Social Transparency: Projects on Housing

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with essays by Hilary Sample, Michael McCloughlin, & Florian Idenburg
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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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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SOCIAL TRANSPARENCY
Michael Maltzan
Housing is often thought of as a very specific part of the discipline of architecture, having its own forms of technical knowledge and its own particularities of building code and economy. But at the same time, going all the way back to the very beginnings of modernism, housing has historically been one of the most expansive typologies within the field, witnessing a type of progress that goes well beyond technical and functional challenges, and in fact represents culture and society at the most profound levels. It manifests an incredible complexity of architectural ideas, touching on social, economic, political, aesthetic, and urban questions. For that reason, our office doesn’t think about housing as separate from the rest of what we do. On the contrary, we are intensely interested in how housing reinforces our other work, as well as how the other work fuels our thinking about housing, so that housing becomes a deeply integrated and influential part of our practice.

In Los Angeles, where we are based, the relationship between housing and the city at large is still emerging. Los Angeles is for the most part a city that grew up after World War II. And like most postwar suburban settlements across the United States, it is primarily made up of single-family housing. From the air, if you squint, the vast carpet of freestanding houses can seem to add up to one big housing project. On the ground, the city’s psychology is still very suburban, very much about the individual. But like a lot of contemporary cities, Los Angeles—which covers more area than most cities in the world—is now becoming more
and more dense, and apartment buildings and condominiums, forms we have to understand as collective housing, are becoming increasingly prevalent. While this is partially owing to a steady influx of new residents, it is also the case that sprawl has begun to hit its topographical and practical limits in terms of the city’s sheer extension. 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. This has also challenged architecture, because a limited range of existing housing types offers few productive models to depend on or refer to.

I had wanted to design housing for a long time and never had the chance to. Not much housing was actually being done in Southern California, and most of the developers doing housing weren’t interested in hiring architecture offices like mine. When I was in school, housing studios were a core part of architectural education, as they are here at Columbia, and those studios were influential—not only in terms of housing as a design problem, but also in terms of architectural history. We were rediscovering modernism at the time, and it was eye-opening to see how housing had been a source of seemingly endless experimentation: housing projects were structural projects, conceptual projects, planning projects, and spatial projects all at once. I believed, maybe naively, that housing was something an architect inevitably did. When we finally had the opportunity to do that kind of project, we came to grips with the real lack of interesting prototypes in our own city. That forced me, in the positive sense, to go back to what I learned as a student about housing and its relationship to modernism, and what fascinated me most was the fact that housing was the essential typology of modernism.

I’d like to talk about five housing projects our office has worked on, four of which have been realized in collaboration with the Skid Row Housing Trust; but I want to start with a single-family house. We don’t do a lot of houses, but I’m interested in them because that microcosm of the single-family house can be a focused experiment on the mechanisms that architecture can employ to create social environments. They are like little cities in and of themselves: your entire life takes place
in a house. They may be single-family, but they aren’t single-use programs. They contain an enormous amount of complexity and history, while also representing our ambitions about how we want to live today.

This project, the Pittman Dowell Residence in La Crescenta, completed in 2009, sits at the furthest edge of what has become the quintessential and very characteristic single-family residential sprawl of Los Angeles, more than 15 miles from the downtown core. The 6-acre site in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains already contained a house by Richard Neutra, the Dorothy Sereulnic Residence built in 1953. Neutra had convinced the client to cut three building pads into the site, one for the house he designed and two spares; our project took on one of those pads. I think Neutra was trying to be practical, thinking that the owners might want to subdivide the property at some point, but I also think he was always interested in a type of socialist enterprise. Even single-family houses, in his thinking, were meant to be a part of a larger collective. It was rare that Neutra ever designed a house without considering its possible existence among four or five other houses, which he would typically design himself, so maybe it was in part a business strategy. But the single-family house wasn’t as interesting
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to Neutra as its social and collective mechanisms, and this is something that we want to respond to in our work.

Our clients, who were the second owners of the Serulnic Residence, wanted to keep the Neutra house. At the same time, it had become for them an historic artifact; it didn't really relate to the way they lived. They started by questioning its lightness and transparency. Given that the mountains can get very windy and cold ("cold" for Angelinos, at least), the house could feel like you were camping out. They commissioned us to design a second house that would feel more permanent and be more inward looking, less directed outward to the elements. This led me to an observation that the kind of transparency in a Neutra house, a modernist

Richard Neutra, Dorothy Serulnic Residence, 1953; photograph by Julius Shulman, 1953.
idea, maybe even a romantic idea, is not necessarily a contemporary idea.

