

Social Transpar- ency: Projects on Housing

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SOCIAL TRANSPARENCY: PROJECTS ON HOUSING

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

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"In the notion that architecture is accessible to anyone, that architecture might return to a kind of pragmatism and embrace of the currents of our time, Maltzan's projects are a casual manifesto for how the city could transform."

L.A.'S NOT- SO-DISTANT FUTURE Florian Idenburg



Los Angeles, "a city so long associated with the car-oriented suburbs of the 1960s."

Fundamental transformations are taking place within the two main urban centers of California, the state that has been thought to exemplify a model of laissez-faire sub-urbanity. The force of change is a new generation of urban dwellers—a phenomenon found across the United States, in fact—who have a different set of values concerning questions of identity, community, and responsibility (whether social or environmental). The effect of these changes, however, has differed between the two cultural centers of the California coast. A comment on an online forum, which then spread on Twitter, summarized this phenomenon quite pointedly: "San Francisco is a utopia gone wrong, while Los Angeles is a dystopia gone right."¹

San Francisco first. A half-century after the Summer of Love and the rise of Haight-Ashbury as a dream of liberated urbanism—a dream that passed quickly, but which left substantial cultural and countercultural effects in its wake—the urban development of San Francisco is now intertwined with the more dubious techno-utopianism of the dot-com boom and the social disparities that followed. For some this has taken the form of a kind of reverse suburbanism, in which the city is the site of the "good life" of moneyed privilege and private bus networks transport white-collar workers to the corporate parks of Silicon Valley. Even for those who work in the city, this shift has taken the form of increasingly monocultural demographics and ways of living—a phenomenon formerly associated with suburbs and now increasingly a part of overstuffed urban areas like San Francisco.

By contrast, Los Angeles, a city so long associated with the car-oriented suburbs of the 1960s, seems as though it might be evolving toward a more enmeshed alternative. This current idea of the city might well become the model for other developing regions around the globe.

For decades L.A. was understood as an entropic field of enclaves, a mat-city where sunshades and windshields allowed

"Our time is one of enormous social transparency and connection to things around us. Our private lives are more and more blurred with our public lives."
← p. 34

for a coexistence of minimal interaction—a condition cleverly portrayed in the passing-but-not-quite-intersecting narratives that comprise Robert Altman's *Shortcuts* (1993). The city's downtown is frequently transformed into a hell-on-earth in sci-fi movies through natural disaster or simply the catastrophe of inhumane urban development. For years the dark and haunted vision of Los Angeles as depicted in *Blade Runner* (1982), a city of seemingly perpetual nighttime, was an *idée fixe*. Compare



The dystopian, nighttime Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, 1982.

these visions to the magical realism of Spike Jonze's *Her* (2014), which brings us a radically new notion of what L.A.'s future might look like. Jonze's protagonist, Theodore Twombly, falls in love with a sentient operating system (seductively voiced by Scarlett Johansson), but the more remarkable future of the movie is that downtown L.A. is clean, dense, and comfortable. As many have noted, one of the biggest signals that we're in an alternative reality is the existence of robust mass transit, making *Her* something of a bookend to the city's scandalous history of dismantling its streetcar lines. According to *Her* cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema, Jonze wanted an L.A. of the not-so-distant future, a "world that was tactile and pleasant: the very opposite of a dystopian future."²



The magical realist Los Angeles of *Her*, dir. Spike Jonze, 2014.

The Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan has been contemplating the not-so-distant future of L.A. for a while, leading to his book *No More Play* (2011), which speculates on the city's trajectory in a series of conversations with a diverse range of people interested and invested in that future. For Maltzan, L.A. finds itself at a turning point relative to its historic pattern of growth:

The city is at a moment where much of the way that it has been developed in the past, which has created both the physical and psychological identity for the city—a city that just continued to push the boundaries outward and sprawl into the periphery—is probably untenable. There is an extraordinary pressure back in and onto the city that is almost overwriting the city in a very intense way.³

This brings up a number of important urban questions that older cities have dealt with in the past, issues like transportation, scale, and density. Maltzan's own work focuses on "trying to imagine how you deal with those questions, but deal with them in a way that is inspired by and specific to Los Angeles. I don't think it really helps at all to try to import models from other

established or more traditional cities into a culture that has its own identity, its own character, its own spirit."

