

TRANSCRIPTS ON HOUSING

Social Transpar- ency: Projects on Housing

Michael
Maltzan

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

SOCIAL TRANSPARENCY: PROJECTS ON HOUSING

Michael Maltzan

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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"Architecture's
power lies in its
engagement with
the real."

INTRODUC- TION Amale Andraos

Architecture's power lies in its engagement with the real, and for the past twenty years, Michael Maltzan has been one of the discipline's leaders in shaping what that engagement might look like. Whether designed for cultural institutions, private clients, or marginalized urban populations who are too rarely addressed by practicing architects, Maltzan's work has been at once thoughtful, inspiring, and radically inventive as it recasts new possibilities for how the built environment can better answer fundamental questions about how we live.

It may seem curious that an architecture school in New York would turn to an Angeleno for ideas on housing, given the nearly opposite role these cities play in assumed histories of urban development in America. But as Maltzan's work shows us, it is high time to upend such binaries and to think more collaboratively—across continents and across disciplines—about the way architecture locates itself within the physical and social fabrics of the urban landscape. Since 1975, the housing studio has been a fundamental part of Columbia's M.Arch curriculum (given New York's history of compelling precedents and pressing needs), but the work of housing is not just local; it is national and global as well. As the current director of our housing studios, Hilary Sample has been instrumental in expanding the school's sites of inquiry in order to look at this important architectural question across a number of global contexts. In bringing Maltzan to the school to speak about his work, she has invited us not only to learn from one of the field's most agile designers, but to learn from the particular context of Los Angeles and expand beyond it.

Maltzan's four buildings for the Skid Row Housing Trust in Los Angeles are a truly remarkable complement to his larger body of work. They insist on the fundamental dignity of the at-risk or the dispossessed; they create dynamic and dramatic moments in the city with minimal means; they offer remarkable spatial and typological innovations. Michael Maltzan's projects on housing inspire a sense of pleasure together with a sense of urgency, and so it is with both pleasure and urgency that we publish this lecture and accompanying essays.

"Maltzan's
housing projects
speak of our
common need to
situate ourselves
and participate
in public life."

STREET LIFE

Níall McLaughlin



Skid Row, Los Angeles, 2015.

The name Skid Row has been immortalized in myth and music as both a place and a state of being. It is the address associated with the bottom rung of life's ladder, the dead-end destination for the hopeless. The original Skid Row was probably in Seattle and it got its name from the corduroy wooden tracks used to haul heavy lumber to the timber yards. The area around the yards became associated with the darker aspects of transient immigrant life; they became a haven for grease monkeys, vagrants, pimps, and grifters.

The area known as Skid Row in Los Angeles is a 50-block section of Downtown. It is bounded by the Historic Core and Little Tokyo and it partly overlays the Downtown Industrial District. Its origins lie in the industrial developments that grew up to service L.A.'s agricultural hinterland reached from the nearby rail yards. The seasonal nature of the work drew in a combination of short-term workers and rail crews on layover; small hotels suited to single male migrant workers serviced them. A scattering of bars, brothels, and religious missions vied for the attentions of this lonely constituency. The combination of transient accommodation and available vice set the deep structure for the district, and has persisted beyond many of the original industrial functions that generated it. By the 1930s, the place had an established character based on cheap hotels and the sorts of services and commerce that attended them. The Great Depression brought in a new population of destitute farmers, many of whom were alcoholics, who had abandoned home and family. The end of the war in Vietnam saw a new influx of residents, often traumatized and addicted to drugs other than alcohol.

At regular intervals, the L.A. city authorities would attempt to clear the area out in highly publicized campaigns of arrest and intimidation. Although these were publicly popular, they did little to change the underlying structures and the homeless population of the area continued to grow. The intractable persistence of this condition is astonishing. In 1947 an *Evening Independent* correspondent wrote, "a high class criminal wouldn't be caught dead in this area. It draws cheap grifters and

floaters like a magnet. It holds 9,000 transients at all times—bums, panhandlers, small time crooks looking for a quick buck.” Today Skid Row has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the United States. A survey dating to 2012 suggests 8,000 people in single-occupancy hotel rooms, 2,000 in transitional accommodation, and up to 4,000 living on the pavement.

