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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ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

The 25,000-square-foot glass house for the former Hollywood powerbroker Michael Ovitz. Since opening his office here in 1995, Mr. Maltzan has also devoted part of his creative energy to a string of projects in a dire 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 1998 and expanded in 2002, was an electrifying confluence of sculptured stucco-clad buildings — a theater, library, teaching spaces and offices — 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 88-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 venues, 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 nonprofit 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 subtleties. Instead Mr. Maltzan strove to enrich 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

Continued From First Arts Page

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 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. 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 inclining by in their cars at rush hour. Further 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 underfinanced 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 forgo 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.