

# The Design Solution for Homelessness

In Los Angeles, An Architectural Approach to Keeping People Off the Streets Is Gaining Notice.

STORY BY **Lyra Kilston**      PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Katrina Ohstrom**      PUBLISHED ON **Sep 8, 2014**

The glittering skyline of downtown Los Angeles is bright and close from the roof of the Star apartment building in L.A.'s Skid Row. "We can see them, and they can see us," says Mike Alvidrez, the executive director of Skid Row Housing Trust, the developer of the sleek Star, an uncommonly beautiful respite for formerly homeless Angelenos.

He was referring to the clear line of sight between the building and its neighbors but also to the striking building's own visibility. The 10-month-old Star Apartments — home to 100 individuals struggling to rebound from lives on the street — is visually arresting, a bright white set of staggered towers hovering over an open terrace.

Until now, Skid Row's mostly low-rise buildings didn't even appear in the skyline — out of sight, out of mind. Now, Alvidrez hopes, perhaps the homeless will be seen.

A few blocks' distance shouldn't render a place invisible, but for generations in Los Angeles it has. Skid Row has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the nation. Demographers estimate there are 5,000 to 11,000 destitute individuals living in a 50-block radius just south of the crowded bars and hip restaurants of downtown, pushing shopping carts down trash-strewn streets and when it gets dark, passing out on the ground. Most Angelenos have no reason to visit the area or consider the people living there.

The Trust has a plan to change that. Unlike all the plans that came before, it relies on something that

this culture capital already knows how to do well — aesthetics. Its portfolio of edgy, striking buildings has raised the design profile of Los Angeles and reframed the conversation about how to build affordable housing in a place where income inequality ranks among the highest in the nation.

In the book *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton notes that beautiful architecture has none of the “unambiguous advantages of a vaccine or a bowl of rice.” Alvidrez’s organization seeks to complicate that notion. At the heart of the non-profit’s work is the question, posed to me by more than one staff member: “How can the homeless be viewed as equal if their housing is not?”

The model has found its apex, so far, in the stunning, modern Star Apartments, which opened last November. The Star includes a medical clinic, onsite counselors, a wellness center, and 15,000 square feet of community space, all designed by the internationally renowned architect Michael Maltzan — the same Michael Maltzan behind numerous high-profile civic projects, including the redevelopment of Governors Island in New York, the master plan for the Minneapolis riverfront and the \$105 million One Santa Fe development in downtown L.A.

In a conversation last spring, he described his work with Skid Row Housing Trust as “part of thinking about how to continually evolve the model forward of housing in the city.”

“What I’ve come to believe,” he said of the Trust’s buildings, “is that such projects can represent how to be a real participant in the overall future of a city, and certainly of Los Angeles.”

The Trust has chosen to work with small, creative architecture firms like Maltzan’s company, instead of large developers with cookie-cutter plans. They’ve partnered with nimble practitioners counted among L.A.’s vanguard, including Killefer Flammang Architects, Koning Eizenberg Architecture, and Brooks + Scarpa. The association has proven mutually beneficial — a daring architect is more likely to experiment to find inventive design solutions, while non-profit clients are, as Maltzan put it, “constitutionally wired for innovation.”

Many of the Trust’s buildings are the most striking on their block. Some are LEED certified or have used cutting-edge construction methods. Several have received regional or national awards for historic preservation, beautification and architectural excellence. In recent months, the organization’s office has been inundated by tour requests from architecture students.

“Trauma-informed care” is a medical approach that takes into account someone’s past when providing services. The Trust describes what it does as “trauma-informed design.” Most of the non-profit’s tenants have cycled through institution after institution: temporary housing, overcrowded clinics, shelters, addiction recovery centers, prison — places typically designed via budget-driven utilitarianism. They’re also systems that didn’t work; people fell through the cracks and ended up on the streets. Familiar elements like dark corridors, stark fluorescent lighting or worn, anonymous spaces augur the same failures.

“How do we design buildings that create the best environment for people to live in and recover from the effects of homelessness and other disabilities?” asks Alvidrez. “We are always trying to mitigate some of the ill effects of homelessness by bringing in good design, ample light and generous landscaping.”

It is this approach that brought a tomato-red staircase and vertical garden to the Rainbow Apartments, Maltzan’s first building for the Trust. At another development, Charles Cobb Apartments, the designers opted to avoid a dark stairwell by adding a thick glass floor on the top story. The Trust couldn’t find a local fabricator so the glass was imported from Germany. It wasn’t the cheapest solution, but now light filters through every floor of the building.

### “I Feel Like a Person Again”

Le’Vonna Lacy has lived in one of the Trust’s buildings since 2011. I met her on a May afternoon on the rooftop garden of the Charles Cobb Apartments, where the Trust’s community relations manager, Daniel Rizik-Baer, was giving a tour. Lacy joined us as we admired fruit and vegetables growing in large planters under the hot L.A. sun.

