

# STREET LIFE

In an area of LA infamous for its homeless population, three social housing projects by Michael Maltzan bring a sense of decency and dignity to a fractured urban realm



**Skid Row Housing,  
Los Angeles,  
USA,  
Michael Maltzan  
Architecture**





## REPORT

### NIALL MCLAUGHLIN

The name Skid Row has been immortalised in myth and music as both a place and a state of being. It is the address associated with the bottom rung of life's ladder, the dead-end destination for the hopeless. The original Skid Row was probably in Seattle and it got its name from the corduroy wooden tracks used to haul heavy lumber to the timber yards. The area around the yards became associated with the darker aspects of transient immigrant life; they became a haven for grease monkeys, vagrants, pimps and grifters.

The area known as Skid Row in Los Angeles is a 50-block section of Downtown. It is bounded by the Historic Core and Little Tokyo and it partly overlays the Downtown Industrial District. Its origins lie in the industrial developments that grew up to service LA's agricultural hinterland reached from the nearby rail yards. The seasonal nature of the work drew in a combination of short-term workers and rail crews on layover; small hotels suited to single male migrant workers serviced them. A scatter down of bars, brothels and religious missions vied for the attentions of this lonely constituency.

The combination of transient accommodation, available vice and the services needed to support the Fallen set the deep structure for the district and it has persisted beyond many of the original activities that generated it.

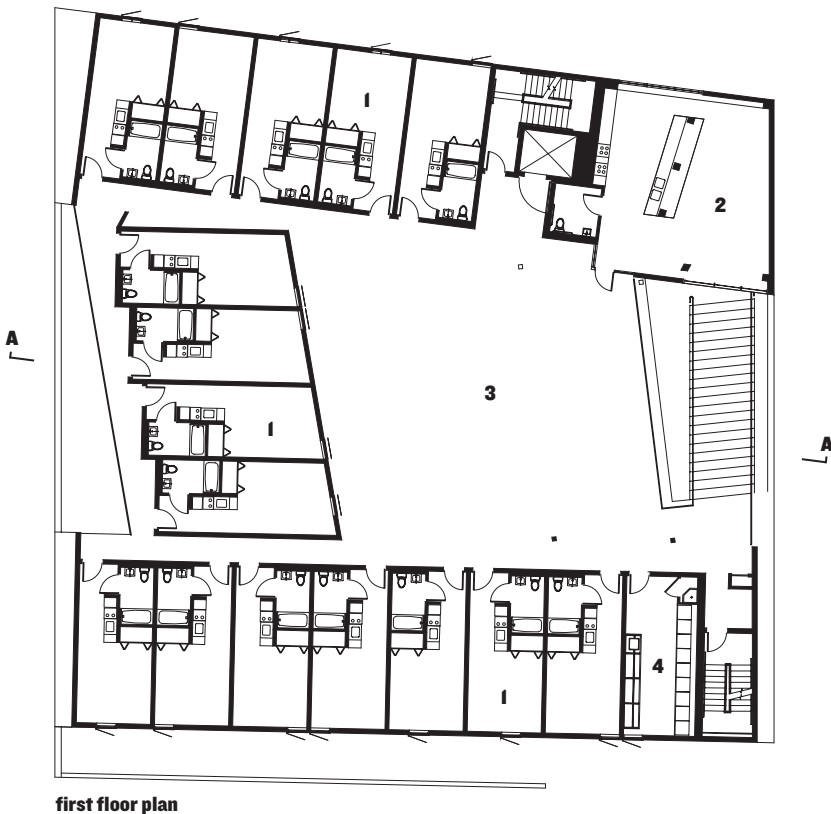
By the 1930s the place had an established character based on cheap hotels and their attendant life. The Great Depression brought in a new population of destitute farmers who had abandoned home and family. Many were alcoholics. After the Vietnam conflict, a new influx settled in the area, often traumatised and addicted to drugs other than alcohol. At regular intervals, the LA city authorities would attempt to clear the area out in highly publicised campaigns of arrest and intimidation. Although these were publicly popular, they did little to change the underlying structures and the homeless population of the area continued to grow. Now, it has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the US. A recent survey suggests 8,000 people in single occupancy hotel rooms, 2,000 in transitional accommodation and up to 4,000 living on the pavements. The intractable persistence of this blighted condition is astonishing. In 1947, an *Evening Independent* correspondent wrote, 'A high class criminal wouldn't be caught dead