The Serulnic Residence represented a moment in which dissolving the line between inside and outside was philosophically and structurally essential to Neutra’s work—literally the spatial problem that preoccupied him.

But perhaps this gesture no longer aligns with what we need from a house or architecture generally. Our own 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, as the transparency that was almost a moral imperative for Neutra becomes increasingly fraught. I have grown more interested in how to achieve a kind of socially connected visibility while also exploring what it means to be private. Today, without ever leaving home, we exist in multiple places simultaneously: wherever we are, we’re almost always connected to something else. Even if those connections aren’t physical, the spaces in which they occur are nevertheless connected to one another in a very real way, and this is represented in architecture. I would say that this simultaneity is the most compelling spatial challenge confronting architects now, the spatial characteristic that perhaps best defines our time.
kitchen, bathroom, and master bedroom are all very visible. It’s as if we took the Serulnic Residence, which has its fireplace and dense core in the middle and glass on the outside, and folded it in on itself, with all of the exterior transparency, all of the public-ness now being brought inside the private world of the house. You move around it in a clockwise spiral, although you can shortcut the spiral at points across the courtyard. In plan, the spiraling motion that leads you into the living room takes you by the opening to the bathroom first, so the most private place in the house actually belongs to the most public space of the entry. You move clockwise through the living room, the dining room, a small kitchen, an office, and eventually, the bedroom and bathroom, bringing you back to the beginning.

RAINBOW APARTMENTS

Our office began working on multi-unit housing ten years ago. The first of these projects was the Rainbow Apartments (2006) in downtown Los Angeles for the Skid Row Housing Trust. The Housing Trust always names their projects after an apartment building in the neighborhood that has been torn down, as a way of connecting new housing to a longer history and raising awareness about housing in a city that rarely looks back. Up to this time, the Housing Trust had for the most part been developing hotel-like Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings, transitional housing where the homeless could spend a couple of nights, perhaps up to a month. We were invited to design the Rainbow Apartments, eighty-nine units, at a moment when the Housing Trust was transitioning from the SRO model to a Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) model in which residents could potentially live the rest of their lives if they chose to. It was housing conceived as “home.” The other essential aspect of Permanent Supportive Housing is that it includes vital social infrastructure for the inhabitants. With each of the four housing projects I will be talking about here, the building was oriented toward a particular homeless population. Among the residents of the Rainbow Apartments, about 75 percent are HIV positive. Our second project for the Housing Trust was for elderly homeless; the third was for people with chronic physical, and in some cases, mental disabilities; the fourth was for formerly homeless veterans. Each community requires a complex set of services, and in the past these people would have to commute, often over long distances, to
see their doctors, social workers, psychologists—basically to access the infrastructure that supports their lives. That fact of being constantly out on the street in search of supportive services has led to high levels of recidivism and instability. The things that kept a lot of these individuals in trouble are still out there, and they are harder to confront in the absence of a supportive community. The thinking that has evolved in the social services sector in response to the minimal gains achieved by the old system is that moving services, doctors, and caseworkers into the housing creates a greater likelihood of building more stable lives. Consequently, each of these housing projects takes on greater programmatic complexity, effectively becoming a community within the city—the kind of community that its inhabitants have lacked for much of their lives.

The Rainbow Apartments were an enormous learning step for us as an office and very challenging from a cost standpoint. Rainbow is a U-shaped building with a single-loaded corridor on the outside of the courtyard. This was a way to take advantage of the Southern California climate. The single-loaded corridor has another function here as well. To be eligible for this type of housing, a person must be “chronically homeless,” which means having been on the street for ten years. I would have imagined that six months could qualify a person as chronically homeless, but imagine, ten years. For many of the people coming into the building, their entire psychology is based on being “in public” all of the time. Homelessness obviously doesn’t afford the luxury of having a private world within a public world. Many of these individuals have built up shells around themselves that make it difficult for them to relate in a more social way. They have lost their capacity to relate in public, which is something most of us take for granted. Breaking open the usual double-loaded corridor that you find in housing projects is a very simple design move, but the effect is powerful. It means that whenever you come in or go out of your apartment, you enter the communal space of the courtyard. You cannot go up in the elevator, walk down the double-loaded corridor, and disappear into your unit. Instead you have to become part of this semi-public world, even if it is for just a few moments.