This spirit is increasingly made manifest in Maltzan's architecture, particularly in the realm of housing. His lines and forms are daring and bold. His predominantly white massings, shaped with hard chamfers and sharp facets, achieve a remarkable clarity of expression in the crisp shadows of the sunshine state. More particular is his embrace of the raw and the given—the reality of the everyday in all its looseness and unpredictability. This engagement with the real, which was also crucial for Maltzan's fellow Angeleno Frank Gehry, results in a distinct attitude toward the spatial organization of architectural materials as well as an embrace of client collaborations that have often been overlooked by the field of architecture.

A part of downtown called Skid Row has certainly fueled the aforementioned notions of L.A. as potential dystopia. Maltzan's projects for the Skid Row Housing Trust offer a form of resistance to that too-easy fictionalization of the realities of the city. This for-profit organization develops permanent supportive housing with a high level of architectural ambition, helping this population in need transition back into a home. The third in an ongoing series of projects, Maltzan's Star Apartments—a daring transformation of a once nondescript retail building into a six-story, 95,000-square-foot mixed-use project—was completed last year. It accommodates 102 apartments for the formerly homeless alongside social services, recreational facilities, and retail. The construction is of stacked prefabricated modules, but to laud the project for being fast and cheap (as the Los Angeles Architecture and Design Museum's recent "Shelter" show did) is to miss the fact that it proposes a new and important typology for the socially deprived.⁴



Star Apartments, building as city block. ← fig. 025

The most notable innovation of this project is how the apartment modules cantilever dramatically over the newly constructed ground plane of the existing building's roof. The space between this surface and the apartments above creates a new 15,220-square-foot terrace with gardens and a jogging track, alongside a communal kitchen, lounge, and rooms for art and exercise—offering the formerly homeless an alternate ground. Maltzan explains:

With Star being right in the middle of the city, one of the things that I was actively trying to imagine was what would a kind of hyper-density look like in Los Angeles? I was trying to create an extremely intense, super dense housing block that gets lifted up, and a new type of semi-public space gets created in this layer in between the mixed-use ground floor on the street and the upper level of the housing, as a new kind of ground plane to invent open space within this super density.

Less than a mile away and completed in the same year, Maltzan's project for One Santa Fe explores the possibility of hyper-density from another and very different angle. The scheme was originally a speculative proposal for graduate and undergraduate housing serving the nearby campus of USC as well as SCI-Arc, an architectural school located in a former freight depot across the street. Now the colossal 438-unit rental project has been built on a 4-acre portion of a 32-acre plot previously used for the maintenance and storage of rail cars. The elongated property stretches along Santa Fe Avenue, bracketed by the First and Fourth Street bridges and backing up against the Metrolink service tracks adjacent to the Los Angeles River. The substantial 510,000-square-foot massing—a size that some in the city deemed too large—accommodates a programmatic amalgam of residential, retail, and live-work spaces within the formerly industrial neighborhood context.

"As Los Angeles evolves in ways that the single-family-house model doesn't easily sustain, the city's social and cultural interests are starting to take on a more collective and connected character."
← p. 22

The building's quarter-mile length echoes the strongly linear forms of the surrounding regional infrastructure. Maltzan amplifies this length by placing the apartments in a bar along a double-loaded corridor that floats above a three-story concrete parking garage and over an open plaza, eventually landing on a strip of commercial units toward the south end of the lot. This requires structural heroics that Maltzan deftly employs to give the building its character. The building is not simply an allusion to infrastructure—though it is that, as its formal expression carries overtones of speed and motion. It is a piece of infrastructure in a more literal sense as well, forming connections to the neighboring bridges and offering pedestrian access directly into the raised portions of the building.

