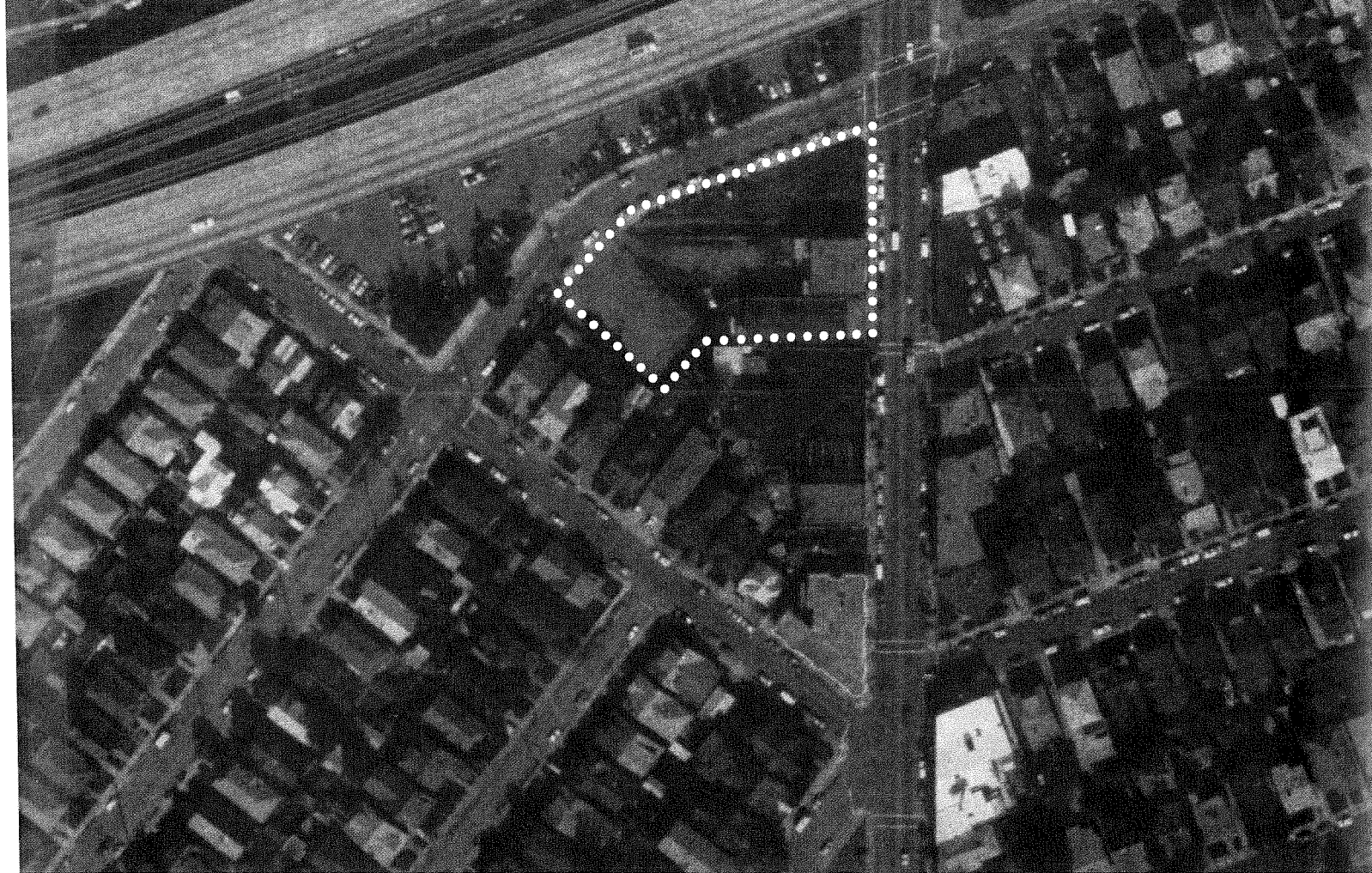
The upscale food vendors are crowded at all hours. The coffee bars are filled, and the customers—both neighborhood residents and outside shoppers—spill out into the sidewalk along with the smell of espresso and fresh bread. The restaurant at the corner draws turn-away crowds. The offices upstairs are all rented, and tenants express great satisfaction with their quarters. Real estate listings use proximity to the Market Hall as a selling point. The building gives a strong architectural focus to a busy and long neglected street corner and establishes a sound relationship with the rest of the buildings on the block.

