THE NEW FACE OF HUMANE ARCHITECTURE
MICHAEL MALTZAN DELIVERS AN AMBITIOUS VISION FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

DURBACH BLOCK JAGGERS, BAK ARQUITECTOS, SAM JACOB AND STEFAN SAGMEISTER

A Norman Day double-bill on two very different schools Architecture and design à la L.A. An urban shade structure like no other. The Zen of Elliat Rich Mury Architects designs for autism.
AMBITIOUS ARCHITECTURE CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN EASING THE HOMELESS BACK INTO SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

MICHAEL MALTZAN ARCHITECTURE DELIVERS THE NEW CARVER APARTMENTS IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - A COMBINATION OF STRONG DESIGN AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE.
NEW YORK

The stark white drum-shaped form of the New Canaan Apartments juxtaposed with the Interstate 10 freeway. Photography: Dean Baicov

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Apartments, explore a series of ideas, a practical sense, the facility from the nut.

The circular shape of one of LA's best-list.
In Los Angeles, and indeed throughout Southern California, the word 'community' is most often used, at least in an architectural sense, as the second half of the phrase 'gated community', a loaded term that typically refers to collections of sizable houses built at a remove from urban life, and patrolled by private security forces. Community, in these neighbourhoods, is less about togetherness or sociability than about separation and protection from the city at large and its various threats, real and perceived.

At the other end of the spectrum has been Southern California's homeless population, for whom privacy and community are in exceedingly short supply. Partially due to the region's famously mild climate, the number of homeless people in and around Los Angeles has long been quite high, with many congregating in an area on the edge of Downtown LA known as Skid Row. There they struggle to find even fleeting moments where they are not on full public display or at the mercy of the elements.

In recent years a number of LA's most talented architecture firms have begun turning their attention to this group of Angelenos, with more consistently or with more impressive results than Michael Maltzan Architecture. MAA, whose institutional clients include the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has designed three residential projects for the LA-based non-profit Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT), most recently the remarkable New Curver Apartments, a six-story building that takes an arresting drum-shaped form.

Unlike the firm's other projects for SRHT, the New Curver Apartments are not in the heart of Skid Row but a mile or so southwest, on a gritty site directly adjacent to an elevated, busy section of Interstate 10, a freeway that slices east-west across the Los Angeles basin. For all its famous suburban-style sprawl, LA County is actually among the most densely populated urban regions in the US. Though its density is of the low-to-mid-rise variety, it is increasingly difficult to find open land for new construction. As a result, public agencies, school districts and social-service organisations alike are finding that when they manage to raise money for new facilities, the only available undeveloped parcels are near or even immediately adjacent to freeways.

In a number of sfy but also surprisingly optimistic ways, MAA founder Michael Maltzan, in his design for the New Curver Apartments, explores the building's proximity to the freeway to explain a series of ideas about exposure, visibility and community. In a practical sense, the architecture had to protect the residents of the facility from the noise and air pollution produced by the freeway. The circular shape of the building — which instantly calls to mind one of LA's best-known architectural landmarks, the cylindrical Capital Records tower by Welton Becket Associates — limits the number of apartments that face the freeway. Triple-paned glass helps keep the sound of the traffic to a low murmur inside the 96 apartments, each of which is an efficient 28 square metres.

In a more symbolic sense, the freeway-adjacent site makes clear to drivers — and thus to the public at large — that the homeless and formerly homeless population is not a group that deserves to be hidden away. Indeed, during the morning and evening rush hour, as traffic outside the building slows to a crawl, drivers have a chance to look directly into a third-floor laundry room and thus come face-to-face with the work that SRHT is doing to lift homeless people off the streets and into a supportive setting.

The materials and plan of the facility also reflect an effort to balance honesty about its location with an interest in privacy and even seclusion. The sawtooth-like edges of the drum suggest that the building is tough enough to protect itself in the urban jungle. The galvanised sheet-metal strips that run vertically up the walls of the circular central courtyard offer an interior buffer from complete exposure. At ground level, the building's concrete base and concrete floors, which lead to meeting rooms, counselling areas and staff offices, mirror the concrete of the freeway.

But the dominant material wrapping the building, especially on the upper floors, is stucco. This has long been the basic, if unadorned, lingua franca of the LA cityscape, used by anonymous builders of shopping malls as well as famous architects like Richard Neutra and Frank Gehry. Though there are occasional slabs of bright colour in Maltzan's design, including patches of yellow in the stairwells and on the metal slats of the facade, most of the stucco is painted an almost startlingly bright shade of white.

It's a shade that indicates quite clearly to residents and public alike that this is a building that will require — that anticipates — constant upkeep. Implicit in the colour, then, is a promise of consistency, attention and care; precisely what many of the residents have been missing, if not craving, in their lives.

