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I live in a city that is changing rapidly. These changes are happening for many reasons: such as responding to social and political evolutions and, physical and environmental pressures, but nowhere are those changes being felt more acutely than around the questions about and extraordinary needs for housing.

For most of its history, Los Angeles, like most post-war cities in North America, has been defined by the ever-expanding carpet made up of single-family houses sprawling to the horizon. The freeways might be the more iconographic emblem of Southern California, but it's the house that really built LA.

That model of development has become unsustainable for all of the reasons you probably imagine, but it is the combination of the growing housing unaffordability, along with an ever-expanding deficit of housing stock that has made accessibility to housing increasingly so unachievable across a broad economic spectrum.

This expanding crisis has had a direct effect on the growth of homelessness in the region, and one goal for city leaders, developers, and planners has to be finding ways to provide more housing, more quickly, and more cost effectively. These are tangible, metric driven goals and certainly a place architecture and architects can make real contributions… But the homelessness

issue is more complex than pure numbers. Homelessness has many causes, and many faces. There is not a one size fits all solution. Trying to confront the scale of the problem simply with one type or approach to building fails for the individual, the community, and our cities.

We have to be realistic about architecture's ability on its own to create wholesale social change, and to hope that simply the act of building collective housing is enough to guarantee positive transformation in social conditions. But architecture can't stand back either. There is within architecture's range of capabilities genuine potential for agency, to use its unique tools and skillsets to demonstrate what is possible, to develop new useful prototypes, to help reconnect community, to make problems society wishes to hide, visible in positive ways, and to continue to push architecture and the architect into a more active and ethical role within culture.

This belief has been the guiding context for myself and my office since we began working with the Skid Row Housing Trust in the middle of 2003 when the Trust, led by Mike Alvidrez, Jim Bonar, and Christian Ahumada commissioned us to design a new ground up project in the heart of Skid Row that was to be called "Rainbow Apartments." It was also the first multi-family housing that I had been asked to do even thought I had been interested in and hoping to work with housing for many years. I had learned in architecture school that housing was one of the fundamental typologies of modern architecture, and a place where architecture could be particularly effective in working towards progressive change in culture and society, an idea I continue to strongly believe in strongly.

The name Rainbow Apartments seemed a bit ironic given the site location, which at the time was the epicenter of homelessness on skid row. This location, and this project, were important to the Trust as it was here that they were exploring a new evolution of their buildings, which up until then generally were SRO transitional or shelter based models. With Rainbow, their plan was to create one of the first permanent supportive housing projects in North America.

Permanent supportive housing is exactly what it says it is: housing where individual inhabitants have a long-term stable home, with supportive services, like medical care, psychological assistance, educational opportunities and job training for the residents within the building. This new model had the chance of systemically changing the long term effectiveness of housing for those residents by reducing recidivism and building community, but it also meant new architectural forms were needed to respond to this change in their mission. With residents living permanently at Rainbow Apartments they would need more than a bedroom, and bathroom. With permanent residency also meaning the possibility of community forming, communal kitchens, common rooms, and supportive program spaces take on more prominence. Supportive service offices, and how they were situated within the building needed to respond to the competing ambitions for new collective community life while also maintaining personal privacy. How to accomplish this was a big question to navigate in the design. At Rainbow, we placed a lot of this program just off of the entry and intentionally positioned in between the street and the stairs up to the community courtyard.

I think the challenges for an individual's ability to weave together public and private life is one of the places architecture has some of its greatest potential for innovation. The Trust residents

have all come from chronic homelessness. Most have been on the streets for months and years. That constant exposure often creates a psychological shell these individuals have created out of necessity to cope with that radical imbalance. They often become withdrawn and the previous housing models often allowed that isolation to continue. The residents would come in the front door, up the elevator, down an enclosed corridor, and disappear into their room. At Rainbow I was trying to find a way to make an architecture that could help modify that equation. A simple thing was to organize the building with a single loaded outdoor corridor around a courtyard which have the positive effect of creating a kind of semi-public realm where an individual, just by going to and from their room, became a more visible part of the community. It was trying to create a new "semi-public" space to safely reestablish a comfort level with being a part of a community.

The interiors of the Rainbow units were also a real challenge. Housing codes have changed a great deal over the past decades. Accessibility regulations have expanded bathrooms to the point that they're almost the largest room in these very compact apartments. 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 architecturally how you might make something like a bathroom or a kitchen more efficient and also more considered, so they come to play a more generous role in the space of the unit.