### Skid Row Housing, Los Angeles, USA, Michael Maltzan Architecture

1. (Previous pages)  
map of the Skid Row  
neighbourhood showing  
the location of Maltzan's  
three housing projects  
2. Up to 4,000 people  
live on the streets  
3. Maltzan's first block  
for Skid Row is organised  
around a courtyard set at  
a right angle to the street



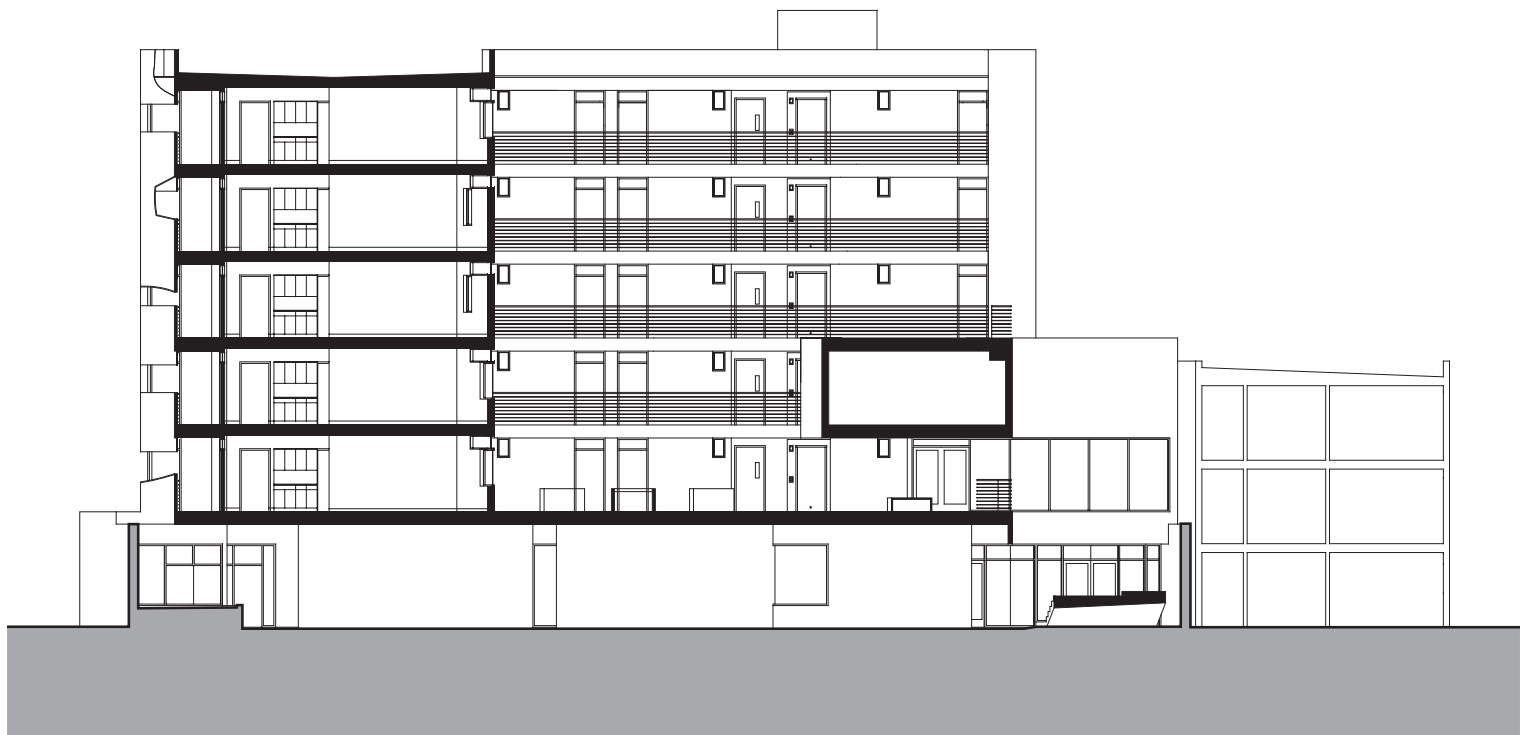


- 1 residential units
- 2 communal dining area
- 3 courtyard
- 4 laundry facility

in this area. It draws cheap grifters and floaters like a magnet. It holds 9,000 transients at all times – bums, panhandlers, small time crooks looking for a quick buck.’