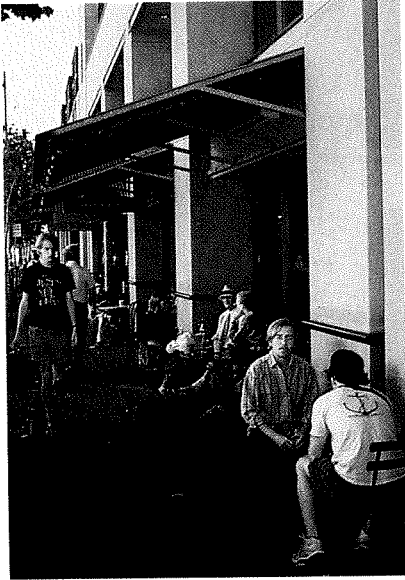
One might expect such a successful development to have had an easy time coming into existence and to have met with much approval along the way, but the Market Hall was almost four years in a troubled path to its creation.

The story of its birth is actually three stories: The first is the ability of its creators to establish a vision and stick with it through the inevitably unpredictable development process; the second is the depth of opposition to the project by its prospective neighbors. The third lies in the conjunction of the first two: What does the Rockridge Market Hall teach us about how we can create good places?

### **The Resurgence of Rockridge**

Rockridge is a small neighborhood in northeast Oakland, built in the 1910s and 1920s as increasing automobile use allowed development to disperse from the city's center. All of the considerable commercial activity in Rockridge takes place on College Avenue, a two-lane street that leads from Broadway, Oakland's original main street, to the University of California campus in Berkeley. The rest of the neighborhood is residential, mostly modest one- or two-story California Craftsman bungalows, with a scattering of small apartment buildings and backyard second units. The neighborhood scene is pleasant in a Norman Rockwell-meets-Bernard Maybeck fashion.





In the mid-1960s, the elevated Grove-Shafter Freeway—and between its divided paths, the tracks of the regional Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART)—cut through the neighborhood. Construction of the freeway and BART, both created to connect San Francisco and Oakland with the growing suburbs beyond the Berkeley and San Leandro Hills to the east, spelled the decline of College Avenue, which became peppered with vacant storefronts.

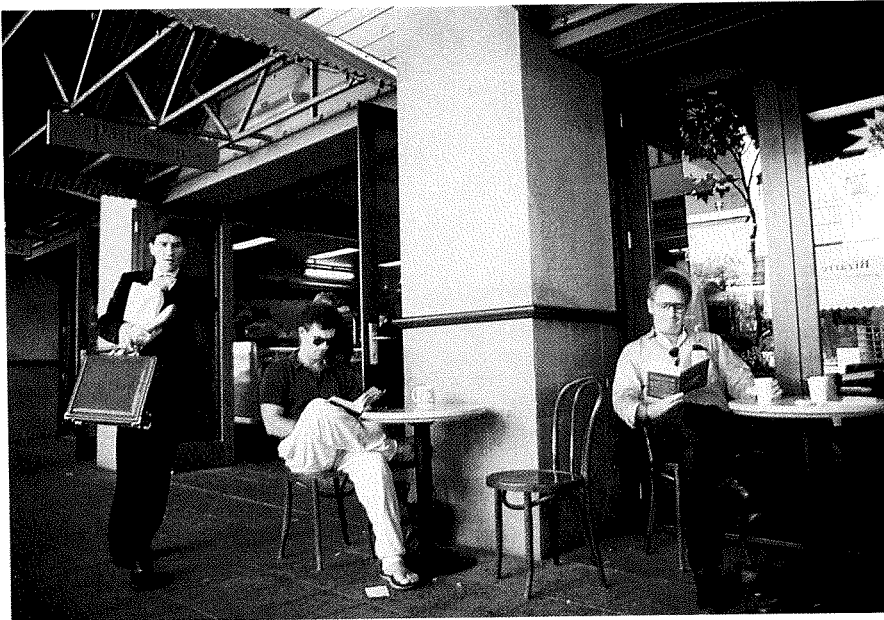
Many neighborhoods never recover from that kind of tear in their fabric. That Rockridge has is the result of several bits of good fortune.

Construction of the freeway and BART held property values down while prices in the rest of the Bay Area skyrocketed. The housing stock was in good condition and consisted almost entirely of single-family houses, while surrounding areas of Oakland and Berkeley were being redeveloped with apartments, townhouses and condominiums. Rockridge was close and convenient to downtown Oakland and San Francisco; easy freeway access and a BART station beckoned white-collar and professional workers with the promise of a quick commute. Its proximity to the Berkeley campus made Rockridge attractive to the academic community as well.

As Rockridge rebounded in the mid-1970s, pressure inevitably mounted to capitalize on the neighborhood's location by developing it more densely. Regional land use planners sought to couple the public investment in the BART station with zoning that would allow denser housing development near the station.

This pressure was thwarted early on by the efforts of a neighborhood association, the Rockridge Community Planning Council, organized in response to a plan to build an apartment building on a small side street. RCPC valued the neighborhood's character, particularly its predominance of single-family homes and the low-rise commercial strip on College (several stores operated out of converted bungalows). The group persuaded the city to downzone substantially the neighborhood, and that restrictive zoning is still in place.