But we have to be realistic about architecture’s ability to create wholesale social change. Historically, the thinking has been that building collective housing would

Rainbow Apartments, floor plans.  
(fig. 008)

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

guarantee transformation in social conditions. This is one of the romantic myths of modernism. There are many, many factors that go into making true social change. But at the same time, architecture can't stand back. There is the potential for agency. Architecture can use its tools in focused ways to change the way that a community relates to itself and to the city, for instance. The Rainbow Apartments project became an example of a situation in which architecture could assume an active role in the realization of sociological and psychological benefits that the Housing Trust is trying to make possible for its residents.

We lost 50 to 75 percent of what we normally think of as architecture in this building. The interior screen around the courtyard that was part of the original design was value-engineered out, for example. Materials are often used in a way that imports a kind of fanciness to a building, and the use of materials in that way, it seems to me, has a very short shelf life. Before long, something that was designed to look contemporary feels dated. I'm more interested in subverting that and making the materials less apparent, so that the forms and relationships they construct have to stand on their own. I've come to think of color as a material itself, in a way, because it can have as much of a transformative effect as other

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treatments. Nonetheless, some of the coloration got trimmed from the Rainbow budget. By the time we were done, we were negotiating whether there would be two or three screws in the door hinges.

On the other hand, reducing the presence of those things we usually call "architecture" demands that we return to what is most effective about architecture and the way it frames social relationships. Instead of pointing to the formal aspects that we couldn't hang on to, these requirements ask us to step back and reevaluate what is most foundational and different about our design. This is one of the functions of housing studios in schools, the ones I took and the ones you do here at Columbia. They involve stepping back and looking at how the most fundamental elements of architecture—courtyards or double-loaded corridors, prosaic things like that—have evolved historically and ultimately come to have substantial agency in the lived world.

The interiors of the Rainbow units were also a real challenge, especially in some of the smaller units. Housing codes have changed a great deal over the past decades. ADA bathrooms have gotten larger and larger, to the point that they're almost the largest room in these very compact apartments. The strategy we
employed was to design in the capability for all of the bathrooms to be converted to full ADA, although in the beginning, only 20 percent would actually meet those standards. All are constructed to the required dimensions with blocking in the walls so that grab bars and other equipment can be added later. Since the basic business model for buildings like these doesn’t allow you to expand much beyond 250 to 300 square feet per unit, it becomes difficult to create large spaces for living when there are such prescriptive technical and code-based requirements. It demands that there be a certain leanness to the building, but it pushes you to imagine how you might make something like a bathroom or a kitchen more efficient and also more generous than they usually are, so they come to play a larger role in the space of the unit.

Many architects who have worked with this type of affordable housing do one project and then say, “Thank you, that was a lot of fun.” They feel like they’ve done their turn and don’t pursue it further. Within the framework of a normal architecture practice this work is hard. For us, though, it was important to build on what we’d learned from the “failures” we’d just grappled with. The only way of becoming more successful at difficult buildings like these is to transfer the lessons about what does and doesn’t work into the next projects. I asked the Housing Trust if we could do at least two more projects with them, and they said, “Yes.”

NEW CARVER APARTMENTS (2009)

Our second project, the New Carver Apartments, wasn’t slated for the Skid Row district but rather a site right next to the Interstate 10 freeway that runs through downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica in an increasingly visible district of the city. The Housing Trust was interested in moving out into other parts of the city to meet the homeless communities it serves in a way that emphasizes a broader presence throughout the city, rather than confining its activity to a specific area. Their incredible success in developing projects in Skid Row was starting to create, incrementally, the equivalent of enormous residential projects familiar to the postwar boom in public housing in cities across the United States, which continues to be such a fraught topic. Rather than build out Skid Row to serve and contain a single community, their hope, urbanistically, has been to connect and weave these communities into the city at large.