In the 1960s the authorities attempted to control the population by regulating the cheap hotels using legislation relating to fire codes. Many hotels were closed down or demolished. It constituted a 50 per cent decrease in the housing stock for the whole area. The policy was reversed in the 1970s when it was suggested that residential facilities should be preserved and enhanced with the addition of necessary services such as clinics. This enlightened policy had an unfortunate effect when other cities in LA County started dumping their unwanted citizens in Skid Row. Discharged mental health and hospital patients were unloaded into the area from considerable distances away. In 2007 a major national health provider was taken to court for dumping a patient on the pavement from a taxi wearing nothing but their hospital robes. ‘Greyhound Therapy’ was a phrase hospitals used for a one-way bus ticket to Skid Row.

This persistent problem situated a national malaise in a particular place. It became a battleground for civil liberties activists,



**section AA**





**10 WEST**  
**Santa Monica**  
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

**110 SOUTH**  
**San Pedro**  
↓

**110 NORTH**  
**Downtown**  
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

**Pico Bl**  
**Convention Center**  
**NEXT RIGHT**

**Santa Monica Fwy**  
**ONLY**  
**WEST**  
↓

**Harbor Fwy**  
**ONLY**  
↓

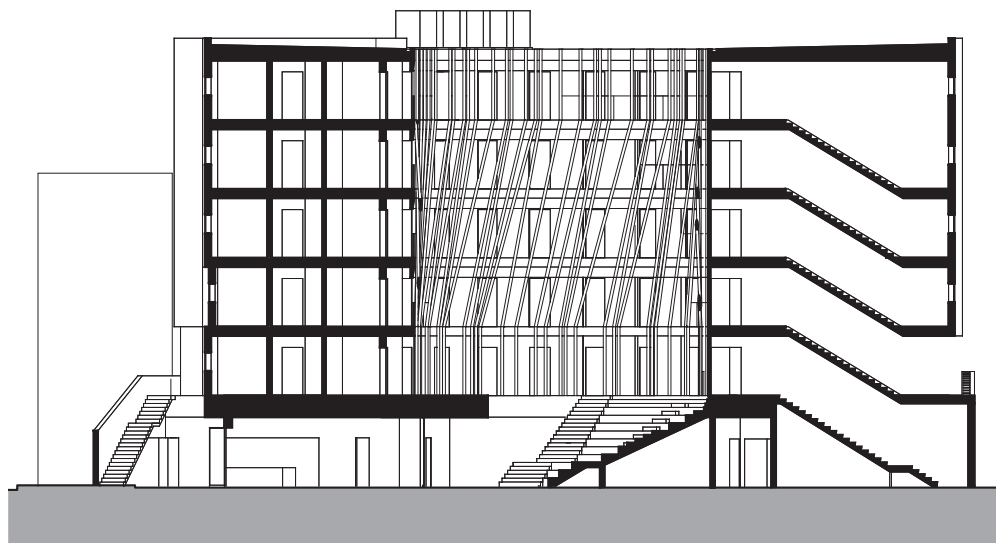






**Skid Row  
Housing,  
Los Angeles,  
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Architecture**

**4. (Previous pages)  
New Carver Apartments  
takes an entirely different  
approach to the residential  
block typology, shielding  
its residents from the  
blare of the freeway  
5. A terrace offers  
Downtown views  
6 & 7. Walkways overlook  
the central atrium**