Today Rockridge is one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Oakland, and its success has brought the return of retail business to College Avenue. Even with the soaring rents, though, there are few franchises or chain stores; neighborhood residents have



**Cafe tables line the College Avenue facade. Bi-fold doors with large windows make it easy to see or walk into the bakery, coffee shop and cafe inside.**

**Photos by Todd W. Bressi.**

enough purchasing power to support boutiques, specialty stores and corner bookstores. More importantly, they wish to support them. In the politically liberal East Bay, spending money is often seen as a political and social act, and residents tend not to patronize enterprises owned by a faceless conglomerate when they could buy from a local artisan or merchant. Smallness is considered synonymous with quality.

This is especially true with food shopping and dining. Throughout the Bay Area here are dozens of small clusters of restaurants, wine shops and bakeries. Exotic hybrid vegetables, unique and expensive cheeses and microbrewery beers have a market there as nowhere else.

### **Establishing a Concept**

One of the entrepreneurs looking at Rockridge was Anthony Wilson, a real estate lawyer practicing in the Bay Area. He and his brother Peter, a New York architect, had long been interested in developing properties themselves. Anthony recognized the enormous potential of resurgent Rockridge and purchased a small vacant lot at the busy intersection of College Avenue and Shafter Street (next to the BART station) as well as three houses on the block behind College.

The Wilsons decided to capitalize on the neighborhood's spending habits by creating a food market comprised of many small specialty vendors. They settled on this concept for two reasons. First, most of the site fronted Shafter—which is not a busy pedestrian street—and a parking lot built under the elevated freeway. The Wilsons realized they needed an activity and design that would pull people from the busy College frontage into the depth of the lot—suggesting an open market with many vendors.



**Entrance to Olivetto's, the restaurant/cafe at the corner of College Avenue and Shafter Street.**

**Photo by Norman McGrath, courtesy Wilson Associates.**

Second, both the Wilsons had an interest in food markets. Anthony was intrigued by how the design of markets like New York's South Street Seaport was influenced by marketing concepts. Peter was interested in restaurants and food merchandising.

To begin work on the Market Hall, Anthony called Peter, who was beginning to tire of the succession of designs for office suites and apartment remodelings common to a New York practice, and persuaded Peter to move to the Bay Area. The move foreshadows the brothers' depth of involvement in the Market Hall. From the start, they wanted to build something they would keep—something that would make them proud as they passed it on the street. That meant acting as developer, designer and manager, to make sure the job was done right.

The Wilsons didn't have to look very far for a precedent for either their leasing strategy or design. Less than a mile away on College, a small set of one-story row buildings housed some of the most popular and prosperous food retailers in the East Bay. Three side-by-side stores had openings in

their party walls, enabling shoppers to pass from one store to another without leaving the building. This arrangement offered the convenience of a large market along with the range of choices available only in specialty stores, and was a great success.

The combination of sidewalk frontage and interior connection became the model for the Wilson's market, which they planned as a series of street-level stalls accessible from both sidewalk and interior. The food businesses would be owner-operated, because, they felt, that was the best way to provide accountability and ensure quality.

The Wilsons topped the market with two stories of unspecified "something" to take advantage of the local three-story height limit. They thought offices would be more lucrative than housing, but were unsure of the office market, particularly for the small spaces they would provide. Consequently, their early designs for the upper levels were non-committal: The spaces looked like apartments but could easily be rented as small professional offices.



Shafter Street facade.

Photo by Norman McGrath,  
courtesy Wilson Associates.

### Securing the Site And Starting Construction

In late 1984, during the early stages of design, the L-shaped property next to and behind the Wilson's lot was purchased by Alta Bates Hospital, a large Berkeley health care corporation. The hospital did not really want the entire lot; its plan was to demolish the old wood-frame building that existed and to build a one-story showroom for its volunteer association thrift shop, the Alta Bates Showcase.

The Wilsons seized the opportunity and purchased the rear of the Showcase lot. Realizing the demand for housing in Rockridge, they also proposed demolishing their three houses, directly behind the Showcase lot, to make room for 22 apartments and a two-level parking structure to serve both the market and the apartments.

The neighborhood erupted in protest, and RCPC was determined to defeat the plan. The next RCPC board elections saw a wholesale change of directors, with the neighbors voting in a new group who lived near the Wilsons' properties. This group was

representative of Rockridge's new residents: young, well-educated, politically savvy and committed to protecting the feel of the neighborhoods and the value of homeowners' investments.

Before long the Wilsons realized they were fighting a losing battle. The lots upon which the three houses were situated were zoned for single-family, and the likelihood of obtaining a major variance with such organized neighborhood opposition was almost nil.

But the Wilsons had also made Alta Bates another offer: They would develop two floors of office or residential space above the Showcase building (taking advantage of the three-story height limit) and connect it to the upper two floors of their market building. The Wilsons agreed to pay the extra costs of building the foundation and structural system of the Showcase building so it could support their proposed upper floors, but believed that the price quoted by Alta Bates' contractor was too high.

