

Review Maltzan's One Santa Fe apartment complex plays with notion of density



The mixed residential and commercial development at 255 South Santa Fe Ave. in the Arts District in Los Angeles. (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)



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Architecture review: One Santa Fe gains drama when it breaks from the wood-frame mold

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Every once in a while a piece of architecture comes along that is emblematic of a moment in a city's architectural and urban development. One Santa Fe, a 438-unit apartment complex in the arts district by Michael Maltzan Architecture, is that kind of building.

It is a fractal of contemporary Los Angeles architecture, the fragment that both contains and helps explain the whole.

One Santa Fe is not a flashy or gymnastic piece of architecture. It doesn't suggest a new design vocabulary for the 55-year-old Maltzan, who founded his firm in 1995.

What gives the \$165-million project its unusual symbolic power is that it takes the generic stuff of a typical L.A. apartment building — a wood frame slathered in white stucco and lifted above a concrete parking deck — and expands it dramatically to urban scale.

One Santa Fe is just six stories tall, around the same height as the vast majority of new apartment buildings in Los Angeles, since by code going any higher requires trading wood for a more expensive steel or concrete frame. But it is a quarter-mile long — wider than the [Empire State Building](#) is high — and holds 510,000 square feet of interior space.

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It is this combination that makes One Santa Fe's significance impossible to miss. The design takes banality and stretches it like taffy in the direction of monumentality.

It uses those 438 apartments to fill a pair of long train-like wings, which is fitting given that along its eastern flank the complex backs up to a rail yard and the concrete banks of the L.A. River. It makes the famously linear campus of the [Southern California Institute of Architecture](#), directly across the street to the west, look stubby.

As they say in Silicon Valley, it scales.

One Santa Fe, with 20% of its units earmarked as affordable housing, has been a controversial building in the arts district since its construction began. Some have criticized it as wildly oversized or seen it as a kind of gentrification ocean liner, slowly drifting toward dock as an unmistakable symbol of the money pouring into this corner of downtown, which used to feel busy only when somebody was shooting a car commercial.

In fact the meaning of the project — and its appeal, if you're willing to look at it a certain way — springs directly from its practically Seussian width.

You hear a lot of talk from urban planners these days about how L.A. is becoming a city of infill, no longer pushing toward some regional frontier but instead turning its attention back to the spaces it left behind during its great postwar expansion.

Which is fine — increased density is going to be necessary if we want our growing transit network to succeed — until you begin to see precisely the kind of infill projects we're managing to build. Most are precisely what

Maltzan is riffing on at One Santa Fe: depressingly expedient stick-built apartment buildings, five or six stories of modest rental units above a concrete parking podium.

Maltzan takes that developer opportunism run amok and contains it, for close inspection, within a single piece of architecture.

He also tweaks it just enough to point the way to a more inventive, less paint-by-numbers kind of midrise housing.

The design, in fact, gains much of its drama from the carefully arranged moments when it breaks from the wood-frame mold. Maltzan positions a curling concrete parking ramp right where the building faces the intersection of Santa Fe Avenue and 3rd Street, with another ramp near its northern end. He uses no small amount of steel to frame a 200-foot-wide opening in the center of the project.

Coming through this opening, with a long bar holding three stories of apartments above your head, you find yourself in a generous, eccentrically shaped courtyard. Train tracks, razor wire and the concrete banks of the L.A. River are visible through another cutout on the far, eastern edge of the project.

The building's longer arm runs perfectly straight for three blocks along Santa Fe. The shorter one bends twice to follow the eastern edge of the site. Both will have shops and community rooms at ground level.

The openings in the center of the project will also promote pedestrian connections to a possible new transit stop nearby. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is considering building a spur to the arts district, with stops at First and Sixth streets.

This is the project in a nutshell: It doesn't want to be a run-of-the-mill transit-oriented development, reacting to planning moves already made. It wants to anticipate and even accelerate change.

Will it succeed on that score? It's mostly too soon to tell. Bringing more than 400 apartments to this part of downtown will certainly help animate the street life on a number of surrounding blocks even as it makes the SCI-Arc campus, which used to wear its isolation from the rest of downtown as a badge of honor, feel squeezed.

Another large apartment project is planned on the other side of SCI-Arc. This pair of rental buildings could persuade [Metro](#) to pull the trigger on a rail extension — or do so sooner than it might otherwise have done.

One Santa Fe has enough architectural complexity to give some of its apartments real character inside. (The apartments offer a variety of views, many back toward the Bunker Hill skyline.) Others are plain or cramped.

Typically we reserve the adjective "contextual" to describe buildings that are polite, eager to blend in with the architecture that surrounds them. Maltzan's building deserves a slightly different label.

It's based not on the immediate context but on how much of the larger city looks. It's hypercontextual, built from a kind of super-vernacular.

This is also true of the details and the color palette. The angular metal window shades, the terraces created by slicing into and adding volume to the flat stucco facade, the Calder-red accents: There are signs everywhere that though Maltzan wants to use the anonymous stick-built apartment block as his template he's also aiming to sharpen its details and pump up its colors.

In that sense One Santa Fe is a canny attempt by Maltzan to overcome both his own limitations and those that rule planning and building in Los Angeles.

The city has become a tough place to build innovative architecture. Commercial clients are as conservative as ever, and fire and seismic codes are more restrictive here than in many big cities. The space that used to be open for moderately priced experimentation in the private realm, at the level of the single-family house, has largely disappeared as we run out of empty parcels and land costs rise.

Maltzan, for his part, has never been a masterful designer of pure architectural space. Unlike [Frank Gehry](#), for whom he used to work, he is not known for his virtuosity. His talents are his thoughtfulness, his careful and ongoing study of Los Angeles and his interest in tracing connections between architectural and civic scale.

And in the end Maltzan makes clear that he learned something crucial from Gehry. The older architect reached a midcareer breakthrough in the 1970s and 1980s when he began taking the ubiquitous, workaday and even ugly materials from which much of 20th century Los Angeles was made — chain-link, corrugated metal and perhaps most of all stucco — and using them as the basis of a new native architecture.

Maltzan is doing something similar at One Santa Fe but in an exaggerated, attenuated way.

As he understands, what Los Angeles needs most from its leading architects at the moment is not brilliance at the level of the curve or even the room but the ability to think and operate at a macro level — to achieve with individual buildings what urban planners have largely failed to do in Los Angeles, which is to make density not anxiety-producing (or necessarily vertical, for that matter) but forward-looking and charismatic.

There are traps associated with Maltzan's approach. Wringing charisma from convention is not easy.

At times his building too plainly matches the architecture of the cheaply built residential complexes it so clearly wants to critique and supersede. An ironically or self-consciously generic apartment can feel just plain generic when you're inside it.

Yet behind its endlessly repetitive façade, One Santa Fe is chasing an ambitious and timely goal. It aims to find the inspiration for a new and memorable kind of multifamily housing design in the familiar stuff that architects and builders in Los Angeles are already working with — not just the materials and the construction methods, a la Gehry, but the codes and the developer pro-formas.

It tries to make the typical prototypical.

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