Christopher Hawthorne is an architecture critic for the Los Angeles Times. He is the author, with Alanna Stang, of The Green House: New Directions in Sustainable Architecture, published by Princeton Architectural Press.
ARCHITECT STATEMENT

"Viewed from the freeway and the street, the project’s faceted form articulates the scale of the individual units within, expressing the dynamic relationship between an urban fabric composed of individual lives, the texture of our collective experience, and the speed of the freeway. At street level a series of lines trace the street inwards, defining primary circulation paths, organising program spaces and creating views deep into and across the block. The architecture urges residents to connect with the urban context at multiple scales and from multiple vantage points. The screened central courtyard connects vertically to the natural sky; a grand stair gestures down towards the ground floor, drawing the courtyard space across the lobby and into the street. At the top floor, a partially covered terrace creates dramatic views of the Downtown skyline. Visual and perceptual connections to the local landscape abound at multiple scales, drawing out the rich texture of the social program and situating it within the expansive perspective of the architecture."

Michael Maltzan
PROJECT TEAM:
DESIGN PRINCIPAL: Michael Malman
PROJECT TEAM: Peter Hazel, Steve
Jung, Chen Lee, Wai, Carole, Katrina
Loo, Hiroshi Takayama, Subho, Anam, Christopher
Platt, Shrikant Karthik, van
Lam, Cتزhao, Mark
Lun, Christopher Nakado
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: FV Smith
BUILDING ENGINEER: "MECHANICAL AND ELECTRICAL ENGINEER: BE Consulting"
Engineers
CIVIL ENGINEERS: Pulsar
Building Consultants Inc.
AEROSPACE: Airflow, Torino
FIRE AND LIFE SAFETY
ENGINEERING: Air
BUILDING WYNDHAM CONSTRUCTION INC.

PROJECT DETAILS
DEVELOPMENT: 32 months
CONSTRUCTION: 12 months
FLOOR AREA: 530,000 sqm
CONSTRUCTION COST: $131,14,000

KEY MATERIAL INFORMATION
DOORS: Floorwood (sliding), Corel
Ironwood (sidewall), CI Group
TILES: FLOORS: Ironwood Rubber, Tile
PAINTS AND STAINS: Dunn Edwards
WOODWORK: Alumina Fraser floor
Floorwood, glass floor, Okita

FLOOR PLAN
10, Entry
2. Lobby
3. Community kitchen
4. Community garden
5. Manager's office
6. Meeting room
7. Assistant manager's office
8. Manager's unit
9. Office
10. Copy room
11. Electrical room
12. Telecommunications room
13. Elevator machine room
14. Janitor closet
15. Recycling room
16. Trash room
17. Mechanical room
18. Parking
19. Laundry room
20. Community room
21. Unit

The view from the models. PHOTOGRAPHY: JEAN BAIN

To see the projects section go to monumentmagazine.com.au/102
ARCHITECT
MICHAEL MALTZAN

Is this building 'significant enough' to make a difference?
That's a heavy burden for one building to bear. I think it's difficult for one building to generally make the only difference in the city, but it is possible for a building to make a difference and I hope very much that this building does. My bigger ambition with Carver and the other work we've been doing for the Skid Row Housing Trust is that while each of these buildings is meant to be significant and important in and of its own right, it's as a group at an urban level where their real significance lies. It's when they are viewed as a whole that they have the potential to point to a more progressive version of the city.

Was your approach to Carver any different to your other projects?
It's a very good question because often people think of this work as being almost a special project. It's not. I approach each of these projects [for the SHHT] in exactly the same way that I would approach a project for a wealthier client or a larger institutional project in that I'm trying to find where architecture has a real role.

I don't think you can approach these projects differently: in the end you would be producing something that was not authentic to yourself or your architecture as a whole.

The real goal is to show that architecture at the very high level of pursuit and ambition and optimism can take place at many different levels of socio-economic urban strata and that it can be quite elastic.

Often, there are specific challenges for each of these projects: the context is different, the technical questions are different, the program is often different and budgets are different, but it doesn't mean that we approach them any differently.

Are you pioneering an 'optimistic architecture'?
I definitely think I'm trying to make optimistic architecture, but I'll leave that up to others to judge. I'm trying to make an architecture that points to a set of new possibilities for buildings and buildings in the city. I'm not only excited about change in the city as an agent of the future, but I'm excited about trying to make something from that, and to make something that is optimistic in a sense that it believes all of the messy complications of the city, even in a city that is reinventing itself and is as new as Los Angeles.

If the city of Los Angeles has been 'rewritten', how will it look in five to ten years' time?
I've been speaking publicly about cities that push the boundaries further and further outward and how that has now—at least in a city like Los Angeles—reached one type of conclusion. In a way it's reached not only its physical but also its psychological boundaries, the point beyond which, if you keep going, you're really no longer in L.A., you're in a different psychology and culture. You begin to see people moving into different neighborhoods, different precincts, different cores and that's interesting, because it changes the fabric of the city. And in a city like Los Angeles it gives you an opportunity to re-imagine what the psychology and the identity of the city is.