By late 1985, the negotiations had dragged on to the point at which Alta Bates was ready to start construction, with or without the Wilsons. So the

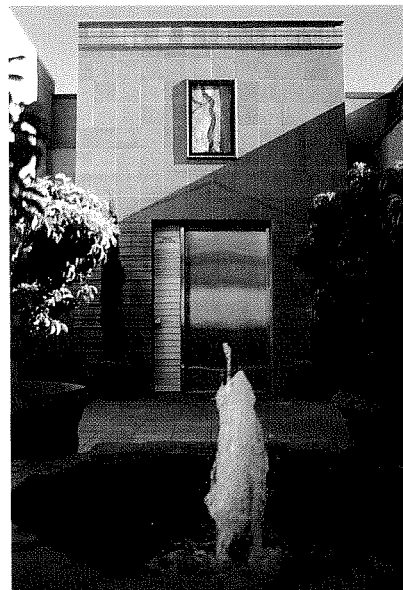
Wilson's switched course and offered to build the entire three-story structure, delivering the completed ground-floor retail space to the hospital as a turnkey project for an agreed-upon price and keeping the top two floors for themselves. Alta Bates accepted, and the Wilsons found themselves, for the first time, in the general contracting business. Two months later, early in 1986—and before the design of the upper levels was finished—construction on the Showcase began.

That spring, when the Wilsons submitted plans for the upper levels of the Showcase building and the city issued a building permit, RCPC again jumped into the fray. The commercial zoning along College Avenue mandates a neighborhood design review process for all projects; RCPC members claimed the only plans they had ever seen for that site were for the hospital's one-story building.

Claiming proof of the Wilson's deception, RCPC pointed to the Environmental Report that Alta Bates had filed for the Showcase Building. That report, filed when the hospital was still considering its original plan, was specifically for a single-story building. When the RCPC discovered the discrepancy between the ER and the permit, construction was halted. But within two weeks, the Wilsons (who claim to have formally notified both Oakland's planning department and RCPC earlier about the change in plans) had obtained a revised ER and construction resumed.

The transaction with Alta Bates allowed the Wilsons to refine several aspects of the Market Hall design. First, they were now able to push the parking for the Market Hall back from the original corner lot onto the rear lot, giving them an extra 40 to 50 feet of Shafter Street frontage and room for two extra vendors.

**Courtyard on third level.**  
**Photo by Norman McGrath,**  
**courtesy Wilson Associates.**



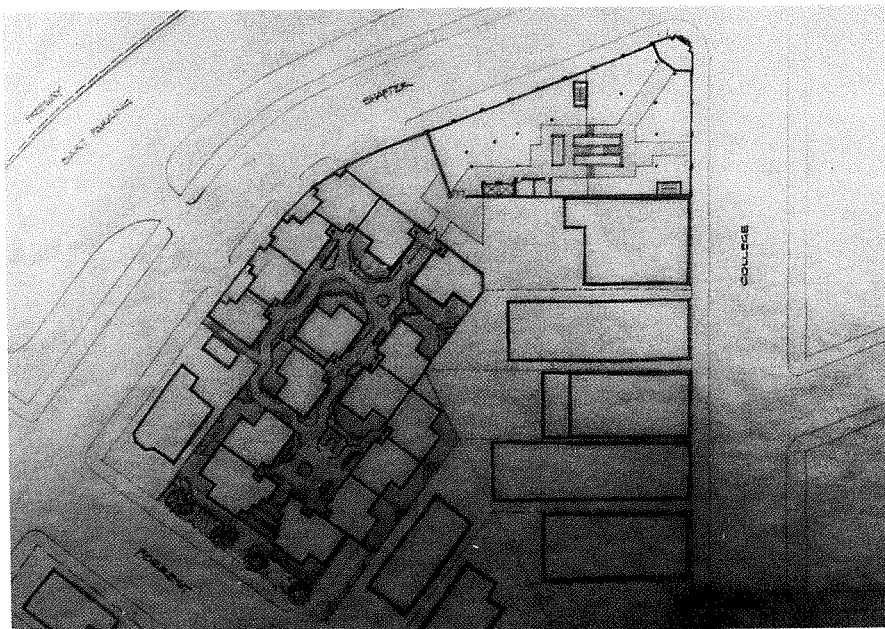
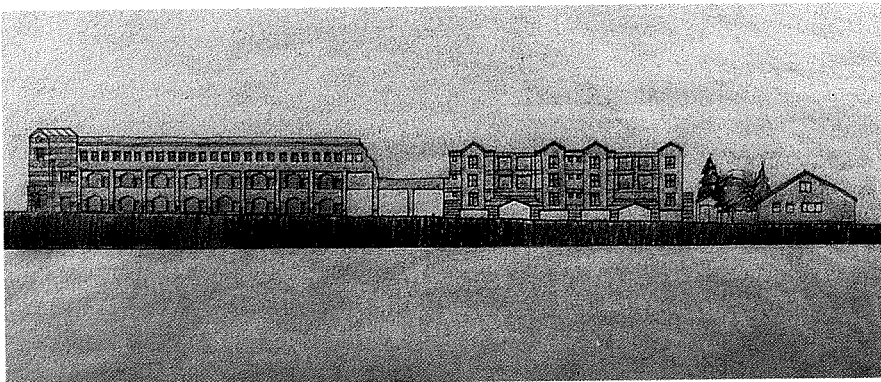
**Stairway leading from Shafter Street to upper-level professional offices.**  
**Photo by Norman McGrath,**  
**courtesy Wilson Associates.**



