

UCSF Medical Center's new stem cell labs building

John King, Chronicle Urban Design Critic
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Next to hospitals, the most stultifying new buildings in American cities are large laboratories. Most are shaped solely to satisfy the needs of the researchers inside, leaving the rest of us to contemplate squat boxes wrapped in thin veneers of stone or glass.

That's what makes the latest example in San Francisco such a startling exception to the rule. Dubbed the Ray and Dagmar Dolby Regeneration Medicine Building, it's a 700-foot-long addition to UCSF's Parnassus Heights campus that slides along Mount Sutro like an elongated silver snake, perched on stilts with an upreared head facing the ocean.

Audacious and practical at once, the \$123 million facility is a unique response to a unique site. But there is a larger moral as well: This distinctive structure underscores how our region's terrain is something to be celebrated by architects and their clients, not subdued.

The 68,500-square-foot building, which will open next week, houses UCSF's stem cell research efforts with room for up to 300 professors, support staff and graduate and post-doctoral students. It's located here rather than the university's Mission Bay campus because of a desire for proximity to the UCSF Medical Center, a top-rated hospital.

Campus constrained

Adding another building to Parnassus Heights wasn't easy; the campus is constrained by geography as well as legal agreements that limit the overall amount of space allowed.

New York architect Rafael Vinoly responded to the constraints with imagination. Instead of trying to wedge a modest tower into the narrow, steep site, he split the needed space into four batches of offices and open labs, stringing them together in overlapping tiers.

Tower laid flat

The result is a structure longer than the One Rincon tower next to the Bay Bridge is tall. The methodical ascension also allows each section to have its own landscaped rooftop terrace, a simple cloak of native grasses and wildflowers that's a counterpoint of sorts to the undulating green roof of the California Academy of Sciences downhill in Golden Gate Park.

The skin is simple corrugated steel; the building has no foyer or reception area, no detail that smacks of

architectural pomp. Viewed from above, it's a sleek undulation.

View from below

The view from the campus below, by contrast, could be a flashback to imagined but unbuilt 1960s-era megastructures. Thickets of trusses flare from 42 seismic isolators that are attached to concrete piers that lock into the slope. The chain of work spaces tops off the show.

This is linear drama on diagonal stilts - and smart seismic engineering that uses the same type of system inserted beneath such treasures as San Francisco's City Hall. In a strong earthquake, the isolators should absorb all the motion. The mountain shakes, the labs stand still.

(The underpinning to the labs, by the way, is so tall that you enter the facility by crossing a bridge attached to the *ninth floor* of the tower across the way.)

While Vinoly deserves credit for seeing the potential of the site - his firm is billed as design architect - turning vision into reality was a team effort. Architect of record SmithGroup worked with DPR Construction to streamline the audacity into something that would fit UCSF's budget. Nabih Youssef Associates crafted the structural design concept, which was completed by Forell/Elsesser Engineers.

Natural solution

The building, thankfully, isn't nearly as contorted as the credits. It feels like a natural solution, emphatic but right.

Make no mistake, the site's constraints shaped the happy outcome at the Dolby building, named for the project's largest donors. Yet the collision here between the built and natural terrains isn't jarring; the virtues of each are shown to greater advantage as a result.

And this is nothing new. San Francisco's landscape is memorable in large part because of contrasts - the grid against the hills, the horizontal drape of homes against steep Twin Peaks. Strong urban strokes don't blur nature, they emphasize it. Often this point is irrelevant; often it comes into play. When it does, other architects and clients should take cues from Mount Sutro's silver snake, and play up the drama to the hilt.

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