(Maltzan envisions these bridges becoming still more complex and spanning across the rail yard to the river as the side develops further.) As the project's linear form moves south, it begins to shift, delaminating to create views and ground-level openings across its width for a clear connection



One Santa Fe, rendering showing potential connections across the rail yard to the river. ← fig. 037

to the L.A. River and future transit nodes. Maltzan describes it as “a three-dimensional armature that eventually weaves itself into the city.” Interspersed in this connective network are the perks that such buildings require these days, such as a pool, barbecue decks, outdoor lounges, and a gym, each serving as a point of orientation within the complexity of the overall form.

Both the Star Apartments and One Santa Fe are frugal encampments of wood and stucco on top of a new ground. Not hiding their artificiality, they are each comprised of crude concrete structures with ordinary plumbing exposed underneath. They are built to current economic realities and construction techniques. The idea of producing a “second ground” certainly is not a new concept in architecture. In their parti, the projects evoke Masato Otaka's Sakaide Artificial Ground development (1968–86).



Sakaide Artificial Ground, Masato Otaka, Sakaide, Kagawa, Japan, 1968. Photograph by Osamu Murai.

This Japanese Metabolist established an artificial datum over a seismically unstable slum area in Sakaide using a fixed concrete slab and beam platform. The project housed itinerant salt workers in a series of prefabricated housing structures on the slab, while underneath, offices, shops, parking, and a network of pedestrian alleys occupied the fragile terrain. But while this new ground may evoke its utopian or structuralist precursors, Maltzan's approach is not infused with radical rhetorics. Somewhere within the amalgam of new realities of urban development like housing subsidies, affordability ratios, zoning requirements, ROI models, and parking quotas, Maltzan is able to create two projects that are both unique and memorable. Worth considering is that indiscriminate of their users, they are built to a similar unit cost, using similar construction techniques, and equally rich in architectural and structural ingenuity.

In the notion that architecture is accessible to anyone, that architecture might return to a kind of pragmatism and embrace of the currents of our time, Maltzan's projects are a casual manifesto for how the city could transform. They offer models for further development, by Maltzan's own office and by others. Unlike most other cities, space in L.A. is not so precious that

development inevitably pushes out less privileged segments of the population. Doubling the ground takes place not because it is necessary to create more; it is the introduction of a layer within the city that can take on novel community or urban roles. These new public layers appear as testing grounds or antechambers, allowing the dynamic and diverse L.A. populace to gradually get reconnected to the environment and to one another. In their scale and appearance, these two buildings have received a fair dose of critique locally, but Maltzan believes they need time. He talks about an *anticipatory scale*. "I think architecture through building form has a responsibility to try to point to what urban forms are going to look like and what the city's going to look like. These buildings try to do that," Maltzan says. If this is where Los Angeles is heading, a "dirty" and possibly magical realism awaits us in the not-so-distant future.

An earlier and condensed version of this essay was published as "One Santa Fe Housing in Los Angeles by Michael Maltzan," in the *Architectural Review* (August 5, 2015), <http://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/this-is-the-dirty-magical-realism-future-of-los-angeles/8686180>. article, and is reprinted here with the permission of the publisher.

1 The original mention of this phrase was in a Quora forum titled "Why Would Someone Choose to Live in Los Angeles over San Francisco?" <http://www.quora.com/Why-would-someone-choose-to-live-in-Los-Angeles-over-San-Francisco>.

2 "The Way She Haunts my Dreams," interview with Hoyte van Hoytema, in *International Cinematographers Guild* magazine (January 2, 2014), <http://www.icgmagazine.com/web/the-way-she-hunts-my-dreams>.

3 This and all following quotations of Maltzan are from an interview with the author.

4 For more, see my "The A+D Museum's 'Shelter' Disappoints by Reinforcing Market Fundamentalism," *Metropolis* magazine (October 2015), <http://www.metropolismag.com/October-2015/LA-Living>.