More important, Alta Bates, known for its many mental health services, pointed out the existence of a large community of psychologists, therapists and other mental health professionals who were sorely in need of accessible office space. The Wilsons saw an opportunity to give the undefined upper floors of the Market Hall a focus.

Finally, the question of access to the upper floors had to be settled. Alta Bates refused to allow access through the Showcase to the Wilsons' floors above, so Peter planned a small stairwell at the College Avenue end of the Market Hall and a larger, open air staircase at the rear Shafter Street

**The evolution of the plan: sketches of an early proposal for apartments and a parking garage behind the market. Graphics courtesy Wilson Associates.**



edge. These complemented the articulated entry tower at the corner of College and Shafter, and gave a visual termination to both of the two-story-plus-mansard street facades.

### **Getting It Built, Leasing Up**

With the Showcase underway, the Wilsons realized they would have to start construction on the Market Hall soon. As of yet, they had little financing and no tenants. Fearing they could not obtain bank financing without tenants in place, they leased the corner space at College and Shafter and a second-story loft above the market to Olivetto's, a restaurant/cafe.

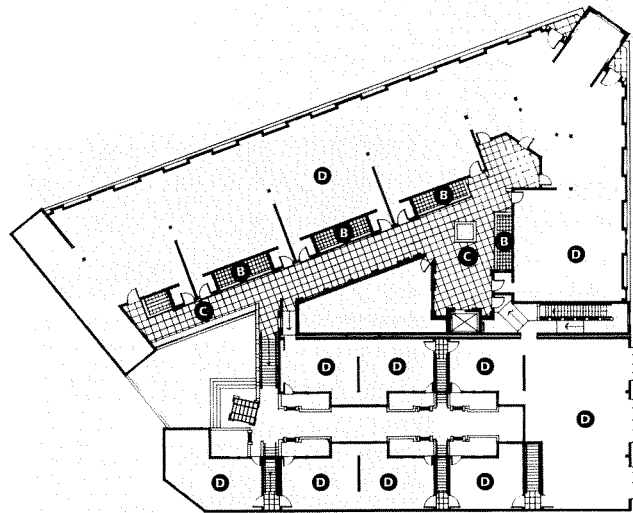
The brothers were not completely happy with the decision. They wanted both a market and a restaurant, but both demanded space on the first floor and along the street. Unable to make room for both (and fearing the loft would be hard to rent) they reluctantly gave Olivetto's the next best thing: the corner entrance.

That decision changed the interior layout of the market, which had been planned as two rows of food stalls strung along a walkway leading lengthwise from the corner to the back of the building. Now, Peter planned a bending walkway that started at College Avenue, wrapped behind Olivetto's corner cafe, then turned along the Shafter edge of the market. The revision was an improvement, but the brothers were unhappy about the extent to which a leasing arrangement dictated the design.

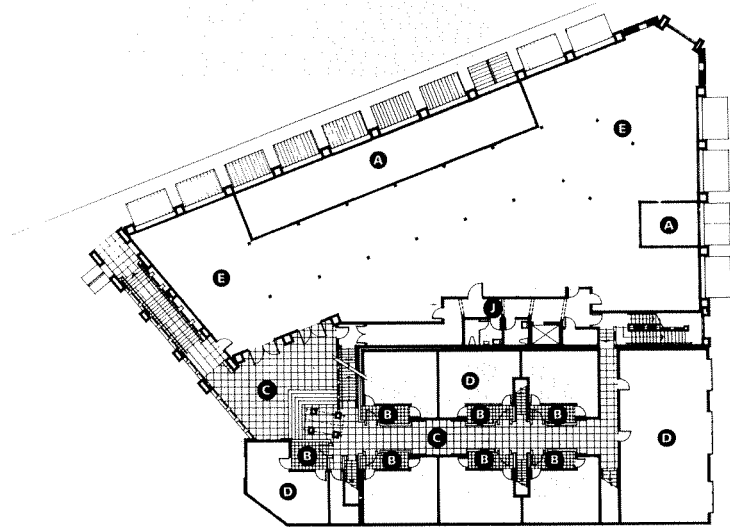
The change also angered some neighbors, who had heard an earlier version of the plans explained at design review meetings. Even though the facades had not been changed (which is all the design review process covers, technically), the layout and circulation of the building were dramatically dif-



