

The Architectural Review

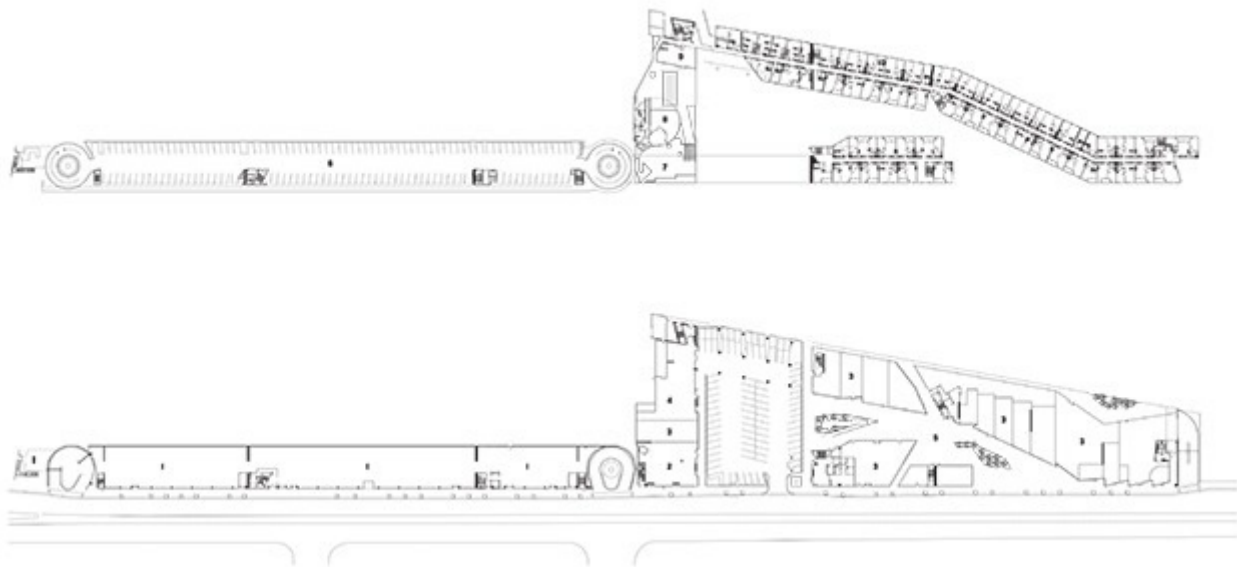
One Santa Fe housing in Los Angeles by Michael Maltzan

5 August, 2015 **By Florian Idenburg**

Maltzan's bold, stacked forms engage with a formerly industrial neighbourhood in downtown LA

Fundamental transformations are taking place within the two main urban centres of California, the state that exemplified a previous model of laissez-faire sub-urbanity. The force of change is a new generation of urban dwellers that bring a different set of values around identity, community and responsibility. The effect of these changes seems to differ between the two cities, as a forum commenter recently pointedly summarised: 'San Francisco is a utopia gone wrong, while Los Angeles is a dystopia gone right.' While SF's development has become dubiously intertwined with the tech boom and its relating social disparities, LA is possibly evolving towards a more enmeshed alternative. These developments deserve attention, as even more than the car-oriented suburb of the '60s, this current idea of the city might well become the model for other developing regions around the globe.

Los Angeles for decades was understood as an entropic field of enclaves. A mat-city where sunshades and windshields allowed for a coexistence of minimal interaction, as depicted so cleverly in Robert Altman's *Shortcuts* (1993). The city's downtown frequents as hell-on-earth in numerous sci-fi movies. For years, the dark and haunted vision of this part of town, as depicted in *Blade Runner* (1982), was an *idée fixe*. Come 2014, Spike Jonze's magical realism brings us a radically new notion of what LA's future might look like. In *Her*, the movie in which protagonist Theodore Twombly falls in love with an OS with an exceptionally seductive voice, the future of downtown LA is clean, dense and comfortable. According to *Her* cinematographer Hoyte Van Hoytema, Jonze wanted an LA set in the not-so-distant future – a 'world that was tactile and pleasant: the very opposite of a dystopian future'.



Floor plans - click to expand

Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan has been contemplating the not-so-distant future of LA for a while, leading in 2011 to his book *No More Play*. 'The city is at a moment where much of the way that it has been developed in the past, which has created both the physical and psychological identity for the city – a city that just continued to push the boundaries outward and sprawl into the periphery – that data equation is probably untenable at this point. There is an extraordinary pressure back in and onto the city that is creating a kind of overwriting of the city in a very intense way.' This brings up a number of questions that other cities, older more traditional cities, probably have dealt with in the past, things like transport, and certainly scale and density as important urban questions. What Maltzan has been most interested in, 'is trying to imagine how you deal with those questions, but deal with them in a way that is inspired by and specific to Los Angeles. I don't think it really helps at all to try to import models from other established or more traditional cities into a culture that has its own identity, its own character, its own spirit'.

