

Social
Transpar-
ency:
Projects on
Housing

Michael
Maltzan

with essays
by Hilary
Sample,
Niall
McLaughlin,
& Florian
Idenburg

SOCIAL TRANSPARENCY: PROJECTS ON HOUSING

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with essays by
Hilary Sample,
Níall McLaughlin,
& Florian Idenburg

A PROJECT OF THE HOUSING STUDIOS AT
COLUMBIA GSAPP, DIRECTED BY HILARY SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION BY AMALE ANDRAOS

EDITED BY JAMES GRAHAM

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AND THE CITY, 2016

The GSAPP Transcripts series is a curated record of the major events that take place at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. Embracing the simple idea that publication is the act of making something public, these books form a channel through which the discourse internal to the school enters the public arena of architectural media and ideas, in the form of edited talks and symposia. In each case, the original lectures and discussions at the core of these books are augmented with supplementary material, additional imagery, and critical commentary, expanding their debates and provocations beyond the confines of the lecture hall.

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"These projects
for the Skid Row
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remind us that
social housing
should be seen as
an architecture of
enfranchisement."

IF HOUSING
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Models of Skid Row Housing Trust buildings interspersed with other projects in the office of Michael Maltzan Architecture.

If housing today demands that we cultivate a new sense of *social transparency*, and if we as designers seek new models to further that ambition, then Michael Maltzan's four projects for the Skid Row Housing Trust in Los Angeles might help us understand the urgency of thoughtfully designed collective housing while underscoring that to achieve *social transparency* requires *critical thinking about urban living*. This means considering the scale of building and the scale of the city simultaneously. In Los Angeles it is not possible to disconnect the two even if it were desirable; these scales are inextricably interwoven. Further, this conjoining of scales points to the constant making, remaking, and unmaking of a city that is necessary in the creation of architecture, as K. Michael Hays has reminded us.¹ Acknowledging this dialectic of making and unmaking is important when it comes to designing housing. In the context of the crowded freeways and the empty concrete channels of the L.A. River, and the city's building boom of new cultural and institutional buildings contrasted with a large chronic homeless population downtown, Maltzan's work represents and embodies this contemporary condition of making and unmaking that is simultaneously happening in the city.

If Los Angeles is indeed a city best understood through its infrastructures, as Reyner Banham and others have argued, then it is possible to say that there is a new kind of infrastructure emerging through Maltzan's housing projects—each offers a series of social services and spaces, and in each case the architecture finds a distinctive, identifiable form. One possible reading of these projects is as a collection of discrete objects. Too often in architecture a building with a unique form is celebrated and duplicated through a singular vantage point, generally the aerial oblique photograph. The reality is that each building is as tied to the ground as it is open to the sky. Today it is important that housing connects that loftier view to the realities at ground level. Certainly these particular projects require a sensitivity to residents that often takes shape in the buildings' interiors, which create places for recovery, recuperation, comfort, healing, renewal, or social interaction. These social actions are enabled

through form. It is this approach that allows us to see Maltzan's work as a guide to thinking about collective urban housing.

If there were a wish list for housing it might be something like this:

**If comfort is needed,
then housing is needed.**

**If housing is needed,
then architecture is needed.**

**If housing is needed,
then it should not be isolated.**

**If housing is needed,
then it should be internally
open.**

**If housing is needed,
it should provide visual
access to its neighbors.**

**If housing is needed,
it should provide physical
access to its neighbors.**

**If housing is needed,
provide spaces for
emotional support.**

**If housing is needed,
provide parking.**

**If housing is needed,
provide gardens.**

**If housing is needed,
it should be easily cleaned.**

**If housing is needed,
provide shaded outdoor
seating.**

**If housing is needed,
provide a visible entry
reception desk.**

**If housing is needed,
enable domesticity.**

**If housing is needed,
enable wandering.**

**If housing is needed,
provide a laundry work-
space that is accessible,
visible, and has daylight
and fresh air.**

**If housing is needed,
provide individual mail-
boxes at the entrance.**

**If housing is needed,
provide social support
infrastructures that are
open, at the entrance and
first floor of the building,
not hidden or remote.
Privacy can be achieved
through other means.**