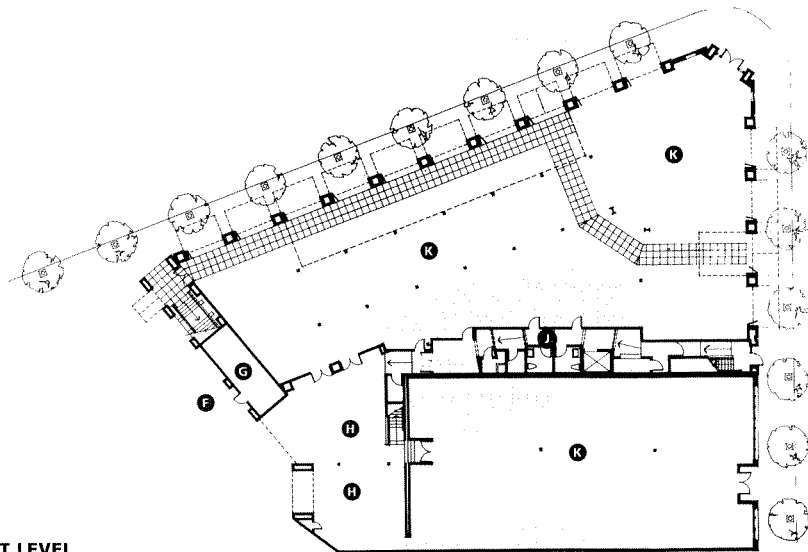
Plan of Market Hall and upper-level professional offices.



THIRD LEVEL



SECOND LEVEL



FIRST LEVEL

- A Open
- B Private Courtyard
- C Public Courtyard
- D Office
- E Storage/Restaurant
- F Parking
- G Electrical Room
- H Service Bay
- J Service Corridor
- K Retail

**Opposite:**

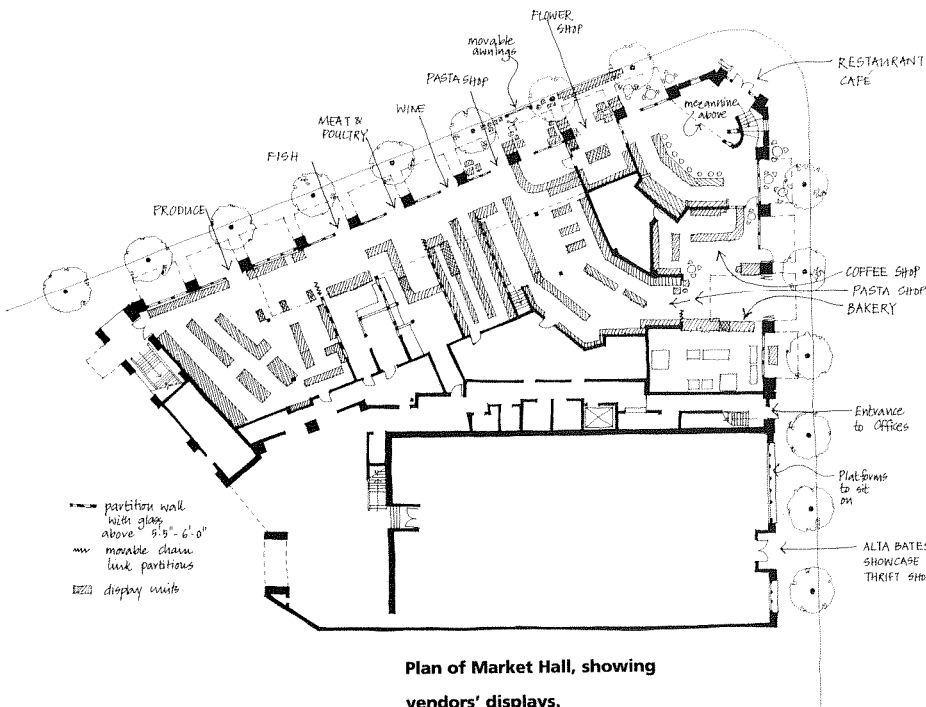
**The "path" along the Shafter Street side of the Market Hall, with abutting vendors' stalls.**

**Photo by Norman McGrath, courtesy Wilson Associates.**



**Flower shop on Shafter Street side of the Market Hall.**

**Photo by Norman McGrath.**



**Plan of Market Hall, showing vendors' displays.**

**Graphic by Neema Kudva.**

ferent. Once again, the neighbors felt misled, deceived and powerless.

