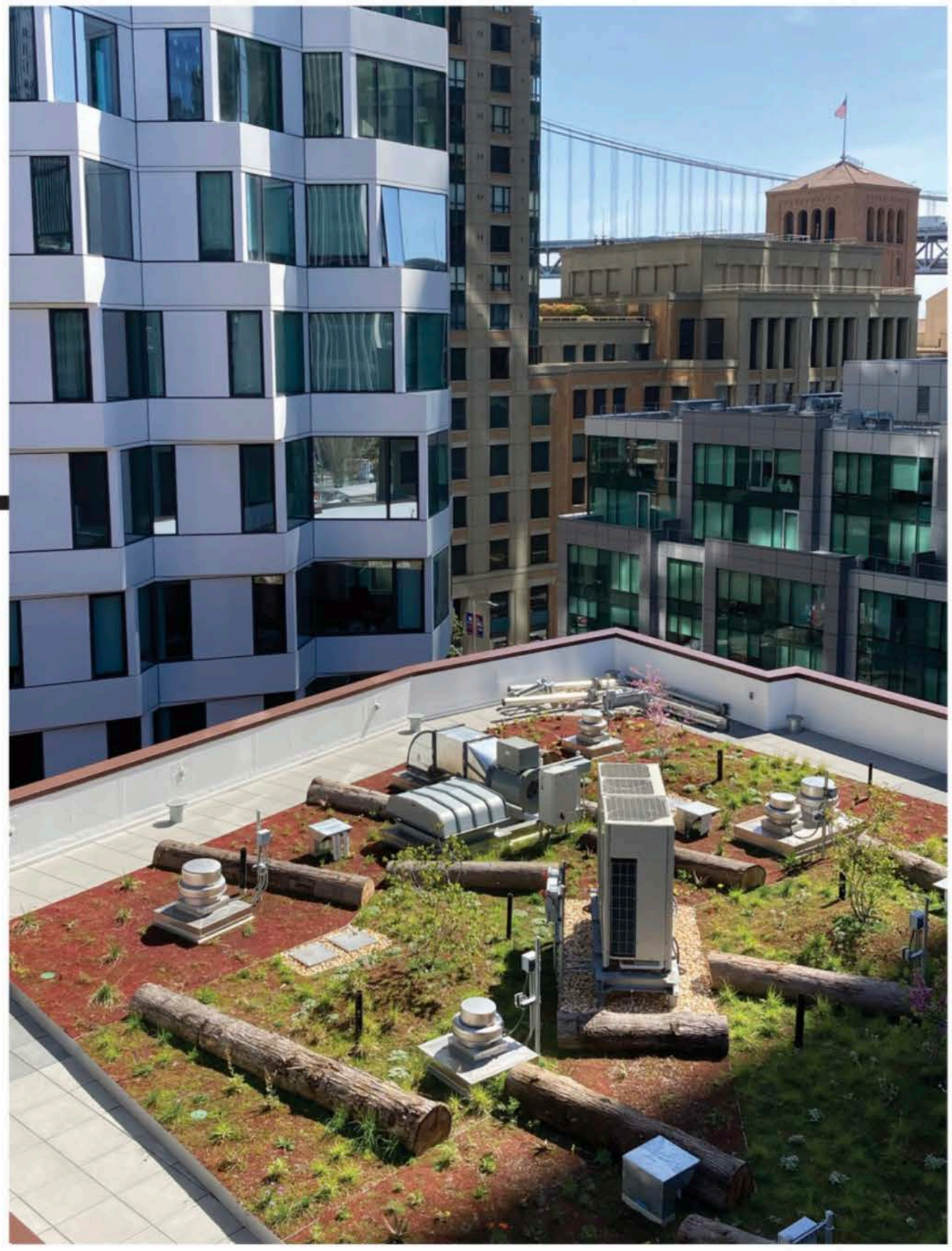
LOGGED ON

DECAYING LOGS BECOME ROOFTOP HABITAT FOR SAN FRANCISCO'S MIRA TOWER.

BY JOHN KING, HONORARY ASLA



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ABOVE
The log-studded rooftop on a lower wing of the new Mira tower will provide habitat for insects and protection for small birds.

Like many large buildings erected during the past 15 years, San Francisco's Mira residential tower covers several of its roofs with vegetation. This is partly to provide a visual amenity to people living or working higher up in the air, and partly for the environmental benefits of absorbing rainfall and sunlight.

But the landscapes that top one wing of the 39-story high-rise include another feature that isn't nearly so common: several dozen thick logs of western red cedar lying amid the *Sedum* and flowering plants and mechanical equipment, as part of a landscape design effort to create a more varied habitat for insects and birds in a dense urban district.

"Any green roof is good, but we began thinking about how we could make this a richer contribution to the larger setting," says Zoee Astrachan, the principal of INTERSTICE Architects in San Francisco. "It's an ecological link."

This deployment of felled trunks, bark and all, is on a pair of small rooftops that is off-limits to residents of the eye-catching Studio Gang-designed tower that stands one block from the Embarcadero waterfront. The rest of the INTERSTICE design offers a range of handsome but more conventional amenities, including pedestrian mews and an amphitheater-like public staircase that leads up to a private courtyard thick with birch trees.

The project is in the city's Transbay district, where recently added towers like Mira come with low-rise wings of five to eight stories to allow light to

LEFT
The designers hope that the local felled logs will attract bugs and birds as they decompose.

reach the street. Working alongside Studio Gang, Astrachan and INTERSTICE's cofounder Andrew Dunbar saw the potential of using rooftops otherwise cluttered with vents and machinery to add to the episodic strand of green spaces that are tucked among the towers, from leafy upper-floor terraces on several nearby buildings to the 5.4-acre rooftop park of the city's new three-block transit center located just east of Mira.

Astrachan and Dunbar's only requirements for the logs were that they came from within the Bay Area and that they were reclaimed wood. Once on site, they were placed between the attractive bands of red and blue drought-tolerant plants, with an eye to the long-term benefits of slow decay. As the large logs gradually decompose in the next 15 to 20 years, the hope is that the microenvironments will attract the likes of spiders, beetles, and pill bugs, which in turn would attract birds. They might also offer protection for small birds from larger predators, as any varied landscape does.

Haven Kiers, ASLA, an assistant professor of landscape architecture in the human ecology department at the University of California, Davis, is intrigued by the strategy. "For biodiversity, you want to have layers. I'm excited about the potential," says Kiers, who has seen decaying logs used on rooftops in Switzerland but not in the United States. As to whether small insects will find their way to a pair of small rooftops above commuter arteries, she suggests that "some will come in the plants, or they may already be in the logs."

INTERSTICE has not begun a monitoring program to gauge the extent to which the haphazardly arranged logs—aesthetically likened by Astrachan to "trees floating on the bay"—attract and provide sustenance for a wider range of species than a conventional green roof. But one is likely. "It will be really interesting to start taking a closer look in a year or two," Astrachan says. "The only way to judge success is by the way it functions, not just how it looks to folks up above." ●

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