**cross section**



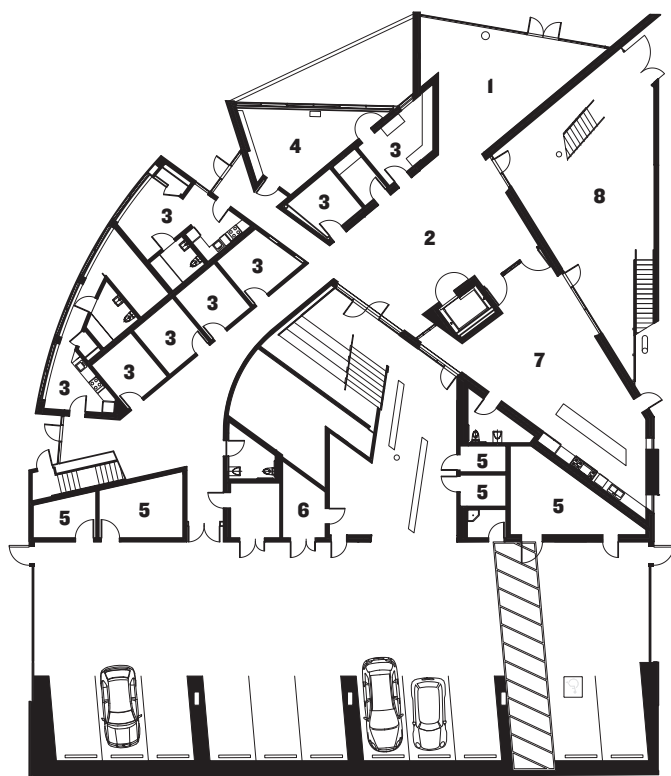
law enforcement agencies, city authorities and service providers. The potential solution came from a fairly predictable source. The overall development of Downtown was pushing property prices up in the area. Coffee bars, galleries and loft developments started to appear on the fringes of Purgatory. The police attempted another clear-out in 2006, based on the 'Broken Windows Theory', a form of intimidation and cleansing given thin academic credence. Broken windows and loitering were seen to point to disorder and therefore a threshold to serious crime. Saner voices pointed out that broken windows are merely indicative of poverty. People were cleared out of the area with no destination in mind. This simply exported the problem with the most vulnerable people separated from the services they depended upon. Since then, a new and tentative compromise has formed, with the City saying that it will not clear out homeless people without providing additional homes in the area.

The Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT) was set up in the late 1980s to provide permanently supportive housing for formerly homeless individuals. In the 1990s they began refurbishing old dilapidated hotels using talented local architectural practices. They realised that stable accommodation only worked when combined with essential services and they developed a building model combining single person rooms, communal facilities and services such as mental health treatment, substance abuse recovery, money management and benefits advocacy. They began to target the most vulnerable people

living on the street. Their work constitutes a criticism of the whole city by attempting to reassemble the complete homeless services system in one place. From the beginning they advocated good quality architecture on the basis that it establishes the basic coordinates of a dignified settled environment for people who have lost trust in the idea of home; but it also advertises to the neighbourhood and the broader city that these people are here and that they have a viable identity in this place. This combination of inhabitation and representation is the basis for the architect's brief.

Michael Maltzan Architecture has designed three new buildings for SRHT over the last seven years. AR readers will know Michael Maltzan from his exquisite private dwellings, characterised by intricate involutions of geometry, built on the hills overlooking LA (AR June 2010). His career has followed a familiar and enviable trajectory from bespoke private dwellings to cultural institutions and major pieces of civic infrastructure. In this context, the design of low-cost housing for the previously homeless is a unique challenge. Maltzan insists that while this building type has its own architectural problems, it is designed within the practice with the same values and systems as any other commission.