Recruiting local food merchants for the project was difficult, and the Wilsons were still searching when construction began in late 1986. North Berkeley, with its myriad specialty food shops, was an attractive hunting ground but most of the shopkeepers were either content with one store or unsure of their ability to operate a second. The prospective tenants located by real estate agents were franchises, which ran counter to the Wilsons' vision for owner-operated businesses.

The Wilsons tried a new tactic. They purchased The Pasta Shop, which was operating nearby on College Avenue, moved it to the Market Hall and hired their sister to run it. They started a bakery and butcher shop from scratch and found a baker and butcher willing to manage them by canvassing their contacts with local restaurants.

There still was no major commitment to financing when construction began, partly because of the lack of tenants (since Olivetto's was a start-up restaurant, lenders still considered the project risky), partly because of the unusual character of the Alta Bates deal. So the Wilsons started construction with their own money and small loans from personal contacts. Eventually they were able to obtain a loan for about half the cost of the building from a local savings and loan, and another loan for the tenant improvements. With that, the Market Hall was completed and opened in 1987.

As the project was nearing completion in 1987, the frustrated and wary RCPC embarked on a different route, one which would put the neighborhood (its members believed) on the offensive. The group applied for and received more than \$30,000 in city funding to prepare a Rockridge Area



Specific Plan, which would amend the city's general plan, spelling out the direction for future growth and development in Rockridge. RCPC sees the plan as the only way it can influence the long-term direction of the neighborhood. Rather than react to each proposed development, the group reasons, it can now incorporate its own vision into city policy.

### An Appraisal

If we look at the Market Hall as an object, a place and a destination, then it is a great success. If we see it for its process, it shows just how tenuous are our opportunities to get good places, and how far we have yet to go.

The design of the ground-floor market was integral to the Wilsons' tenancy plans, and is what makes the Market Hall unique. They believed the owner-operator tenants they hoped to attract would want a very visible street presence, because of both the obvious advertising advantages and the romantic storefront atmosphere that would be projected by stalls facing the public street. Thus they wanted to avoid the typical double-loaded interior corridor that would render the market a self-contained mall with stores visually and physically cut off from the street.

The solution was to line each facade with 15-foot bays that open to the sidewalk and connect to the interior path, which touches the front of each shop along the way (except the Pasta Shop, which it traverses, and the flower shop, which fronts only on Shafter).

All of the shops are open to one another and all can be seen from the middle of the curve in the path. This is because the ceiling is raised to double height above the path along the Shafter facade, allowing more afternoon sun to reach the market. The partitions between the bays exhibit



Shafter Street side of the Market Hall.  
Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

varying levels of transparency: In the rear, near the storage and service areas, there are solid walls; in the merchandising areas, there are either openings or partitions made of glass; when a store is to be closed off, a mesh gate is pulled across the path. Altogether, this creates a sense of expansiveness, airiness and connection.

A trip through the market is visually dense but never confining. Each shop pays rent on its portion of the path and can display within its limits — some even display goods on the sidewalk outside. The effect is one of great bustle and activity, a spilling out from each merchant's bay onto the semi-public space of the path and the public way outside.

This permeability is apparent from the outside, as well. The Market Hall's street-level facade consists of a series of wood-frame bi-fold doors with large, plate-glass windows. When the doors are folded open, there is no sense of a wall between the outside and inside; pedestrians can wander freely between the market and the street without having the sense of passing through a door. A few mer-

chants elect to keep some of the doors in front of their shops closed and put low baskets of produce or cases of wines in front of them, but the interior remains visible.

Even if the doors are closed, passersby can easily see that food businesses extend along the length of the Shafter facade. And cafe tables are clustered under the galvanized metal awnings along College, luring pedestrians into Olivetto's, the coffee shop and the bakery.

On the upper levels, the Wilsons created a courtyard scheme, emphasizing privacy and security, while using open-air courts and passages to maintain a spacious and street-like atmosphere. In fact, the third-level courtyard is a one-half scale duplication of the ground floor facade, with its corner tower and repeated bays. The main court, on the second level at the top of the grand staircase, offers a wonderful view of Rockridge, with the San Francisco skyline barely visible above the treetops.

The Wilsons developed this project almost single-handedly: They were the architect and client, did their own legal work in the complex Alta Bates negotiations, acted as general contractor, provided the initial financing for the Market Hall, acted as the real estate agent in finding their own tenants, loaned their own money to one tenant to start up a bakery and owned two of the shops themselves (they still own one, having sold the meat shop to the butcher who operates it), and are still the day-to-day operators.

This in-house process allowed the Wilsons many important advantages. First, of course, it saved them tens of thousands of dollars in what would have been profits and commissions for the contractor, lawyer, real estate agent and others. This project would never have been built if, for instance, a

developer had had to spend \$50,000 on legal fees to negotiate the deal with Alta Bates.