Carver sits only about 20 feet from the massive Interstate 10 freeway and, ironically, at the end of Hope Street. In Los Angeles, freeways are in many ways our version of the front yard, our most visible public space, characterized by people passing by. Our office was trying to use that infrastructure
as a Main Street of sorts, on which to stage a visual encounter between people moving through the city and the mostly invisible homeless. The problem with infrastructure, I think, is that for too long it has been conceived as a monoculture in that it does exactly one thing, in this case it moves cars, but gives little else back to the city. In our project, given the improbable proximity to the freeway infrastructure, I was trying to suggest that one might imagine the building as a part of the freeway, its concrete walls and columns indistinguishable from those of the transportation system. By getting that close to the freeway, maybe one could imagine getting closer and closer and closer, finally closing that gap and integrating infrastructure and housing. Or at least the "monoculture" of infrastructure could start to give way to a more complex relationship between space and community—maybe even giving rise to a "multi-culture."

The building is more or less circular, so it has this quality that makes it feel like it spins as you drive by it. But the form also came from specific technical concerns. One of the problems with using single-loaded corridors is that they increase the amount of exterior surface area, and the exterior is, generally, the most expensive thing in a building. What we were interested in, in an almost
hypothetical way, was what kind of shape would create the maximum interior floor plates with the minimum circumferential exterior surface, and that turns out to be the circle. The shape was also driven by acoustical considerations. While the visibility from the freeway was a real asset, the noise was an enormous problem, and triple-glazing the windows and building acoustic walls would obviously just add to the costs. But every foot you move away from a sound source sees a drop in decibels, and the circular shape had the benefit of presenting the smallest piece of facade to the highway.

The ground floor contains many of the same supportive services as the Rainbow Apartments, as well as communal facilities like a kitchen, a common room, spaces for medical professionals and caseworkers to meet with residents, and a large outdoor courtyard. The form of the building as it meets the street creates a series of angled, perspectival "skewers" through the building. As you're moving around the ground floor, you're looking through or under the freeway
overpass as well as the connecting surface streets. As you get up inside the building, there is a central courtyard surrounded by a single-loaded corridor. The ninety-seven units are organized in a fan shape, which starts to suggest that they are part of a larger collective, but breaks in the form—small indentations of a foot-and-a-half in the wall around the courtyard space—give each of the units a sense of individuality. For us, that relationship between the individual and the collective remains one of the most important issues in housing.

The courtyard is open to the elements and functions as a space for social interaction. There are generous stairs that take you up from the ground floor, which also function as a space for social encounter—even as an “amphitheater” when members of the community come together or if performances are staged in the courtyard. Whereas we lost the entire interior screen to value-engineering in the Rainbow Apartments, I was determined that wouldn’t happen here.

The interior screen was extremely important, so what we did was merge the design elements with necessary functional elements around the interior of the courtyard. The balconies are all hung with steel rods, and roof drains come down through the interior of the courtyard. We also had a methane problem on the site, so some of the vertical articulations are actually a series of methane vents. That means that many of the fins that wrap the courtyard have functional importance and can’t be removed from the building; if the interior skin is removed, the balconies fall down, the courtyard floods, the place fills up with methane. We didn’t think of it as a “trick” so much as a way of saying that something like a freeway now has to do more in the city, just like the things we do as architects have to support two or three uses at once.

Community functions are distributed throughout the building rather than concentrated on the ground floor. There’s a big terrace at the top with views of the city. The very important and very prosaic elements of
the TV room and laundry room are on the third
door, right at the level of the elevated
freeway. When residents are doing laundry or
watching TV, it’s like they have a porch that
opens on to the public space of the highway; at
night it becomes a visible space that connects
the community of residents to the community of
drivers on I-10. This
being Los Angeles,
traffic is stopped
fairly often, so in a
city where things and
lives are often dis-
connected, these two
communities get to see
each other and thus
connect. That chore-
ography of a visual
connection doesn’t
build community automatically, but at least it
tries to suggest that the isolation of human
beings (whether economic or physical) is some-
thing that architecture can try to undermine.