**If housing is needed,
provide small assembly
spaces.**

**If housing is needed,
provide access to an ATM.**

**If housing is needed,
provide interiors that are not
isolated from the exterior.**

**If housing is needed,
provide a rich color palette.**

**If housing is needed,
provide security and sense
of safety.**

**If housing is needed,
then it should be designed
in relation to other
projects, not isolated
from other projects within
the architect's office.**

If Reyner Banham in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* puts forward the idea that the city had grown equally and was therefore equally and easily accessible, then rereading the city today reveals that this ease of access has been largely unmade, if it existed at all.² Today it is visually evident that there has been a shift in L.A.'s urban ecology. The highways are overloaded, aqueducts are largely empty, and there is a stark dichotomy between the prevalent McMansions and a growing homeless population downtown. While many cities share these concerns, it is possible to witness the increasing disparity between wealthy and poor, healthy and sick, in Los Angeles's downtown core—a city of sprawl, car culture, art, and design. It is a city that thrives on its investment in novel forms and images of things, people, bodies, buildings, films, etc. Banham posits that the city offered different scenarios of life that were easily accessible to any individual and that reflected his or her relation to the city: "surfurbia" for surfers, "autopia" for drivers, for instance.

Today it is hard to deny that the city's unhealthiest reflection of itself can be found in the form of Skid Row, a neighborhood that is well known in the heart of downtown for its homeless who line the sidewalks with tents and metal shopping carts. While Skid Row houses a population that suffers from a multitude of problems that architecture cannot fix, architecture can at least enable a support structure from housing to spaces for health. In *Thinking in an Emergency*, which poses questions about how we think in the nuclear age, Elaine Scarry describes the notion of a "landscape of emergency" that produces the need for a recognition of "deep principles of mutual protection that consistently appear." This applies just as well to cities: the increasing urban populations who live in suffering need, more than ever, those who take seriously the "responsibility and the ability to protect one another."³ It is a task seemingly too large for architecture alone, but other partners in the making of the city—developers, certainly—should also participate in such a project. The SRHT takes this responsibility seriously and yet does not turn away from design while doing so.

When seen from the point of view of contemporary architectural pedagogy, housing has a vital place as a creative problem within a critical architectural practice. This was part of the importance of having an architect like Michael Maltzan lecture to the housing studios at Columbia University GSAPP, which spurred the making of this book. His notion that housing is foundational to a creative architectural practice, and the way in which he situates these housing projects in the context of his other work, shows us how an architect develops a practice and a way of working. It becomes clear that the housing projects are done concurrently with other work in his office. Even the physical models of his SRHT housing projects scattered throughout his office sit side by side with other models rather than being tucked away or discarded. ← p. 120

There have been generations of architects whose practices developed through the familiar path of first designing a single-family house, slowly shifting to housing, and then creating increasingly larger commercial work, sometimes never returning to housing. Though one can never predict the trajectory of a practice, the importance of housing to this moment in Maltzan's work should not be missed, and it signals a more enduring relationship to housing as a testing ground for ideas about architecture and the city, not as a specialization alone. It has long been something of a truism—particularly in the American tradition of starting an architectural practice—that you're not an architect until you've built a house, or at least that this is one modern path to becoming an architect. Perhaps we might now say an architect is not an architect until he or she has designed housing. And maybe for students today, one is not even an architecture student—or someone who thinks seriously about the world—unless housing is part of the pedagogy.

In his first project for the Skid Row Housing Trust, the eighty-seven-unit Rainbow Apartments, Maltzan first sets up the two opposing conditions—providing security and providing connections—that will unfold further in the Carver and Star Apartments. The project evinces careful thought about design of the interiors,

what is the correlation between community & the event?