Beneath a shady canopy near a small blooming fruit tree, Lacy sat down and told her story — how she had first come to Skid Row as a teenager and somehow never left. Finding stable housing with onsite medical and mental health services enabled her to discover and manage her bipolar disorder and diabetes. Now in her mid-30s, she works as what the Trust calls an ambassador, helping others on the street navigate their way into housing, and guiding them toward the services they need. She has a girlfriend too, and beamed when talking about the simple, domestic pleasure of having her visit. As we left the roof, Lacy gestured toward the planters and view of the downtown skyline, and made sure we’d seen the courtyard and community kitchen. Her pride was evident. This was her home — her garden, her courtyard and her stunning view.

“I feel like a person again,” Lacy said.

It’s not hard to see what Lacy likes about the Trust’s models.

At the Star, Maltzan’s airy spaces play host to classes, film screenings, group exercise and art activities led by outside professionals coordinated by the Trust. A running track circles the building’s vast second-story terrace, where dwarf fruit trees are planted along the wall and lines of vegetable planters offer thriving artichokes, brussels sprouts and raspberries. In the works is a sports court that will offer basketball or pickleball — a cross between tennis and badminton popular with older people.

“The Star is really pushing the typology of permanent supportive housing,” Theresa Hwang, the Trust’s community architect told me. “Projects like these are creating an opportunity to expand the definition of design and the role of the architect.”

Design questions aside, the kind of long-term, holistic care provided within the Trust's buildings is increasingly becoming the answer to the question of how to help the chronically homeless. It's central to President Obama's "Opening Doors" plan launched in 2010 and strategies in cities across the country.

It's also the most cost-effective solution. Alvidrez showed me some extraordinary charts that tracked the financial effects of supportive housing. Without access to medical care, most homeless people rely on local hospital emergency rooms. Some visited the ER an average of 10 times in six months. Likewise, without the stability of housing and support, crime is more likely, resulting in a cycle of costly court hearings and incarcerations. As of 2009, services for one person with multiple disorders living on the streets of Los Angeles amounted to \$60,456 per year. By contrast, the average cost for the Trust to house and serve one supportive-housing tenant, as they measured it in 2011, is only \$13,000 per year.

Today, more than 90 percent of the Trust's tenants stay for at least a year, a much longer duration than the typical experience of multiple evictions under the "no tolerance" policies common in other subsidized housing developments. That means more than 1,600 people now have safe long-term homes. Letting residents make a decision to seek help, Alvidrez explains, "gives people a sense of being able to guide their own destiny."

He relayed a story about a doctor working with formerly homeless individuals who had made a Powerpoint slide to explain that no amount of intensive medical care could really make a permanent change if the patient was homeless and not receiving regular care. The slide showed a prescription pad with the doctor's signature on it that simply reads: "One Unit of Permanent Supportive Housing."

## From the Ground Up

The name "skid row" originated in mid-19th-century Pacific Northwest logging camps and comes from "skid roads," or paths made in the woods to skid or drag cut timber. The term became slang for where workers were sent when they were fired or no longer needed — as though they too had been felled. Because of the saloons and brothels that were often clustered around logging camps, the name "skid road" and then "skid row" evolved to mean any similarly derelict area.

For more than a century, L.A.'s Skid Row has attracted the poor and the transient, starting soon after the terminus of the cross-country railway was built in the 1870s. The neighborhood around the train station quickly developed a slew of cheap single-room occupancy hotels (SROs), bars and brothels to serve the mostly male, itinerant laborer population radiating from the train station. Over the decades, the area absorbed various waves of migrants arriving in the West to seek work, a pattern that peaked during the Depression, and again during World War II. After the Vietnam War, many veterans who had passed through Los Angeles before they were shipped out ended up returning to the familiar streets of Skid Row, where services were already concentrated. According to the L.A. Chamber of Commerce, it was during this post-Vietnam phase that the demographic of Skid Row changed from "predominantly elderly, white and alcohol-dependent to predominantly young, nonwhite, and drug-dependent."

Parallel to this new influx of homeless veterans, the housing stock of Skid Row was being severely reduced due to a 1960 Property Rehabilitation Program enforcing earthquake and fire safety codes. Over the next decade, a huge number of the area's SRO hotels were unable to afford the mandated rehabilitation or upgrades. The result was the eventual demolition of half the area's 15,000 housing units by the early 1970s.

In 1976, to address the growing crisis of homelessness, the city passed a redevelopment plan for downtown that supported the concentration of services and housing for the homeless in Skid Row, while encouraging light industry to move in on its fringes. Now known as the policy of containment (or as some call it, "unofficial ghettoization"), the initiative protected the neighborhood from complete destruction but was driven, in part, by a desire to divide the area from the parts of downtown trying to attract affluent residents and new business. The containment essentially succeeded in quarantining Skid Row from the rest of downtown, creating a sense of two separate political entities. All this was happening at a time when crack use was on the rise and California was shuttering mental health facilities, putting even more people on the street, many of them ill.

In 1989, the Trust was founded in response to Skid Row's increasingly dire conditions. At first, the Trust focused on quickly purchasing and rehabilitating the SRO hotels that had been closed in the 1960s. The organization upgraded several hotels and moved hundreds of residents in over its first few years, but began to recognize that housing alone was not enough. About half of the tenants who moved into the renovated apartments ended up returning to the streets. The Trust's next step was hiring case managers to help residents navigate the thicket of outside social services. This improved the situation, however, by the end of the 1990s it was apparent that a supportive-housing model, offering a network of onsite services, was the way forward.