But I think what's really at stake is what happens when that city starts to become more and more dense, when expansion isn't about pushing the boundaries out. How do you re-imagine what the sensibilities and the identities are in the city? Projects like Carver are not only about the specific program, they're about how you make architecture that participates in that change.

In Los Angeles, as in many contemporary cities that will face this challenge, that new city will not be about buildings and structures that are monocultures, in that they only do one thing—they're going to have to be about buildings that are multi-cultures, buildings that take on a greater level of complexity in the way they act with the city as a whole. I think this is exciting because if you can figure that out then you will have found a new future, a very progressive, optimistic direction for the city that it replaces, and also, in a very positive way, replaces that old version of ourselves.
Downtown renaissance

Downtown Los Angeles has always been something of an oxymoron: the centre of a famously crime-ridden and multipolar metropolitan region. But in recent years it has been enjoying a renaissance, with old office buildings transformed into lofts, apartments and condominiums, and a new influx of young residents who work in Hollywood and other creative fields. The change has been particularly noticeable in South Park, a section of Downtown tucked into an urban corner bordered by freeways to the west and south and new home to the Staples Center arena. It’s the home of Kobe Bryant (left) and the Los Angeles Lakers, and a gigantic, neon-encrusted entertainment and hotel complex called LA Live. It is on the periphery of this part of Downtown — just south of South Park — that the New Carver Apartments are located, an architectural bridge between the roar of the freeway and the roar of the crowd from inside LA Live and Staples Center.

INTERVIEW
CYNTHIA WILLIAMS

What does living in the New Carver Apartments mean to you? I have living here because it’s removed from Skid Row and it feels like a step-up from the usual low-income housing projects. In other places you live there because that’s the only choice you have; you’re stuck. I don’t feel stuck here. I feel like I am learning to have a normal life.

Is there anything you’d change about your apartment? I would like a bigger closet, a bathtub and an oven.

What do you like most about living here? I like the design of the apartments. It’s different from other Skid Row housing and low-income apartment buildings. It’s very nice.

Do you use the communal areas regularly? Yes. It is nice to talk and socialise with your neighbours. Sometimes it’s nice to go sit on the patio and read. It helps people feel more comfortable.

Does this feel like home to you? Yeah, I miss it when I’m not here. I’ve become used to having my own place to come home to.
How important was the choice of architect for the job?
The choice of architect for each development is critically important. Each site requires different attributes and skill sets, but one of the key things we look for is the ability to work collaboratively with us. Permanent supportive housing developments are extremely challenging as you are working within a limited budget, infill sites, high density and very ambitious goals.
We work in a collaborative and creative fashion with architects to overcome these challenges and produce transformative architecture.

Are the New Carver Apartments helping to transform this area of Los Angeles?
Yes, the New Carver is paving the path for creating a deeply diverse Downtown Los Angeles. Downtown LA is a fascinating community because there is such tremendous income and racial diversity in a very small geographic area. We generally think of gentrification as a process of poor households being pushed out of a neighbourhood to make way for higher-income households, but the New Carver demonstrates that when we are very deliberate and thoughtful we can actually ‘raise the boats’ of all members of a community and dramatically improve all neighbourhoods at the same time.

Would this building have achieved your objectives as successfully in another part of Los Angeles?
Hedehome Housing Trust is dedicated to solving chronic homelessness in Downtown Los Angeles. We geographically target our development activities because we believe that for Downtown to achieve its potential we need to address the incredible disparities between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in this community. We believe that good design, high-quality construction and excellent management can be a catalyst for transforming lives and communities. The New Carver also inspires an optimism about the prospects for eliminating homelessness, which is often been thought of an intractable problem.

Is the secret to the building’s good design its therapeutic value?
We do not use the word ‘therapeutic’ to describe our work because it doesn’t speak to the universal need we all have to live in environments and communities that encourage our wellbeing and continued growth. We believe that all members of our community deserve to have not only a home of their own, but homes that they can be proud of. While we at HHTF try to create transformative opportunities for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community, we believe that our work speaks to the universal human need for respite and rejuvenation.
CLIENT NOTES: WHAT DOES THE SKID ROW HOUSING TRUST DO?

Founded in the late 1980s in Los Angeles, SRHT is a non-profit social-service agency providing support for Southern California’s homeless population. It is unique in its commitment to the idea that ambitious architecture can play a key role in using the homeless back into supportive housing and society. By commissioning MMA on three occasions SRHT has sent a message to the residents that they deserve not just a roof over their heads but a welcoming and well-designed safety net. According to SRHT, more than 80 per cent of the people it houses stay in their apartments for more than a year; a remarkable figure given the unpredictable nature of life on the streets.