Hilary Sample

programs and their functions, and a particular aspiration about how the design of a building should engage with the image of the city. At the ground level, Rainbow hosts a series of rooms that are specifically programmed for supportive service providers; the kitchen on the courtyard level and the community room on the third floor can be flexibly programmed as needed. Together these spaces produce new events and perhaps therefore new and different communities; these internal events are in fact more significant than the image of the building. And yet the problem of the image of housing is not forgotten here—though perhaps it can only be arrived at after there is first an understanding of how to construct an interior that allows for a safe and secure environment. Ultimately, though, for this type of housing to serve its residents the building must forge new connections to the outside world and balance that sense of protection with a sense of openness and possibility.⁴

Maltzan's Carver Apartments concentrate ninety-seven individual studio apartments for formerly homeless elderly and disabled residents around an open-air courtyard. Abutting the elevated I-10, the building's concrete structural walls rise up as if in continuation of the freeway. This in a sense recalls Catherine Opie's enchanting "Freeways" photographs of carless flyovers and interchanges; her images typically truncate the ground to celebrate the form of the highway, turning away from the ground and purposefully not recognizing the space leftover underneath. Or it could be seen as a space lifted from Werner Herzog's narrations in "Of Walking in Ice," a vividly



Rainbow Apartments, model showing interior courtyard. ← fig. 009



New Carver Apartments, ground floor under construction. ← fig. 014

If Housing Then ... A Wish List

told story of a journey taken by foot: "For the first time some sunshine, and I thought to myself this will do you good, but now my shadow was lurking beside me and, because I was heading west, it was often in front of me as well."⁵ Maltzan's project, which is by contrast intimately engaged with the ground, suggests that the open space underneath the highway might not be a dead space, but could instead be habitable, usable.

This being Los Angeles, the space under the highway remains unbuilt and open to the air; and yet this openness, combined with the Southern California light, extends towards the interior lobby space of Carver and captures the sensibility of place and environment. The lobby opens to both the street and the space underneath the highway at ground level; internally it opens to the exterior courtyard. These combine to make the lobby and entrance bright and welcoming. After entering through a set of glass doors, one sees a wall of mailboxes, like those found in



New Carver Apartments, for the Skid Row Housing Trust, Los Angeles, California, completed 2009. ← fig. 012



Carver Apartments, entry and atrium.

a typical apartment building, that line the main lobby wall. This construction of mailboxes is significant for a housing project in that this particular program of at-risk residents too often has a clinical feel with highly visible checkpoints of security. Maltzan instead emphasizes a sense of ownership and belonging to a community and even the simple but stabilizing sense of identity that comes from being a receiver of mail. It is also a visual reminder that community or the collective resides within.

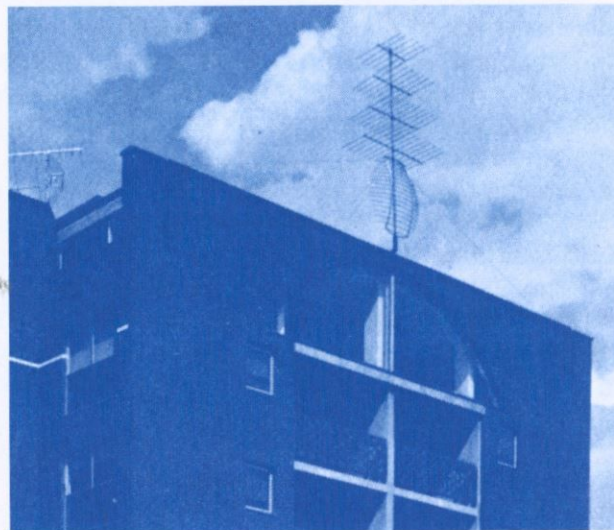
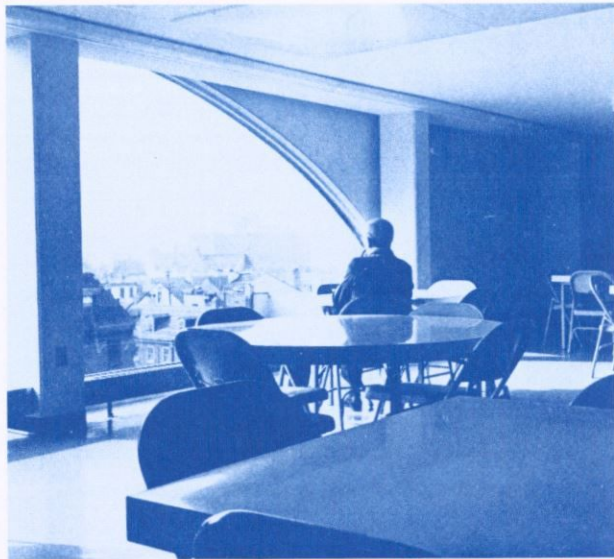
The architectural form of the building—a central courtyard with individual units radiating out—is repeated over four floors until it gives way to a communal exterior room on the top floor (a formal idea that will be reworked in the later Star Apartments). Furthermore the building tautly holds shared social spaces in a dramatic ratio compared to most housing projects. The development of American housing is typically concerned with efficiencies of lot coverage and gross-to-net areas. At Carver there are many efficiencies to be found (especially in the unit layouts) but also a sense of generosity in the square footage dedicated to social spaces, including the open-air corridors, the courtyard, and the roof terrace. This thinking about moving through the building is evocative of Rebecca Solnit's essay "The Shape of a Walk" from *Wanderlust*. If "artists remake the world act by an act or object by an object, starting with the simplest substances, shapes, and gestures," as Solnit believes, then architecture can be made in terms of thinking about such gestures—in this case, the gesture of walking from city to interior, that *within* there is also an opportunity to wander.⁶ Embedded within Carver is also a deepening sense of community—a desire that the community is not just embodied by the building but that it is also expressed in the city beyond. The most evident place that this occurs is in the laundry on the second floor, a thinly dimensioned room painted somewhere between a neon and sunflower yellow. At the end of the room are windows that open to the highway. Here the tenants wash and dry their clothes in natural light and in full view of the highway, rather than being consigned to damp basements or isolated rooftops. It is far from a tired service space, acting instead as a focal point