STAR APARTMENTS

Our third project, the Star Apartments, 102
units on Skid Row in the shadow of downtown,
is surrounded by a number of low-rise buildings
with parking on their roofs. In going back to
Skid Row, one of the goals of the Housing Trust
was to attempt a more mixed-use approach. For
New Yorkers, retail on the ground floor and
housing above might not sound that strange, but
in a city like Los Angeles, that’s a fairly new
tendency in housing. The Housing Trust relies

on federal housing
money, and there are
regulations that say
if you’re in the hous-
ing business, you’re
not allowed to be in
the commercial busi-
ness. But they found
a crucial loophole: if
you develop a build-
ing with existing
retail, you can keep that going. So they found
exactly that, and gave it to us to work with.
We’ve changed it quite a bit, but the exist-
ing building became the ground floor of our
building mostly by scraping off and replacing
the facade. The old
building had park-
ing up on top, which
wasn’t going to be so
necessary for us, so
we tucked the parking
that we needed into
the back of the build-
ning and maintained two
facades of retail use.
The existing structure
became a podium. The
retail clinic of the Los Angeles County Health
Department is among the ground floor tenants
moving in, which is interesting.

Even beyond the loophole allowing developers
to carry forward existing retail space, I think
we increasingly have to think about the reuse
of existing buildings as the city continues to
density. We too often depend on systems and the
mechanics of a building to create sustainability, but it’s equally important to step back and look at the way we develop sites, at what can be preserved and saved. To build on top of an existing building, we had to build a new building with its own independent structure. It started to become clear that we could create a structural tray on which we could then build the rest of the housing. It could have looked like anything, but we were interested in using that gap between old and new structure to provide a horizontal community space that could become the equivalent of the more vertical courtyards we did in the previous two projects. In this case, there is a community kitchen, eating area, offices for caseworkers, an art classroom, a general education classroom, and a computer classroom. Outdoors there is a jogging and walking track, half-court basketball, and a gym and yoga deck. All of these larger community functions that we would normally not be able to fit into the building, or that would be outside of the building, are now increasingly being pulled into the building. The hope is that the residents aren’t just connected to social casework or medical functions, but also to a more expansive range of education and recreation.

Most people don’t think of Los Angeles as a particularly dense city, but in fact it is, just not vertically dense. But as the population continues to expand, there’s also increasing pressure to create a kind of hyper-density, especially around housing. One of the goals of this project was to see just how many units we could provide, and what kind of quality of life that might present to the people who live here. From above, you can see that the building is thick with units at the perimeter and also within the interior of the block. It’s almost like a city block, or even multiple city blocks, squeezed into one building. This is possible because some open space was created by the way the units are stepped in plan, allowing access to air and light,
and also because that community space under-
neath provides some of the functions for the
units themselves. The result is a number of
really interesting vertical shafts through
the structure.

Given the building reuse and the density we
were trying to achieve, there was very little
space on the site for staging construction,
and because of that, we started looking at pre-
fabrication. For Los Angeles, this is the
first multi-family
prefabricated housing
project; in fact, the
city only boasts one
other prefab build-
ing that dates to
the 1960s. There are
a number of munici-
pal regulations that
have made it almost
impossible to use pre-
fabrication. I won’t
go into that here, but
the first thing we did
as architects was not
to design, but rather
to negotiate with the
city to make this a pilot project for prefab-
rication in Los Angeles. In that sense, the
invention here wasn’t the form of the building,
although hopefully there is invention there as
well, but rather the procedural actions of the
architect before design even began.

The wood-framed units were all built in a fac-
tory just outside of Boise, Idaho. They are
transported two to a long pallet, trucked here
on a flatbed, and when they arrive, cut in half
at their base and hoisted into place. There
are some cost-per-square-foot benefits, but
the bigger economic benefit is that the build-
ing gets assembled much faster than usual, and
this reduces the overall construction schedule.
Also, because the units are built in a fac-
tory, the interiors can have a higher level of
finish—and these units get a little bit beat
up. By “higher level of finish,” I don’t mean
a fanciness of material, I just mean that the
controlled conditions under which the compo-
nents are put together should have long-term
benefits for maintenance costs. The interi-
ors are, again, quite functional. You have
the essential ingredients of a full kitchen,
a large ADA bathroom
tucked behind that,
and then a bedroom.
While the components
themselves might be
fairly perfunctory,
from a design perspec-
tive, the overall plan
is arranged in a way
that grants residents
a lot of access to
light and air.

One of the very interesting things about this
process is that all of the design and all of
the work on the units happens before construc-
tion starts. Architects are used to making
changes on site, whether we want to or not;
but here, it is more like building a car. The prototype is everything. We flew to Boise twice to look at the first prototype, and then went back to look at the second or “check” prototype. Once you sign off, it goes into production, and you as an architect have absolutely nothing to say from there. Nobody will listen to you. It’s on its way. This was a remarkable thing for us, having to rethink our engagement with the design process and the way that, as an architect, you have influence on the work of building.

