



Off the Streets

Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan designs buildings for homeless people in his city. Five of them tell their story.

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Think of housing for the homeless and the picture that comes to mind is one of cheap, basic buildings without much attention paid to design. On Skid Row, an area in Downtown Los Angeles that is home to one of the largest populations of transient people in the United States, local architect Michael Maltzan and Skid Row Housing Trust are taking a different approach. Together, they built a series of affordable housing complexes that not only provide the necessary services, but also manage to look good.

The brand-new Star Apartments at the heart of Skid Row, on the corner of Sixth and Maple Streets, are the latest cooperation between Maltzan and the Trust. With its cascading white blocks that almost seem to float, the building sets a completely new tone in the impoverished neighbourhood, where thousands of people stay in shelters or on the streets. It looks even better than most new condos in the quickly gentrifying blocks of nearby Downtown.

The Star provides permanent residences for the most vulnerable inhabitants of Skid Row: mostly elderly people with many medical needs. For this reason, there are a lot of amenities and services on site, such as medical facilities, a common room, a TV room, a large kitchen, a dining room and a communal garden where they can grow vegetables and fruit. There is even an outdoor running track, funded by the Aileen Getty Foundation.

Architecturally speaking, the Star is special for several reasons. To save costs and construction time, the 102 housing units were

prefabricated in Idaho (complete with toilets and cabinets), then trucked to Los Angeles and, finally, lifted by crane and put in place, one atop the other. Maltzan also made clever use of the original property, a one-storey commercial building. Instead of tearing it down, he designed a concrete superstructure, creating a large deck that supports the residential and service units. The ground floor will be used as retail space and for a care clinic run by the county Department of Health Services.

Maltzan had designed two apartment blocks for Skid Row Housing Trust before getting involved with the Star project. The 2009 drum-shaped New Carver building (*Mark 25*, page 54), located near the Santa Monica Freeway, is the most alluring. It has 92 permanent units and offers communal spaces, including gardens and a kitchen. Its most striking feature is an outdoor courtyard, a propeller-like cylindrical space dominated by a grand staircase. The 2006 Rainbow, also realized at the heart of Skid Row, is a more conventional building that provides transitional housing for 88 residents.

Those residents also have a say in the design process. The Trust arranges for each architecture firm to meet with staff, property managers, and current and future Trust residents to discuss the design and suggest alterations. The question is, of course, whether all the attention paid to design actually makes the former homeless people feel better. Five of them share their opinions and their life stories. ←

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‘In this facility, I have found serenity’

Lawrence S. Horn

Lawrence S. Horn (63) has only recently made peace with himself. For much of his life, he says, his wish to be ‘hip and cool’ stood in the way of becoming a productive member of society. He grew up in a single-parent family in Cleveland, Ohio, and saw his father only occasionally. ‘They were not bad people, but their ideas of what it meant to be a man were maybe not the same as society’s.’ As a teenager, Horn started selling drugs and dreamed of becoming a pimp. ‘I wasn’t really successful in school and had low self-esteem. Pimping seemed to be a symbol of importance and identity.’ But before long Horn was addicted to drugs himself, and things spiralled out of control.

After he moved to California, he served over three years in prison for committing a robbery. When he got out, he did all kinds of jobs before ‘making some bad decisions again’ and finding himself on Skid Row, where he lived in fleabag hotels for the next ten years. In 2011, after spending time in a rehabilitation centre, Horn moved into the New Carver. Since then, his life has changed completely. ‘People tell me: you’re 63 years old; it’s too late to start over. But it’s never too late. In this facility, I have finally found serenity. I read, play music, watch DVDs. Or I go to the gym or to church or an AA meeting.’

A short time ago, Horn was made ‘ambassador’ of the building. And he says there’s more to come. ‘I’m enthusiastic about life. I want to keep going towards bigger and better things. Maybe move out of here, buy a computer and a car. Anything can happen. The sky’s the limit.’



‘I needed my own comfort zone’

JessicaBerneice Hollins

JessicaBerneice Hollins (22) was born and raised in Santa Monica, an affluent beachfront city in western Los Angeles County. After her father died in 2005, her mother fell into financial trouble. In 2010 their house went into foreclosure, and the whole family became homeless. Jessica’s mother went to live in a shelter in the city of Bell, her older brothers had somewhere else to go, and Jessica ended up on Skid Row. ‘I wasn’t there the whole time – during the day, I was all over town – but I spent most of my nights there in shelters and missions.’ A friend who lived in a low-income building told her about the New Carver Apartments, where she’s been living for the past 18 months.

‘This place really is a blessing,’ she says, showing her favourite spot: the vegetable garden. ‘I come here to pick tomatoes or just to sit quietly and look at the traffic on the freeway.’ The fact that she has her own room is of vital importance, she says. ‘I suffered from depression, and I needed my own comfort zone to get myself back together. My room is small, but I have everything I need.’ After some thought, she talks about another reason for keeping mostly to herself. ‘Maybe this sounds strange, but I feel closer to Skid Row here than when I was actually there. People are taking their drug habits into the building. I’ve never been around so much substance abuse in my life.’