The Rainbow Apartments were an enormous learning step for us as an office, and very challenging during construction from a cost standpoint. We were building this building in the boom before the 2008 recession, and every week the cost kept going up against a fixed budget. We were constantly looking for ways to resolve cost and the result was that we lost a large percent of what we normally think of as "architecture." For example, the decorative interior screen around the courtyard that was a big part of the original design was lost. A large portion of glass wall that afforded more transparency in and out was eliminated. We cut back on the range of materials we had specified for the interiors. This was the moment I began to experiment with color as an important tool in all of our buildings with the Trust, and that has continued to be an exciting exploration for me in the subsequential work. But by the time we were done, it felt like we were negotiating with the contractors whether there would be one or two sides of paint on the window shades.

When the building was finalized, I had a lot of anxiety because of what we had lost. I felt like we had failed for the residents, the community, and for architecture. I was worried we had produced an ineffective building, but instead the building was a real success for the residents and for the Trust. The new model of permanent supportive housing was really working there and the building was playing an active role in that success. It was an enormous lesson for me. While much of what looked like the architecture of the building had to be eliminated, many of the most fundamental aspects of the architecture, its planning, circulation, range and scales of spaces, was working as a genuinely new model for the individuals and the community, and life at Rainbow was thriving.

It's not uncommon for architects who have worked with the process of affordable housing to do one project and then say, "Thank you, that was a lot of fun but no more." Within the framework of a normal architectural practice, this work is hard. For me, 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 ambitious and complex building projects like these is to transfer the lessons about what does and doesn't work into the next projects. Brazenly, I asked the Housing Trust if we could do at least two more projects with them, and they said "Yes." It made sense to them as this process of critical evolution is at the core of their culture as well, and a long relationship was formed.

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 what was becoming a very prominent revitalized district of the city. The Housing Trust was interested in moving 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 one specific siloized area. One long term concern was that their incredible success in developing projects on Skid Row could start to create, incrementally, the equivalent of the enormous social projects from the postwar boom in public housing in cities across the United States. Rather than just keep building on Skid Row and risk further isolating the homeless community, their hope, socially and urbanistically, was to connect and weave these communities more thoroughly into the city as a whole.

Carver sits about twenty feet from the massive elevated freeway, and in a stroke of useful coincidence anchors one end of Hope Street. In Los Angeles, freeways are our Main Street. In the design I was consciously trying to use this proximity to the freeway to create a connection, to see if we could create a visual encounter, between people moving through the city, and the residents who are often invisible to most of the rest of the city. The problem with infrastructure, I think, is that for too long it has been conceived as a monoculture. It usually only does exactly one thing, in this case moves cars while taking up enormous space, 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 challenging that singular role the freeway plays in the city, especially as forms of mobility evolve. Maybe one could imagine getting closer and closer and closer to the freeway, finally closing that gap to the point where the city is making forms like infrastructure and housing that could be more integrated. Where the highway wouldn't be a wall between neighborhoods, but more of a bridge linking separate communities together through the unlikely combination of transportation and housing.

The typical way housing is constructed in Los Angeles is 4-5 floors of wood stud framing over a concrete podium. It is so ubiquitous that it is almost impossible to challenge its cost effectiveness. The architectural challenge then is to work within that system and still create something unique.

Above the first floor, the building is circular, so it has this perceptual quality that makes it feel like it spins, and that phenomena gives Carver a real visual connection to you as you drive by. 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 the most expensive thing, generally, in a building. The question we had been asking ourselves was what kind of shape would create the maximum interior floor area, with the minimum perimeter exterior surface, and that turns out to be the circle. The shape was further 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 measurable drop in decibel levels, 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 an outdoor courtyard off the kitchen. The geometry of the plan is created by a series of angled, perspectival “skewers” through the building. As you’re moving around the ground floor, these views through the building connect you to the city around you. It’s important to create privacy in these buildings but it is also important to not be isolated from the world outside its doors. The 97 units are all organized around the central inward courtyard. The interior and exterior lines of the plan are faceted. They create a small but noticeable sense of front threshold for the units, and on the exterior they give scale to the individual units. For us, that relationship between the individual and the collective remains one of the most important issues in housing.