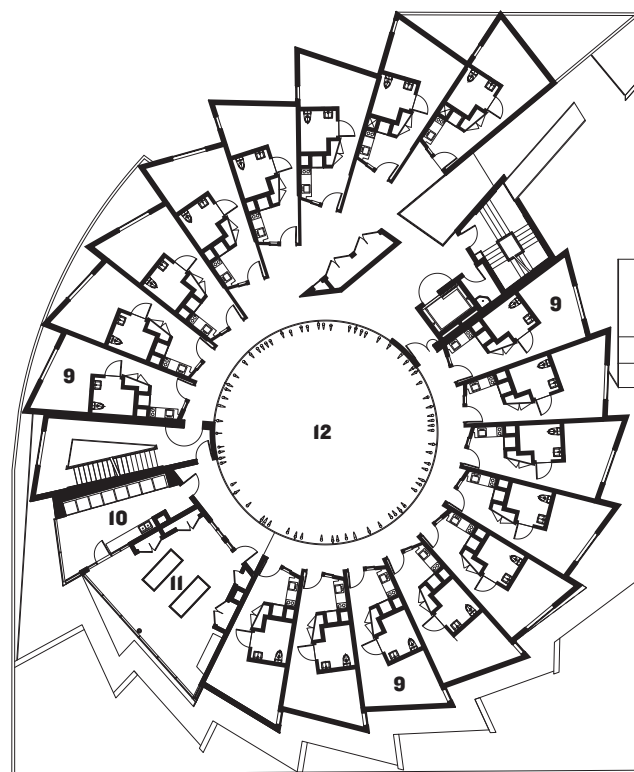
His first project is known as Rainbow and it was finished in 2006. It is built as a conventional urban block with communal services at ground level and individual rooms over five storeys above. The upper accommodation is arranged around a U-shaped courtyard set at right angles



- 1 entry
- 2 lobby
- 3 office
- 4 meeting room
- 5 plant room
- 6 recycling room
- 7 community kitchen
- 8 community garden
- 9 residential units
- 10 laundry room
- 11 community room
- 12 central courtyard



0 5m

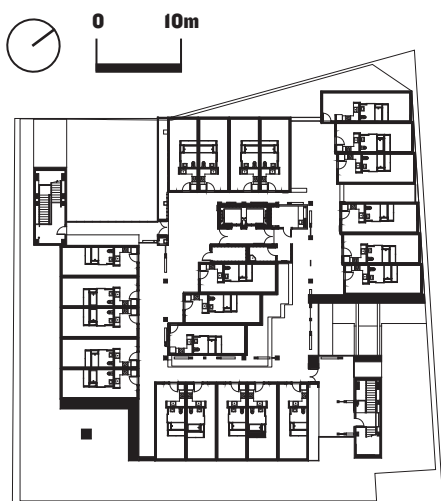


third floor plan

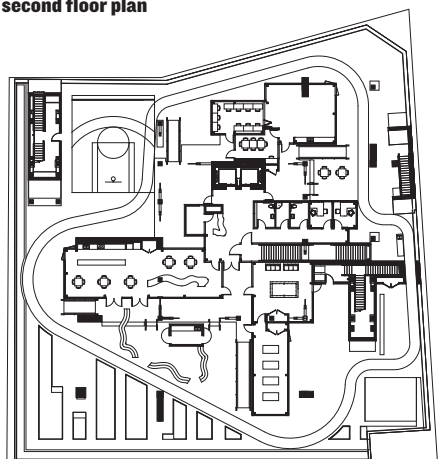
ground floor plan







second floor plan



first floor plan

to the street. The courtyard, established at first-floor level, is reached by a grand stair from the entrance and surrounded by deck access balconies serving individual rooms at each level. Maltzan sees the courtyard as establishing a common zone between the pleasures and perils of the street and the more isolated safety of the individual room. In the context of an individual in transition from homelessness to more permanent dwelling, this becomes the spatial crux of the architectural proposal. It is conceived in terms of views between balconies and rooms, but also framing of the sky and connection to the street. The architect then establishes a simple visual language based on plain stucco walls enlivened by coloured window reveals and openings, as though a sober suit has opened back to reveal a sumptuous lining.

The next project, New Carver Apartments, is built about a mile from the centre of Skid Row beside the 110 Freeway. It needs to deal with a more exposed and noisy location, but its position allows it to be read as a beacon on the scale of the larger city. It is highly visible to passing traffic. The architects describe the circular form of the building as being driven by environmental conditions relating to daylight and the nearby freeway. Care has been taken to baffle light and noise from cars. The section is broadly similar to the Rainbow project with ground-floor services and a grand stair rising to a central atrium flanked by open walkways. The plan, however, is based on a circular geometry,

**‘The buildings announce the enduring presence of transient people in this area, giving them legitimacy’**

with rooms radiating from the centre. Every room is turned slightly towards the perimeter, giving a twisting centrifugal quality to the figure of each floor plate. On the sixth floor an open-air terrace looks back across the skyline of Downtown Los Angeles.