In the 1960s the authorities attempted to control the population by regulating the cheap hotels using legislation related to fire codes. Many hotels were closed down or demolished. These code revisions constituted a 50 percent decrease in the housing stock for the whole area. The policy was reversed in the 1970s when it was suggested that residential facilities should be preserved and enhanced with the addition of necessary services such as clinics. This more enlightened policy had the unfortunate effect of turning Skid Row into a place where other cities in L.A. County began dumping their unwanted citizens. Discharged mental health and hospital patients were unloaded into the area from considerable distances; in 2007 a major national health provider was taken to court for depositing a patient wearing nothing but hospital robes on the pavement from a taxi. “Greyhound therapy” became known as a phrase hospitals used for a one-way bus ticket to Skid Row.

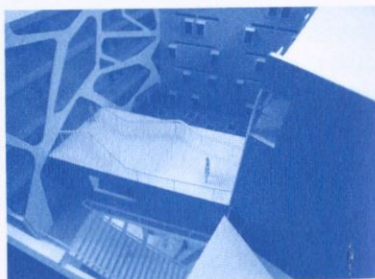
If Skid Row was a uniquely local phenomenon in certain ways, it pointed to a broader national malaise in others. It became a battleground for civil liberties activists, law enforcement agencies, city authorities, and service providers. The pressures on the area increased further as the overall development of Downtown began pushing property prices up in the area. Coffee shops, galleries, and loft developments started to appear on the fringes of this purgatory. The police attempted another clear-out in 2006, based on the “broken windows theory,” a form of police intimidation and cleansing given thin academic credence. Broken windows and loitering were seen to point to disorder and therefore a threshold to serious crime. Saner voices argued that broken windows are merely indicative of poverty. People were cleared out of the area with no destination in mind. This

simply exported the problem, with the most vulnerable populations separated from the services they depended upon. Since then, a new and tentative compromise has formed with the City saying that it will not clear out homeless people without providing additional homes in the area.

The Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT) was set up in the late 1980s to provide permanently supportive housing for formerly homeless individuals. In the 1990s, they began refurbishing old dilapidated hotels using talented local architectural practices. They realized that stable accommodation only worked when combined with essential services, and they developed a building model combining single-occupancy rooms, communal facilities, and services such as mental health treatment, substance abuse recovery, money management, and benefits advocacy. They began to target the most vulnerable people living on the street. Their work constitutes a criticism of the whole city by reassembling a complete set of homeless services system in one place. From the beginning, they advocated high quality architecture on the basis that it establishes the basic coordinates of a dignified settled environment for people who have lost trust in the idea of home; it also advertises to the neighborhood and the broader city that these people are here and that they have a viable identity in this place. This combination of inhabitation and representation is the basis for the architect’s brief.

Over the past ten years, no architect has engaged this work in Los Angeles with as much commitment and ingenuity as Michael Maltzan, whose firm is now completing its fourth building for the SRHT. Well known for a wide range of exquisite private dwellings and thoughtful public projects, his career has followed a familiar and enviable trajectory from bespoke houses to cultural institutions and major pieces of civic infrastructure. In this context, the design of low-cost housing for the previously homeless is a unique challenge. Maltzan insists that while this building type has its own architectural problems, it is designed within the practice according to the same values and systems as any other commission.

The first of these projects, the Rainbow Apartments, is built as a conventional urban block with communal services at ground level and individual rooms over five stories above. The upper accommodations are arranged around a U-shaped courtyard set at right angles to the street. The courtyard, established at first-floor level, is reached by a grand stair from the entrance and is surrounded by deck-access balconies serving individual rooms at each level. Maltzan sees the courtyard as establishing a common zone between the pleasures and perils of the street and the more isolated safety of the individual room; in the context of an individual in transition from homelessness to more permanent dwelling, this becomes the spatial crux of the architectural proposal. It is conceived in terms of views between balconies and rooms, but also in how the courtyard frames the sky and connects to the street. The architect then establishes a simple visual language based on plain stucco walls enlivened by colored window reveals and openings, as though a sober suit has opened to reveal a sumptuous lining.