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This spirit is increasingly emerging in Maltzan's own work. His lines and forms are daring and bold. His predominantly white massings, shaped through hard chamfers and sharp facets, gain their expression in the dark shadows of the Sunshine State. More particular is his embrace of the raw and given – the reality of the everyday in all its looseness and unpredictability. This engagement with the real, which was also crucial for fellow Angeleno and former employer, Frank Gehry, is helping Maltzan now add two significant projects to LA evolving downtown less than a mile apart.



An area called Skid Row has certainly fuelled aforementioned notions of dystopia. In AR September 2013, Niall McLaughlin describes the approximately 50 downtown blocks with one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the US. 'The intractable persistence of this blighted condition is astonishing,' he states. McLaughlin introduces three housing projects Maltzan's studio designed for the Skid Row Housing Trust. This for-profit organisation develops permanent supportive housing with a high level of architectural ambition, helping this population in need transition back into a home. The last of a series of three, The Star Apartments was completed last year through the daring transformation of a once nondescript retail building into a six-storey, 95,000-square-foot mixed-use project. It accommodates 102 apartments for the formerly homeless, plus social services, recreational facilities and retail.

Maltzan stacked prefabricated modules over a newly constructed ground that dramatically cantilevers over the existing building's roof. The space between the structure and the roof creates a new 15,220-square-foot terrace with gardens and a jogging track, alongside a communal kitchen, lounge and rooms for art and exercise, offering the formerly homeless an alternative ground. Maltzan: 'With Star being right in the middle of the city, one of the things that I was actively trying to imagine was what would a kind of hyper-density look like in Los Angeles? I was trying to create that extremely intense, super dense housing block that gets lifted up, and a new type of semi-public space gets created in this layer in between the mixed-use ground floor on the street and the upper level of the housing, as a new kind of ground plane to invent open space within this super density.'

At Maltzan's Star Apartments, a newly constructed ground dramatically cantilevers over the existing building's roof

One Santa Fe (2004-14) pushes this new reality from another and very different angle. Originally a speculative proposal for graduate and undergraduate housing, serving the nearby campus of USC as well as SCIArc, an architectural school located in a former freight depot across the street, the colossal 438-unit rental project is built on a four-acre portion of a 32-acre plot previously used for the maintenance and storage of rail carriages. The elongated property stretches along Santa Fe Avenue, is bracketed by the First and Fourth Streets bridges and backs up against the Metrolink service tracks adjacent to the Los Angeles River. The 510,000-square-foot massing accommodates a programmatic amalgam of residential, retail and live-work spaces within the formerly industrial neighbourhood context. The building's quarter-mile length echoes the strong, linear forms of the surrounding regional infrastructure. Maltzan amplifies this length by placing the apartments in a bar along a double-loaded corridor that floats above a three-storey concrete parking garage, over an open plaza, to land towards the south on a strip of commercial units. This requires structural heroics that Maltzan deftly uses to give the building its character. But not only in its formal presence does the complex allude to expressions of speed and motion. Also in a more literal sense does the building read as a piece of infrastructure. It forms connections to the bridges and offers pedestrian access directly into the raised portions of the building.



Section AA - [click to expand](#)

As the project's linear form moves south, it begins to shift, delaminating to create views and ground-level connections across its width for a clear connection to the LA River and future transit nodes. Says Maltzan, 'It's seen as a three-dimensional armature that eventually weaves itself into the city.' Interspersed in this connective network are the contemporary perks these buildings require such as pools, barbecue decks and gyms as points of orientation.

Both The Star Apartments and One Santa Fe are frugal encampments of wood and stucco on top of a new ground with its concrete structures and ordinary plumbing exposed. They are built to current economic realities and construction techniques. In their parti, the projects evoke Masato Otaka's Sakaide Artificial Ground development (1968-86). This Japanese Metabolist established an artificial datum over a seismically unstable slum area in Sakaide, using a fixed concrete slab and beam platform, which housed itinerant salt workers in a series of prefabricated housing structures on the slab. Underneath was occupied by offices, shops, parking and a network of pedestrian alleys. The second ground certainly is not a new concept in architecture, but other than in its utopian or Structuralist precursors, Maltzan's new ground is not infused with radical rhetorics. Somewhere within the amalgam of new realities, housing subsidies, affordability ratios, zoning requirements, ROI models, parking quota, etc, Maltzan is able to create two projects that are both unique and memorable.

In addition to that, in their pragmatism and embrace of the currents of our time, they form a 'casual' manifesto of how the city could transform. Unlike in other cities, space in LA is actually not yet precious, so doubling the ground is not to create more; it is the introduction of a layer within the city that can take on new community or urban roles. The new public layers appear as a testing ground, or antechamber, allowing the changing and diverse LA populace to gradually get reconnected, to both the outside and to the other. 'I think architecture through building form has a responsibility to try to point to what urban forms are going to look like and what the city's going to look like. These buildings are trying to do that,' says Maltzan. If this is where the city is heading, a 'dirty', magical realism awaits us in the not-too-distant future.

One Santa Fe

Architect: [Michael Maltzan Architecture](#)

Executive architect: KTG Architecture + Planning

Structural engineer: Weidlinger Associates

MEP engineer: Green MEP Engineering Consulting

Photographs: Iwan Baan