CREST APARTMENTS

In the time since I gave this talk at Columbia, our office has been working on our fourth project with the Skid Row Housing Trust. In a big shift away from Skid Row and downtown Los Angeles altogether, the Crest Apartments are located in Van Nuys, a postwar suburb of the San Fernando Valley. The site is long and thin, fronting a typical strip boulevard that is unremarkable in every way but very characteristic of Southern California. The project is located here because its sixty-four units are meant to house formerly homeless veterans, and this area is a center of that population in the region. The location speaks to the Housing Trust’s ambition to continue to meet those populations close to where they are, as opposed to centralizing the homeless population in a very small percentage of the city. The neighborhood of Van Nuys has good public transportation and other services, and these amenities in combination with the on-site services provided by the Housing Trust ensure a balanced mix of independence and support for this particular constituency.

On long rectangular sites like this in the San Fernando Valley, the typical housing type is the “dingbat” apartment building, one or two floors of apartments above surface parking that covers the site.

Crest Apartments, for the Skid Row Housing Trust, Van Nuys, California, to be completed 2016. — fig. 029

Greystone Apartments, an example of the “dingbat” typology.

There are a number of practical explanations for this model which we had to deal with as well. As banal as it must seem, providing for fire-truck access and a turnaround in the middle of the site started to define the form of the building, resulting in the arced plan form. This was also exaggerated because, in contrast
to our other projects with the Housing Trust, we had to develop a double-loaded corridor long enough to accommodate the number of units projected for the site. We accomplished this by thinking formally of two parallel bars of units with an unconditioned corridor, or “split,” in the middle, that allows the two bars to have different elevation profiles and scales. In a sense, this juxtaposition of building scale addresses the in-between character of the neighborhood as it becomes more dense on one side while still echoing its single-family-house scale on the other.

There are two typical unit types at Crest. Both are studio apartment types and variations on other units we have designed for the Housing Trust, but these are some of the most refined and generous, I think. Generous not because they are larger, but because there has been even more attention to the development of smaller “figurative” modulations in the plan and elevation, which, taken together, will have a significant spatial impact on the experience of the living space.
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Finally, and with an impact equal to that of the building itself, the new ground plane creates a continuous garden across the entire site. In collaboration with Tina Chee and SWA, we envisioned a landscape that is multifunctional, with communal spaces for residents and a fully permeable ground surface for rainwater filtration bioswales, while still accommodating the required parking and fire lane. This landscape had a big impact on the form of the building, both in the way it lifted the building to become a bridge over the garden and in the way it brings the ends of the building inward, creating at the two ends of the site the feeling that the building is surrounded by landscape while reinforcing the impression of housing that embraces density.

Crest Apartments, atop a multifunctional landscape. ← fig. 032

ONE SANTA FE

Our projects with the Skid Row Housing Trust have all been quite small in physical scale. When people talk about transforming cities, the conversation often centers on very large projects like convention centers, entertainment complexes, glamorous cultural institutions, and superblock commercial developments—projects that almost change the center of gravity in a city. But I think it’s also possible to take a more incremental, temporal attitude toward significant urban transformation, and I think our housing is part of that. 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. This allows you to work more nimbly, I think. The question of scale, small and large, has been very much on our minds.

The last project, by contrast, is a very large-scale development in downtown Los Angeles called One Santa Fe. The building is largely market-rate housing, 438 units, with an affordable component of about 20 percent–everything from micro-studios to apartments with multiple bedrooms, and, in a few cases, two-floor units. It’s also very much a mixed-use building with retail, commercial office space, and some live-work housing in the base. The site is unique, and the building takes much of its influence from the surrounding infrastructure of rail yards, bridges, and even the campus of the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in the former Santa Fe Freight Depot. Aside from SCI-Arc, most of the surrounding buildings and train yards are maintenance facilities for the Metropolitan Transit Authority. The First Street and the Fourth Street bridges cross the rail yards, carrying a light rail line along with automobile traffic, and just across the rail yards is the Los Angeles River, another type of infrastructure that is slowly starting to develop into an amenity for the city after decades of neglect. From the street our site looks like nothing but infrastructure, and in fact many people didn’t know it was there despite the fact that until 1939, when Union Station was inaugurated, it was the site of Le Grande Station, the main passenger terminal for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railways.

