

BAY AREA

'It's marvelous': Berkeley's newest architectural gem is a 16-foot-tall chess board

By **John King**

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 Gift Article





The chessboard glass wall of the Berkeley Chess School provides a smile-inducing antidote to the sameness of the buildings that fill San Pablo Avenue.

Colin Peck/Special to The Chronicle

Every older city has at least one major street lined with utilitarian businesses, those humdrum strips where the only thing most buildings have in common is that they are easy to forget.

Berkeley's is San Pablo Avenue. Where, I kid you not, the newest architectural highlight is a structure completed late last year that meets the sidewalk with a flat wall punctuated by a single enormous window consisting of 64 identically sized panes of glass.

“The city is full of new glass buildings,” explained Elizabeth Shaughnessy, whose Berkeley Chess School is located inside. “This is unique. This is chess.”

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Elizabeth Shaughnessy, founder and executive director of the Berkeley Chess School, sits in the front room of the school's newly renovated space.

Colin Peck/Special to The Chronicle

It's also a smile-inducing antidote to the placelessness of so many new buildings in Berkeley, the Bay Area and across America. Better yet, consider it a tutorial on the virtues of imaginative practicality — more than big budgets or stylistic fads — as a way to bring urban streets to life.

The work in question is the enlarged and enhanced home of the chess school, which moved in 2017 to an oft-altered house on the 2600 block of San Pablo. Set back from the sidewalk, with small windows and a sad coat of dark paint, the 1925 structure was nondescript even by the standards of a block that includes a Big O Tires, an upscale tea shop, a cabinet showroom and a recently built Kaiser Permanente medical center.

The school has been in existence since 1982, coupling free programs in public schools with on-site classes and tournaments that demonstrate the game's enduring appeal; this month's roster of events ran the gamut from senior tournaments to weekly classes for kids ages 5 to 7. The appeal of the glum house was that the prior owner — a church that now occupies the storefront next door — had converted most of the upstairs into a single-room meeting space.



Exterior design of the Berkeley Chess School, with its illuminated glass chessboard.
Colin Peck/Special to The Chronicle

“The first thing I saw was this room and I thought, ‘It’s a tournament hall,’ ”
said Shaughnessy, whose honors include winning the Irish Women’s Chess
Championship in 1970.

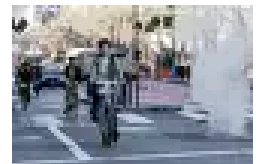
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The catch: That space lacked the easy access that common decency and federal regulations require. An elevator was needed. But why stop there?

Shaughnessy wanted to create a spacious foyer at ground level — “As a woman, my inclination was to have the entrance be more social” — and, in the process, place a mezzanine-level classroom above.

Fortunately for Shaughnessy, one of her pupils was the son of Jasmit Rangr, an architect raised in India whose work tends to involve custom houses. The wish list for what became a 1,200-square-foot addition intrigued him.

City zoning allowed extra space to go in front of the existing home, which made it possible to pull the structure's new front wall out to the sidewalk. The next question was how to illuminate the interior without exposing the foyer *too* much.

A prior architect had proposed an expansive glass window. Rangr conceived something different: today's 16 foot-by-16 foot chessboard.

"Big walls of glass cost money, so I got to wondering what I could do that would be cheaper," Rangr recalled. "Small panes are a lot less expensive. That's when I thought of chess."

The design consists of 64 panels, two feet square, 32 with tinted black glass and 32 done with acid etching to be translucent and white, colors alternating like a you-know-what alongside gray stucco. The assembly was done within a standard metal frame.

Passersby might not be able to play a game on the enormous decorative board, but still: checkmate!

"It's a straightforward storefront wall, the cheapest system you can get," Range said. "The metaphor is that you see the chess board and walk into the world of chess."

Other than a moment of tension while city reviewers debated whether the flourish should be classified as a logo (forbidden) or a window (allowed), there were no real snags. Various bureaucratic hurdles took longer than expected: San Pablo Avenue is also State Highway 123, for instance, so Caltrans had to sign off. But the addition was finished in time to serve as a gathering place for November's Senior Women's National Championship, sponsored in part by the U.S. Chess Federation.

The client is pleased: “I love the airiness of it,” said Shaughnessy, referring to the high-ceilinged foyer where parents can linger while waiting for their children to scramble downstairs from the spacious tournament hall and recount their exploits. “It’s marvelous.”

We should be pleased, too.

Streets like San Pablo Avenue are everywhere. On the Peninsula it is El Camino Real. In central Contra Costa County it’s the 23.6 mile strip that bears seven different names between Martinez and San Ramon.

They also tend to be repositories of everyday life. Which is fine. We need places to fix our car or buy a lamp or grab a quick bite on the way somewhere else. So why shouldn’t architecture hint at the potential richness of everyday life? Small touches — distinctive signage or a splash of neon or, yes, a 256-square-foot chess board — can make the mundane into something memorable.

At its core, the Berkeley Chess School celebrates the value of focused thought. The school’s new sidewalk presence embodies that value, as well, in ways that extend far beyond the game in question.

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URBAN DESIGN CRITIC



John King is The Chronicle’s urban design critic and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist who joined the staff in 1992. His new book is “Portal: San Francisco’s Ferry Building and the Reinvention of American Cities,” published by W.W. Norton.



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