The courtyard is open at the top to the sky and functions as a space for social interaction. There are generous stairs that take you up from the ground floor, which also perform as a kind of "amphitheater" for when members of the community come together during events in the courtyard. Remembering the loss of the entire interior screen at Rainbow Apartments, I was determined that here, the same thing wouldn't happen. The interior screen was extremely important, so at Carver we consciously merged the design elements with necessary functional elements forming 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 most of the fins that wrap the courtyard have functional importance and couldn't be removed from the design. That approach of making elements of the design take on at least two if not three different responsibilities within the design is a goal we continue to work toward in subsequent buildings.

At Carver, community functions are distributed through the building vertically rather than concentrated on the ground floor. There's a big terrace at the top with views of the city. The important spaces for the TV room and laundry room are on the third floor, right at the same 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 this becomes even more visible to the drivers on the freeway. This being Los Angeles, that traffic is often at a standstill, and in a city where lives are often disconnected from each other, these two communities get to see one another. That choreography of visual connection doesn't build community automatically, but at

least it tries to suggest that the isolation of human beings (whether social or physical) is something that architecture can work to undermine and positively effect.

Our third project with the Trust, Star Apartments has 102 units and is located back on Skid Row. One of the goals for Star Apartments was to make a building that had a more mixed-use program. For people in Boston or Cambridge or in most other traditional cities, retail on the ground floor and housing above might not sound that unique, but in a city like Los Angeles, that was a fairly new ambition in housing development. There was a challenge however in that the Housing Trust relies on funding assembled from a number of sources, and the complexity of being in the non-profit housing business as well as in the retail business created challenges for that funding. They found a crucial exeption though: if you develop a building with existing retail space on site, you can keep that retail space. So they found exactly that, and gave it to us to work with. We changed the appearance of the existing building quite a bit. The one-story building became the new first floor podium of our building. We saved the existing structure and roof deck, and replaced the old façade. The roof was originally parking up on top, which provided capacity for more cars than necessary for us, so we tucked the required parking into the back of the building and on ground level, and started to reimagine the possible use of that deck. While the original intent of reusing the retail space was focused on commercial possibilities, the Los Angeles County Health department approached the trust and leased a majority of the space for one of their first urban clinics focused on access to preventative healthcare, which is an innovative program for the County, and they looked to Start it at Star because of the perception of Star Apartments representing genuine innovation. While the original goal of reusing an existing building was focused on creating mixed-use, the greater implications might be that for a

city that always tears down the old to build new, can we create strategies of added density that modify a throw it away mentality?

In development and building culture, this type of approach to revising the future of the city does come with complications though. To add on top of an existing building, we had to build a new building with its own independent structure on top of new columns and needling through the existing building, We created a new structural tray floating above the old building and on which we could then stack the apartment units. In the space between old and new we imagined a new horizontal community space that could become the equivalent of the vertical courtyards we made at Rainbow and Carver. In this space, there is a community kitchen, indoor and outdoor eating areas, offices for caseworkers, an art classroom, an education classroom, technology center, and exercise and recreation rooms. Outdoors there is a jogging and walking track, half-court basketball, and a gym and yoga deck. The range and scale of these community programs could not normally be provided in a building like this, but here are pulled *into* the building creating a kind of microcosm of public and social space. The goal is that the residents are connected to necessary supportive services but also to a more expansive range of educational, recreational, and community building activities.

An additional and fundamental ambition at Star was to maximize the number of units we could provide through a kind of upper density in the layout. From above, you can see that the building is organized with units at the perimeter, but also with stacks of units within the interior of the block. From some vantage points it can look like a neighborhood of city blocks, squeezed into one building. This is largely possible because the primary open space is provided by the second-

floor community deck. There are a number of smaller terraces and vertical spaces that provide light and access to air all through the body of the building.

Given the building reuse and the density we were trying to achieve here, there was very little space on the site for staging construction, and because of that, we started looking at alternative construction technologies. Prefabrication became very exciting possible solution. For Los Angeles, this is the first mixed use multi-family prefabricated housing project in 60 years. There are a number of municipal regulations that had made it virtually impossible to use prefabrication in Los Angeles up until this point. But we were motivated to try and change that and the first thing we did as architects was not to design, but rather negotiate with the city to make this a pilot project for prefabrication in Los Angeles. In that sense, the invention here wasn't initially the architectural form of the building, but rather the use of architecture's range of abilities to create a new pathway way for innovation within the code and entitlements structure that often stops innovative or experimental building approaches before they can ever begin.