The circular form is undoubtedly informed by environmental factors, but it changes the game architecturally from the previous project. The cylindrical beacon by the freeway draws the design into dialogue with other celebrated buildings in LA, in particular Welton Becket's Capitol Radio Tower. Instead of Becket's suggestive horizontal canopies, we have a vertical rotational unfolding, beautifully reminiscent in plan and elevation of Aalto's housing tower in Essen. The torsion is taken into the circular atrium by a screen of vertical fins that establish some distance between the individual rooms and the common atrium. This does something to offset the much higher concentration of space created by the central circular form. In all its virtuosity, this project moves in the balance from artless inhabitation towards an emphatic and singular representation. At the very limit of Skid Row, this building marks the presence of supportive housing for individual homeless with a powerful rhetorical presence.





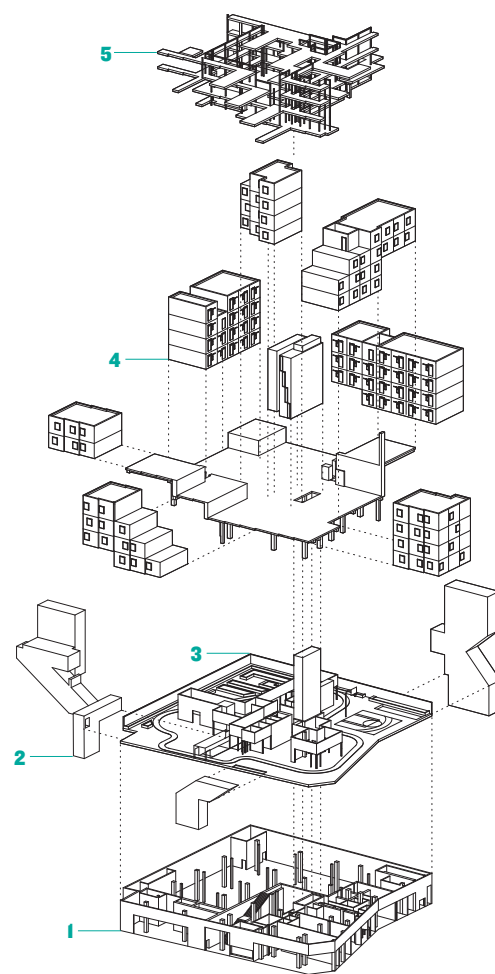
**Skid Row  
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**8 & 9. Maltzan's latest building, Star Apartments, cantilevers its prefab rooms over the street, like a suspended kasbah**

**Architect**  
Michael Maltzan  
Architecture  
**Photographs**  
St Stev, 2  
Michael Maltzan  
Architecture, 3  
Iwan Baan, 4-7  
James Ewing/OTTO, 9

Star Apartments, the final project in this suite, is due for completion later in 2013. Once again it combines essential services, communal facilities and individual rooms. Here, the common space of the atrium is turned outwards as a continuous veranda at podium level. The prefabricated rooms are elaborately held overhead like a suspended kasbah. It will be interesting to see how this variation works. The key contrast will be between the enclosed court and the outward-looking balcony. The safety, sociability and intimacy of the communal spaces seems central to the success of this transitional building type. The Broken Windows policy discouraged people from loitering in groups on the pavement; such disorganised conviviality was surely a threshold to crime. It is intended that groups will loiter here one floor above the pavement, establishing a sociable presence protected from, but participating in the life of the street.

The architect has said that he would like these projects to be read together. The formal virtuosity of each composition is Maltzan's own special skill and they suggest that high architecture can give pleasure and dignity to all of us. They also announce the enduring presence of transient and marginalised people in this area, therefore giving them legitimacy. I hope that the different spatial experiments, linking and articulating pavement, common sheltered space and private rooms, will become subjects for further reflection and analysis. It speaks of our common need to situate ourselves and participate in public life.



**exploded projection**

- 1** street level retail and entry
- 2** circulation infrastructure
- 3** community programmes
- 4** prefabricated modular units
- 5** lateral frames and floor plates