So this is a big building. Stood on its end, it would join the supertalls of the world.
Length of One Santa Fe compared to the heights of some of the world's tallest buildings.

As the building has been going up, it has been commended and also criticized for its scale. I'm used to building buildings from the ground up, but the scale here meant that it was really built from south to north. It's been referred to as a "battleship," a "cruise ship," the "Death Star"—all of those. I ran a studio recently on the possibility of "the wrong scale," an idea that came from thinking about this project's role urbanistically. In this case, we tried not only to carry a coherent design across the tremendous length of the site, but also to break that dominant linearity at intervals, to interject interruptions, rips, and tears with spatial moments that extend into the surrounding neighborhood. In projects like these, I think the ambition should be to speculate or maybe even to anticipate what the city is going to become. In that sense, I've said that this project has "anticipatory scale." It's not trying to meet the city at the scale of the city today and certainly not trying to replicate the scale of the city previously, which is, I think, a problematic tendency. It's a project that tries to use architecture to project how the city might continue to emerge. As Los Angeles gets denser and denser, we should continue to evolve and invent models of what that density is going to look like, and that invention will be more compelling if it happens specifically in terms of the physical, cultural, and social characteristics of Los Angeles, rather than being based on models from New York or Paris or Chicago or London.

Because of the extreme thinness of the site, programs had to be stacked vertically, with the building becoming something of a Neapolitan sandwich of parking, retail, and housing. In the wider part of the site, we were able to do subterranean parking; while in the thinner areas, we lifted it up to floors two and three, connecting it by spiral ramps to the housing above. A semi-pedestrian area weaves through the building. These moments of disruption in the linearity of the building create transverse portals, visual as well as physical, through the building and the site.
They connect to characteristic moments in the surrounding context and work to make One Santa Fe more of a connective threshold in the urban fabric. Right now the back of the site is given over to maintenance functions, but rapid transit is becoming a more important part of life in Los Angeles, and there’s a very good chance that one day there will be a station for this district on the east side of the site. We had some inkling of that, at least, so we worked to convince everyone to allow us to create a big portal that could become a gateway connecting the tracks to the district this station would serve.

Eventually the project might even connect to the river, which is emerging as a site of emphasis in the cultural life and real estate of the city. We’re interested in expanding the conversation about what development might look like, not so much in terms of other buildings, but what effect it might have on how we think about the structure and the infrastructure of the city. Since the Los Angeles River is being developed as an amenity, we incorporated moments in the building where a series of bridges might spring off and tether to the river. They could become community gardens, not owned by people in the building, but by the community as a whole. They won’t happen exactly this way, of course, and they may not happen at all. Even if just one of these happens, it would be an interesting shift in how the city is built. Even as One Santa Fe is finished and people move in, our hope is that the building will keep pace with the dynamic changes that are taking place in its surroundings, and that it will connect to the city as it is now but continue to transform as a platform that has the potential to adapt to possible futures.

Inside the building, the range of unit types is very broad. There are work units, micro-studios of about 360 square feet, one-bedroom apartments, two-bedroom apartments, and two-bedroom townhomes. In the big bridge that connects the structures, we created units that relate in section to Le Corbusier’s Unité

One Santa Fe, view from First Street Bridge, across the Los Angeles River and rail yard. → fig. 035

One Santa Fe, building as portal. → fig. 036

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

One Santa Fe, interior unit types. → fig. 038
d'habitation in Marseille. There is a single corridor serving units that span the full floor with views out both sides of the building. In these units, there's an entrance floor with a bedroom and office and then a full floor on top or below with floor-through living spaces. We planned for four-bedroom units, which, given the student population at nearby SCI-Arc, might become something like a small dorm to make the building more economically accessible.

The skyline is often our first association with cities since it's supposed to be the most iconic and creative representation of what a city is. But increasingly, I think, architects, developers, and citizens are becoming alert to the fact that programmatic typologies like housing are just as important, if not more important, to invest with inventiveness. The representation of the city needs to include the work of making visible the city's different populations and their ways of being in the city, expressing the continual emergence of the city in subtler ways. The individual unit has long been the main object of study in housing—how it functions, how you live in it, how multiple units come together. But we shouldn't forget that the accumulation of all of those individual units, all of those individual lives, not only builds community, but also renders a very powerful representation of the city itself.