Because of the situation she describes, Hollins sees her stay at the New Carver merely as a stepping stone. ‘I don’t want to stay here for years. I want to move on, hopefully get back to school or find a job.’

‘Bad genes and bad luck brought me here’

Tony Cawich

How did Tony Cawich (53) end up on Skid Row? ‘Bad genes and bad luck,’ he smiles wryly, while steering his wheelchair over the running track that’s part of the Star building. Cawich was born in Belize, a former British colony that is bordered by Mexico, Guatemala and the Caribbean Sea. His parents worked in the sugar-cane business, but they were keen on getting him a good education and sent him to Los Angeles in 1981. Here, Cawich got married and found work in the hotel industry. But in 1991 he was diagnosed with diabetes type 2, a disease that his father suffered from as well. Tony had a good job, and the medical bills posed no big problem at first. But later, through a combination of red tape and bad luck, he lost his health insurance. He and his wife divorced in 2000, and in 2012 a small wound on his foot became infected. When he went to see the doctor, he was told that he needed to have an operation and, as it turned out, to have his leg amputated.

He was in the hospital for five months, and when he got out he had nowhere to live. For a while he stayed in a shelter, until a social worker told him he could apply for the Star Apartments. Cawich may not be a fan of Maltzan’s architectural design, but he likes the outdoor running track, which was funded by Aileen Getty, a member of the famous dynasty and a former drug addict herself. Cawich hopes to use the track even more when he gets the prosthesis he’s been waiting for. He doesn’t consider himself handicapped and wants to go back to work as soon as possible. His two sons, both in their 20s, are studying to be doctors. ‘Hopefully, they’ll find a cure for diabetes.’



‘This place is paradise’

Snow Layer

Never in her wildest dreams did Snow Layer (58) expect to find herself in a Skid Row apartment at the end of her life. But after all she's gone through over the past few years, she considers the place 'heaven'. Layer came from Vietnam to the United States in 1981 'because my country lost the war'. She arranged for her mother and sisters, none of whom spoke English, to follow her. Fortunately, Snow found work in a casino as a poker dealer, a job that required very little conversation. 'It was, "Shut up and deal"; she giggles. Layer supported her family, got married twice and raised two sons before her luck ran out. She was 48 when she found out she had ovarian cancer. The cancer was successfully removed, but she didn't fully recover. She had difficulty standing for any length of time and harboured other health problems that kept her from getting back to work. 'I applied everywhere, but my jobs never lasted long because my body wasn't strong enough.' Out of money and lacking health insurance, Layer became homeless and lived on the streets of Skid Row for two years before successfully applying for a room at the Star.

'For me, this place is paradise,' she says. 'I feel secure, and the staff is nice. On the streets, nobody cares if you drop dead. Here you can change your life or die peacefully.' Layer doesn't bring up death lightly: there are signs that her cancer has come back. Until she knows for sure, she is determined to get the most out of life. 'I don't have a favourite spot or activity; I just enjoy all the small things: art class, gardening, cooking class. People say I'm an excellent cook.' [Laughs.]



‘A nice building gives people a sense of pride’

Bill Fisher

People often take Bill Fisher (61) for a former hippy, but he is, in fact, a former biker. Fisher was born into an Italian-American family in New Jersey. They owned a restaurant, but Fisher was more interested in making music. After his parents divorced, he moved with his father to Ohio and eventually became an ironworker, like his mother's second husband. He worked in 'every major city east of the Mississippi' before settling down in Oakland with his girlfriend in 1984. The couple married, did well financially and even owned several houses before disaster struck. In 2000 Fisher's wife died. He started drinking heavily, landed in jail and had to sell everything he owned to pay fines and lawyers. He also developed a heart condition. After he was released from prison in 2008, he did some odd jobs in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, had heart surgery, and wound up living on the streets and being cared for in a Skid Row medical centre for 14 months. His social worker helped him to get into the Star Apartments.

Fisher loves his room, a cosy place full of Vincent van Gogh prints, art supplies, books and guitars. But his favourite spot is an open-air space on the second floor that serves as the residents' private park. 'There are some parks on Skid Row,' he says, 'but they're filthy places, needle parks. Here I can sit and play guitar as long as I like, without people bothering me. And the view is worth a million.' Fisher takes part in almost all the social activities offered. He's a member of the garden group and the music group, takes art classes, plays bingo. He believes the building and its programmes benefit most residents. 'If you stick somebody into a nice building, it gives them a sense of pride. Of course, not all residents appreciate it. Some really make a mess of their rooms. But living here makes most of us feel better about ourselves.'