Some of this savings found its way back into the building. The Wilsons chose Italian tile for the facade and specially ordered the bi-fold doors from a German manufacturer. They paid local artists to create sculptures that now grace the gates of the upstairs office suites. (The addition of the sculptures was serendipitous: The Wilsons gave the metals contract to a local sculptor who did metal work on the side and who suggested that his friends could embellish the gates.)

Second, this process allowed the Wilsons to exercise a control over the project that they would not have been able to maintain within any single role. They did not have to compromise with weak or franchise-backed merchants, they continue to pay close attention to the quality of merchandise sold there and the quantity of business done, and they exercise what Peter calls with a smile "paternal control" over the leases.

But the biggest advantage was the amazing flexibility with which the Wilsons could work toward their



**View of Rockridge from the third level.**

**Passage leading to offices from second level.**

**Photos by Norman McGrath, courtesy Wilson Associates.**



### A Model for Placemaking?

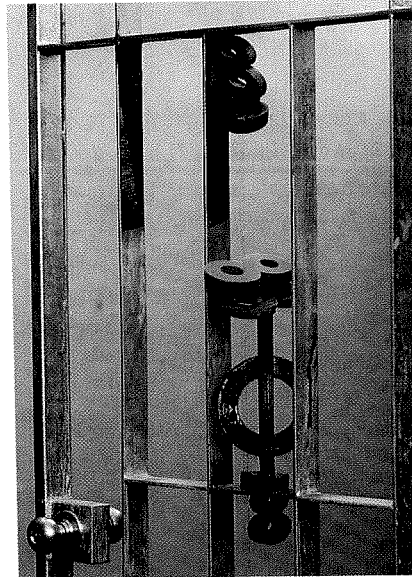
In the deregulatory 1980s, the return to Social Darwinism—whoever wins is right—has taken away many mechanisms for cooperation, consensus and broadened vision. Is it necessary that placemaking so often become a sporting event, RCPC versus Wilson Associates, in a fight to the finish?

The Wilsons felt no compunction about proposing apartments in the single-family zone because, they say, “it’s an established planning principle that residential areas are buffered from commercial by apartment zones.” On the other hand, RCPC can state: “Fifteen years ago, the Rockridge community, led by RCPC and the College Avenue Merchants Association created special zoning for College Avenue and the adjacent residential neighborhoods.... Now we are the ones best suited to review them, improve them and add to them where necessary....”

The story suggests a greater role for government. The Oakland city planning department was decimated by former Mayor Lionel Wilson (no relation) and is just beginning a long climb from its current status as a mere record-keeping agency. The General Plan has not been attended to in years, and the department has been blown about by the political winds. By abdicating its intermediary role, Oakland, like many other cities, has fostered an unnecessarily combative relationship between strong developers and active anti-growth groups, one in which there must be a winner and loser.

Yet no planning process, no city plan, by itself can guarantee good places. The quality of a place is by nature based on a commitment to the future of that place.

The Wilsons knew that they were going to be connected to the Market Hall long after its physical completion, and were thus willing to take the un-



**Sculptures installed on entrance gates to professional offices.**

**Left, by Gale Wagner and Don Rich.**

**Right, by Joe Slusky.**

**Photos by Norman McGrath, courtesy Wilson Associates.**

vision. Each time a change in context came up—be it the shift from purchasing the Showcase air rights to developing the building turnkey, the modification of the pedestrian circulation pattern in the market, or the fight with the neighborhood over the apartments—the Wilsons could make unilateral decisions without having to involve a host of peripheral parties. This allowed them to make mid-course corrections with ease, turning their project to the new circumstances while still making steady progress toward their unchanging goal.

Together, these advantages enabled the Wilsons to establish a vision and stick with it. The initial vision was not whole, and they were able to extend and elaborate it as specific circumstances arose.

That the Wilsons approached the problems this way can be attributed not only to the range of skills and interests they personally brought to the collaboration, or to their inexperience in the development process, but also to their desire to make a place that would be worth calling their own.

sual risks and responsibilities necessary to follow their vision. But we know that such commitment is rare indeed; RCPC can hardly feel comfortable depending on the *noblesse oblige* of the development community to protect and advance the neighborhood.

Similarly, Rockridge residents had a vision for their community that they were interested—and skilled—in articulating through a planning and political process. But the Wilsons would be justified in wondering to what extent that vision included the capability for transformation and to what extent it rested on an unyielding conformity with the status quo.

What is called for, perhaps, is a forum in which visions such as these can be aired, tested, elaborated, and nurtured; compared and contrasted to other visions; and critiqued. In Rockridge, the discussions that are leading to the formulation of a specific plan could turn out to provide such an opportunity. Whatever the forum—a planning procedure, community charrette, student studio, or some other process—it is important that these visions can be expressed and understandings forged before money is on the line or environmental change is imminent.

**Third-level courtway, and walkway leading to professional offices.**

**Photo by Norman McGrath, courtesy Wilson Associates.**