The organization also came to realize that a different kind of housing experience called for a different kind of architecture — a tall order that would signify a fresh start as well as safety, support, permanence, independence, community and hope. It was time to think about building from the ground up.

By then, the Trust had established a system in which their residents, property management, and social services and maintenance staff met with an architect or landscape planner to discuss potential designs early in the planning stages. In these "design engagement sessions," residents and staff were able to hear the architect's proposals, participate in hands-on activities and voice opinions about the design. The ability to start with a blank slate, architecturally, enabled the Trust to fully utilize years of resident and staff feedback.

Maltzan had made a name for himself with the geometrically striking Inner-City Arts building in 1995 on the edge of Skid Row and was at work on the temporary home of the Museum of Modern Art in Queens, New York when the Trust approached him. He agreed to design his first Trust project, Rainbow Apartments, for a reduced fee. Completed in 2006, the 89-unit building features five stories of efficiency apartments built around a central courtyard. There is a communal garden and kitchen, airy open walkways, a vertical wall garden, and a playful rhythm of asymmetrical windows and bright accents,

including the bright-red staircase that has become a social hub for the residents.

In the decade since the Rainbow was built, Maltzan has gone on to design two more significant buildings for the Trust — New Carver, and the aforementioned Star, and is currently at work on a fourth. Over its 25-year life span, the Trust has developed 26 different permanent housing complexes in total, including three that remain in progress. All 26 serve or will serve the chronically homeless.

## Climbing Bright Stairs

In the lobby of the Star Apartments, I met Anthony Haynes. Tall and loping with a quick grin, he talked about enjoying a recent onsite tai chi class and an eye-opening vegetarian cooking workshop. He's lived in the Trust's buildings since 2009 and is now a peer advocate, helping new residents make the adjustment by accompanying them to appointments, encouraging them to attend therapy groups, or just checking in on them from time to time to offer an empathetic voice. The first few months of new housing can be perilous. Haynes told me, as did others that day, that many new arrivals struggle with "the walls closing in." Rizik-Baer described it as "root shock." Inside the unfamiliar privacy of four walls and a ceiling, without the distraction of the constant action on the streets, the silence can feel deafening.

Informal activity or support groups sprang up organically at the Trust's properties, but for the newer buildings, a concerted effort toward wellness resulted in the construction of socially conducive architecture like large, sunny community areas, as well as a formalized activity program to help counteract isolation, build community and contribute to residents' quality of life. "We put a high emphasis on stabilization, but once that happens, then what? Watch TV all day?" asks Rizik-Baer. "Providing choice for our residents is a huge goal." (Choice being a rare luxury for this population.) As we toured the Trust's buildings, he pointed out the lists of daily activities posted in the lobbies. There was a wide variety, from AA to yoga, bingo to gardening, from women's groups to documentary film, book, and PTSD groups, as well as outings to the grocery store and city sights. With event schedules and ping-pong tables, buildings felt more like college dorms than social services facilities.

## THE TAKEAWAY

Design influences how we feel in our surroundings and can have an impact on mental health.

The year of supportive housing cuts taxpayers less on the cycle of

The Star was the last Trust project developed before the dismantling of California's Community Redevelopment Agency, which until that point had been the primary financing vehicle for urban redevelopment projects in the state. It was a blow to the Trust but one the non-profit handled with the same ingenuity it applies to its architecture. In 2012, the Trust opened New Genesis, a sleek, mixed-used, mixed-income building that combines housing and onsite services for the homeless with low-income and market-rate apartments. Below the apartments are two commercial storefronts, now home to an ice cream shop and a coming restaurant, whose leases generate income to support the building's social services. Zigzagging the interior is the Trust's trademark bright stairs — this time painted electric yellow. The Killefer Flammang Architects-designed building is the Trust's first experiment with a self-sustaining mixed-use model. (Another mixed-use building is due to open this fall.)

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It will be interesting to watch, as time goes on, how the businesses at New Genesis (and their clientele) interact with the community living above. One thing all Trust buildings share is the ability to feel both a part of the surrounding neighborhood and like a refuge from it. Their buildings' enclosed courtyards are calm and clean, ensconced in an urban context but offering other possibilities too: the quiet to read, a chance to engage with others, a comfortable chair to relax in. The Trust's Abbey Apartments features towering bunches of lush bamboo and a high wall covered in robust green vines; even a shy cat has found a home there. The rooftop patios — an amenity often reserved for luxury apartments — offer a sense of distance and perspective. Several of the residents I met mentioned the therapeutic beauty of watching the city skyline at night from their rooftops, when street-level inequities are abstracted into quiet geometries.

When I visited the Abbey's second-story community room, Rizik-Baer took me to the corner where a tall window framed the street below. The window, like the community room, was designed to counteract isolation. "We wanted to maintain a link to the street," he says. "People still want to know what's going on down there."

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Lyra Kilston is a writer and 4th-generation Angeleno. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Time*, and *Wired*, among other publications.



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