



Michael Maltzan Architecture

Rainbow Apartments, a housing project for the homeless in downtown Los Angeles designed by the architect Michael Maltzan.

Defying The Odds On a Project In Skid Row

LOS ANGELES — It's a short trip from the excesses of Beverly Hills to the despair of skid row. Few architects bother to make it.

Michael Maltzan is an exception.

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Long a darling of wealthy art world patrons, he is now laboring on the most extravagant project of his career: a 28,000-square-foot glass

house for the former Hollywood powerbroker Michael Ovitz. But since opening his office here in 1995, Mr. Maltzan has also devoted part of his creative energy to a string of projects in a derelict section of downtown Los Angeles that has become one of the nation's most notorious homeless encampments.

His first solo project there, Inner-City Arts, completed in 1995 and expanded in 2002, was an entrancing enclave of sculptured stucco-clad buildings — a theater, library, teaching spaces and ceramics studios — for after-school arts programs at the edge of skid row. Now, he has returned with two new housing complexes for the area: a recently completed 89-unit project for the chronically homeless and mentally ill and a 100-unit apartment complex for the homeless elderly and physically disabled that is scheduled to break ground this summer.

In an age when so much architectural talent seems to serve the aspirations of a wealthy, cultured elite or to deliver a wow factor for arts tour-

A creative solution to a city's homeless problem.

ists, the project is a refreshing rarity. Bold and communally minded, with flashes of genuine elegance, the two housing complexes reassure you that a keen architectural intelligence and a social conscience are not necessarily at odds. In a better world, the projects would emerge as a model for a far-reaching architectural and social agenda.

The projects, known as the Rainbow Apartments and the New Carver Apartments and run by the non-profit Skid Row Housing Trust, reflect changing thinking about how best to reintegrate the homeless into society. Small in scale, the complexes have a prominent visual relationship to the community. On-site providers of support services, from social workers to health care professionals, are situated where they are most needed: in the building where these people live.

Given the tight budget requirements — a deplorable constant for almost any housing project intended for the poor — there was little room for subtle touches. Instead Mr. Maltzan strove to enliven the \$10 million Rainbow Apartments with a series of bold, straightforward design moves. The windows along the simple stucco exterior are arranged in a rhythmic, asymmetrical pattern and framed by bright red galvanized metal light shades. Inside, the first floor is most-

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ly devoted to the social and medical services, the project's literal and metaphorical base.

Tenants ascend a bright red staircase to reach the apartment level. The staircase narrows as it rises, giving you a sense of acceleration. From the top of the stair, tenants pass beneath the bridgelike form of the community room before entering a small courtyard framed by five stories of apartments on three sides.

Because of the pressure to limit costs, many of the details that Mr. Maltzan had first hoped to include in the design were eliminated. Perhaps most important, he had to drop a series of metal scrim that would have shaded the walkways overlooking the courtyard, lending the space a more ethereal, filtered aura. The big plate-glass windows he sought for the community kitchen and laundry room to forge a strong visual connection with the courtyard were also rejected as too expensive.

Yet the architecture was strong enough to resist defeat. The building's general layout is a loose interpretation of the Spanish-style courtyard apartment buildings that have been a staple of Los Angeles architecture since the late 19th century. Mr. Maltzan's emphasis is on communal spaces: the main entry staircase is conceived as an informal hangout for tenants; the open-air walkways that overlook the courtyard connect to a communal kitchen and common room, further breaking down the sense of isolation.



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times



Will Carson/Michael Maltzan Architecture

Mr. Maltzan reinforces all this by visually weaving the protective inner world of the housing complex into the rough-and-tumble fabric of the city outside. At each level, the walkways that line the interior court wind around to the outside of the building, offering views over downtown rooftops. From one upper-level staircase, tenants can gaze upon their own

A walkway overlooking the courtyard, above, at the Rainbow Apartments. At left, a model of the New Carver Apartments.

past: the lost souls and makeshift cardboard shelters that litter skid row. Just beyond are the twinkling, crystalline towers of downtown Los Angeles, a juxtaposition that conjures the sly social subtext (walking dead versus corporate suits) of a George A. Romero zombie movie.

Mr. Maltzan will have a chance to refine his ideas in his design for the \$15 million Carver Apartments, a circular six-story building planned for a site along the elevated 110 Freeway, a mile or so to the southwest.

Like Rainbow, Carver is set around a central court, but its form

promises to offer more formal drama. Nestled against the freeway, the cylindrical exterior is broken up into a series of vertical bands, creating a sawtooth pattern on the facade that is a subtle play on the relationship between the individual and the collective. It will also be visible to commuters driving by on the freeway, underscoring the idea that this is not about keeping the poor out of sight.

Mr. Maltzan hopes to anchor the Carver design firmly in the outside world without losing the sense of a sanctuary. The ground-floor social services offices will be more open to the street, with big shop windows. And as tenants climb to the upper stories, the communal spaces will offer carefully framed views of the surrounding city.

The wedge-shaped laundry and community room on the third floor is set at the exact level of the freeway, so that tenants can virtually make eye contact with drivers inching by in their cars at rush hour. Farther up, a terrace opens onto a sweeping view of the city's downtown towers — this one more distant and romantic than the view from Rainbow.

Both complexes prove that even as the government turns to under-financed private institutions to help care for the poor, it is possible to push for innovative and humane design. Here architecture is used as a tool not only for aesthetic upliftment, but also to forge both a strong sense of community and a visual presence for the poor in a city that often seems to have forgotten them.

Shocking, isn't it? Imagine if this became a commonplace.