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

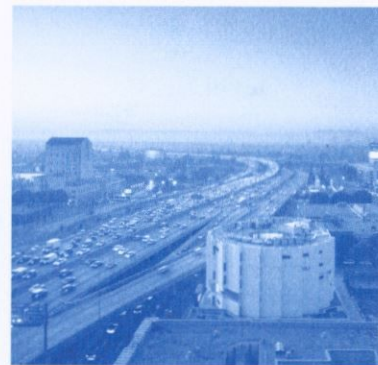
The next project, the Carver Apartments, is built about a mile from the center of Skid Row beside the I-10 Freeway—a position that allows it to be read as a beacon on the scale of the larger city while obliging it to address noise. The section is broadly similar to the Rainbow project with ground-floor services and a grand stair rising to a central atrium flanked by open walkways. The plan, however, is based on a circular geometry with rooms radiating from the center. Every room is turned slightly towards the perimeter, giving a twisting centrifugal quality to the figure of each floor plate.

The circular form is undoubtedly informed by environmental factors, but this cylindrical beacon by the freeway also draws the design into dialogue with other celebrated buildings in

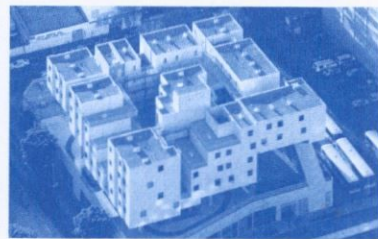
L.A., in particular Welton Becket's Capitol Records Building. Instead of Becket's suggestive horizontal canopies, we have a vertical rotational unfolding, beautifully reminiscent in plan and elevation of Aalto's housing tower in Lucerne. The torsion is taken into the circular atrium by a screen of vertical fins that establish some distance between the individual rooms and the common atrium. This does something to offset the much higher concentration of

space created by the central circular form. In all its virtuosity, this project moves in the balance from artless inhabitation toward an emphatic and singular representation. At the very limit of Skid Row, this building marks the presence of supportive housing for individual homeless with a powerful rhetorical presence.

Star Apartments, the third project in this suite, again combines essential services, communal facilities, and individual rooms. Here the common space of the atrium is turned outwards as a continuous veranda at podium level. The prefabricated rooms are elaborately held overhead like a suspended kasbah. The key contrast is between the enclosed court and the outward-looking balcony; the safety, sociability, and intimacy of the communal spaces seems central to the success of this transitional building type. "Broken-windows" policing discourages people from loitering in groups on the pavement; such disorganized conviviality is seen as a threshold to crime. Here it is intended that groups will loiter one floor above the



New Carver Apartments, seen next to the I-10 Freeway to Santa Monica. → fig. 013



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

pavement, establishing a sociable presence protected from, but participating in, the life of the street.

The architect has said that he would like these projects to be read together, and this book gives us the opportunity to do just that. The formal virtuosity of each composition displays Maltzan's talents and suggests that architecture can give pleasure and dignity to all of us. They also announce the enduring presence of transient and marginalized people in this area, thereby giving them a much-needed sense of legitimacy. I hope that the different spatial experiments—linking and articulating ground planes, common sheltered space, and private rooms—will become subjects for further reflection and analysis. Maltzan's housing projects speak of our common need to situate ourselves and participate in public life.

"If you could imagine connecting all of these different projects, then perhaps 'the project' is all of them together with the smaller increments beginning to add up to a kind of remapping of the city itself."

→ pp. 89–90

An earlier version of this essay was published as "Street Life: Michael Maltzan's Social Housing in Los Angeles," in the *Architectural Review* (September 16, 2013), <http://www.architectural-review.com/today/street-life-michael-maltzans-social-housing-in-los-angeles/8652420.article>, and is reprinted here with the permission of the publisher.