Carver Apartments, laundry room, looking out onto the I-10 freeway.

of community that becomes in a sense a landmark in the city. The tenants are brought into view of the drivers on the highway and vice versa, a visual reckoning of the "haves" and formerly "have nots" of the city. In this understated but nevertheless dramatic space, some part of the care and coping that happens at Carver takes place through cleanliness.

This laundry room brings to mind a famous black-and-white photograph of Venturi and Rauch's Guild House, sponsored by the Friends Neighborhood Guild in Philadelphia and completed with Cope and Lippincott as associate architects. The building is generally celebrated for its imagery, particularly its iconic TV antenna, suggesting that aging was for retiring in front of the TV.⁷ Today our understanding of aging is fundamentally different—rather than a stationary, sedentary way of living, in which the city becomes the backdrop to passive activities, architects design in a way that encourages the elderly (or other populations with particular housing needs) to not be isolated and disconnected from the city. And indeed what is most interesting about the Guild House is that it can be read in this way, too—when photographed from inside, this social space includes



Guild House, Venturi and Rauch with Cope and Lippincott, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, completed in 1963; top floor social room, interior and exterior.

a carefully framed view of Philadelphia's downtown skyline in a half-moon, floor-to-ceiling window. What is captured in the black-and-white images of this space is a communal sense of place-making that marks a particular relationship to the city.

In Venturi and Rauch's case, the view outside of the window could be replaced with almost any city skyline. In the case of Maltzan's Carver apartments this view is irreplaceable. If ever there were a moment of capturing an urban yet architectural experience of living in Los Angeles, it has to be the laundry room of the Carver Apartments. The resident stands amidst the hums and sloshing suds of the washers and dryers while also standing right up against the freeway's idling cars. When there is a traffic jam, you can make out the faces of the drivers as if you were standing on the street corner about to cross an intersection. Why is this so important? It isn't simply that this is a moment that epitomizes L.A. (though it is), but rather that it captures in a single space a very particular urban condition that is framed, literally, through a social space as mundane as a laundry room.

Maltzan's Star Apartments mixes the urban with the architectural from the first conceptual moments, siting housing atop an existing one-story podium of retail that has been remade into offices, communal spaces, and the new headquarters of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services. This is the first level of a triple-layered scheme. Above the street-front retail is an elevated plinth dedicated to community and wellness, including a 15,000-square-foot health and wellness center. Above this layer are the stacked boxes of dwelling units, stacked literally in that this is the first prefabricated mixed-use, multi-unit residential project in Los Angeles. Here housing is seen as a collection of disparate objects (even if they are similar units) collected together and arranged to form a novel building mass within the heart of downtown L.A.



Star Apartments, from Sixth Street and Maple Avenue. ← fig. 023



Star Apartments, internal upper level circulation.