Because there hasn't been prefabrication in LA, the wood-framed units were all built in a factory just outside of Boise, Idaho. They were transported two to a long pallet, trucked here on a flatbed, and when they arrived, they were cut in half at their base and hoisted into place. There are some minimal cost-per-square-foot benefits to prefabrication, but the bigger economic benefit is that the building has the possibility to be assembled much faster than usual, and this reduces the overall construction schedule and carrying costs. Also, because the units are built in a factory, the interiors can have a higher level of fit and finish than normal. By "higher level of finish," I don't mean a fanciness of material, but just that the controlled conditions under which

the components are put together should have long-term benefits especially for maintenance costs. The interiors are, again, quite functional. There is a full kitchen, a large ADA bathroom tucked behind that, and the bedroom/living space.

One of the very interesting things about the prefabrication process is that all of the design changes have to be done before construction starts. Projects are often having changes made on site, whether we want that or not, but here, it is more like building a car. The prototype is everything. We flew to Boise twice, once to look at the first prototype, and then we 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 experience 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. But even within that standardized system the real goal is to provide great armature for living, a place where the individual identities of the residents can be expressed and celebrated.

Our most recently completed project with the Skid Row Housing Trust is Crest Apartments. It is the fourth project together, this time with Mike and Dana Trujillo, and in a big shift is located far outside Skid Row and downtown Los Angeles. The Crest Apartments are located in Van Nuys, a sprawling 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 also very characteristic of Southern California cities. The project is located here because its 64 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 one small area 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 resident group. The site is in between the commercial strip to the front, a light industrial area to the east, single family houses at the rear of the site and a channelized tributary to the LA river a hundred yards away.

The typical building typology for low rise multi unit housing in Los Angeles, and especially in the surrounding valley has often been what is affectively called the "ding bat." They are usually one or two stories of walk up units lifted above a ground plane of parking that accommodates the cars and driveways. I was interested in relooking at this model mostly because we wouldn't need much parking and that allowed us to rethink how you might transform all that ground floor space.

The Crest Apartments presents a different take on the face toward the boulevard. It's vertical in contrast to its neighbors, suggesting an alternative to the vague low density there now.

The plan shape was driven initially by a practical concern. We needed to accommodate a firetruck turnaround in the middle of the site and the building bends around that, but we used that to create the stepped form which has the benefit of getting windows onto two exterior walls and makes better access to light, ventilation, and views for the units.

Given the site constraints we did make a double loaded corridor here, but worked to make it an amenity by increasing its width, and at the jogs in the plan to create space for people to comfortably pause and possibly connect informally as they move along that pathway. The corridors are all naturally ventilated and have vignettes to views out over the valley beyond and to the San Gabriel Mountains.

There are two unit types at Crest, and both are continuing our focus on trying to organize the kitchen, bathroom, and living space to create a sense of a bigger space that unfolds a bit more as you move through it. Here there is a more developed attention to smaller "figurative" elements and modulations in plan and elevation that taken together have a significant impact on how the space feels.

We lifted the building up similar to the ding bat, but here to create an expansive garden of native plants and gathering areas for the residents that also provides a fully permeable ground surface for rainwater capture in our drought prone region. Together the architectural and landscape elements at Crest begin to create a sense of outside and inside living which connects it to a way of living that might seem very recognizable in Southern California, but with a few modifications could also be more widely exportable to other cities and contexts, and in that regard I have thought at times that Crest Apartments is the most repeatable model we have created so far.

At the center of each of the projects we have done with the Skid Row Housing Trust has been the goal of making housing that is unique and tailored to the needs of the particular individuals and the community that will live there. But at the same time we have been looking for ways that

these projects can challenge expectations of what housing for the homeless but also what housing in general can be, how it gets built, what it looks like, how it can create connections and pride and identity for the residents that live there, and to make buildings that contribute something for the city as a whole that is optimistic and ambitious.

After Carver Apartments was built we heard a lot of critisism that went something along the lines of "why would you build something so nice for those people." Hearing that would infuriate me, both for the people who lived at Carver, but also for our city. We should demand the best architecture for all buildings that make up our city, because the city represents all of us – it represents how we live, what we believe in, and what kind of future we strive for. If we can't be ambitious for that future, one that is inclusive, assessable, equitable, and also innovative in how it confronts problems then we inevitably do a disservice to all of us. We risk making cities that are more divided, more unsustainable, less beautiful. Why would we do that to our legacy? The question is not "how can we build something so nice for them" but rather "how can we not."