As a city is made up of many parts—that old adage being that the city is a body and as bodies age, similarly cities age—those parts suffer at different times and scales. One of a city's most essential but often overlooked parts is its housing, which has too often been rendered as generic and banal building fabric, something that can be said for almost every city in America today. Housing—particularly “affordable” housing, a term that has replaced the term “public” housing—is treated according to a very basic set of standards and with very little distinction. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), for example, has tended to pursue a relentless strategy of blocky “towers in the park,” typically found in cross-, H-, or T-shaped forms offset from the edge of the block with simple brick façades and double-hung windows. This adherence to a uniform representation is one of the universalizing forms of modernism, as if housing in its form alone could be a universal fix or that anybody's particular needs and pains could be fixed through a singular architectural solution. In contrast, what these projects for Los Angeles present—what can be read through the plan of the units and the building section—is that housing is anything *but* universal and that housing (in its exploratory sense, not in its rigidly standardized sense) is fundamental to the practice

of architecture. While this text is too short to unpack fully the history of modern housing, one might turn briefly to an example that has been celebrated for being a proposal for universal housing, yet which, when examined internally, suggests difference—for Le Corbusier's canonical *Unité d'habitation* is not universal. The distinctions between each project may be subtle but they are present, and when compounded they produce different effects that further erode the intent of universality. Color shifts on each floor evoke different moods and thus different acts (a lesson that Maltzan has learned as well in his use of color in his projects for the SRHT).

When designing for social transparency, architects should question how program and function relate externally to the city as well as internally within a lot, within a building, within a floor plan, etc. How overlaps, intersections, and superimpositions can link together in response to the needs of a given population or the collective are another site for exploration through design. In these projects for the Skid Row Housing Trust, the prospective residents have already been uncoupled from the city and a “normal” life—they are seeking a way back into some kind of stability and connection. To return to Michael Hays' thought that architecture is always about both making and unmaking, it is clear that homelessness is one case of such unmaking. It presumes that an individual previously had a home but has since lost it, that the normative condition of life would be “homefulness.” These projects for the Skid Row Housing Trust remind us that social housing should act as an architecture for enfranchisement. It is here that architecture's intimate relationship to the city, in this case Los Angeles, becomes especially important. To offer this kind of stability and enfranchisement, Maltzan's architecture creates highly specific spaces for residents with specific provisions to the city—the Carver Apartments' laundry room or the Star Apartments' elevated open space. These two spaces provide enclosure for the residents as well as connection. There are specific and revealing frames that allow a resident to view the city just beyond.

While the blankness of Maltzan's forms for the Skid Row Housing Trust might reflect a sensibility located somewhere between Los Angeles and early socially minded modernism, it's important to also root these housing projects in an American history, which has been fundamentally divisive, problematic, and representative of conditions of unmaking. One can hardly talk about collective housing in the United States without reference to the much-discussed demolition of Pruitt-Igoe (1956–72) in St. Louis by way of a dramatically televised implosion, for example. In the context of New York City, a history of disinvestment in NYCHA housing stands in just as well for this kind of unmaking. The history of unmaking is one that we must reckon with, but what is needed beyond that awareness of history is new references that are groundbreaking, that propose a project of making. In that way Michael Maltzan's housing projects write a new history for housing urban America.

→ \$ \$ "laying foundation"

- 1 K. Michael Hays, "Architecture's Appearance and the Practices of Imagination," *Log 37* (Spring/Summer 2016), 212.
- 2 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971).
- 3 Elaine Scarry, *Thinking in An Emergency* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), xv.
- 4 Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Designed to Help Uplift the Poor," the *New York Times*, February 18, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/arts/design/21maltzan.html>.
- 5 Werner Herzog, *Of Walking In Ice: Munich–Paris 23 November–14 December 1974*, trans. Martje Herzog and Alan Greenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 43.
- 6 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000) 269.
- 7 See Sylvia Lavin, "Oh My Aching Antenna: The Fall and Rise of Postmodern Creativity," *Log 37* (Spring/Summer 2016), 214–227, and *The Difficult Whole: A Reference Book on the Work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*, ed. Kersten Geers, Jelena Pancevac, and Andrea Zanderigo (Zürich: Park Books, 2016).