Designing and Inhabiting Star: An Ethnography of Integrated Affordable Housing in Contemporary Los Angeles

by

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*The Game is About Glory*

*To Dare is to Do*
For Los Angeles,
Introduction

The Star Apartments have a gravity defying air about them, the whole building seeming to float above itself. At least, this was my impression from the other side of the block.

(Baan (2014e))

I am a student of anthropology examining the architecture of this building that is often hailed as revolutionary. But what is revolutionary about it? For about two years this building and the actors and forces that brought it into being have intrigued me. While its architectural form is key in understanding its revolutionary intention, my interest in its “form” includes the social, ideological, and economic influences of which it is also a product as well as the building’s effects over the bodies that inhabit it.
Looking up at Star, I see its features not like a trained architect would, but more like the average layperson. The first floor looks vaguely “modern,” if not quite in the ordinary sense—very much like but unlike the other office buildings in the area. Most of the first floor’s exterior is glass and white stucco, containing offices and – as most buildings in Los Angeles must – a parking garage that drops about ten feet into the ground, with spaces for about a dozen cars. When you walk into the lobby of the apartment buildings themselves, you are welcomed by a large open space with walls colored a cool blue and soft white. Standing in the doorway of the lobby, a staircase rises up toward the room’s back corner to the building’s second floor. In other side of the room is an open seating area that contains soft leather couches, a reception desk, offices, and a pair of elevators.

Most of the second floor is open to the elements, a “deck” that separates the first floor from the residences above. Along this outdoor space is a large community floor rendering (Michael Maltzan Architecture 2014)
garden, a running track, and about a half dozen pieces of exercise equipment, which remind me of the kind you would find in a public park. There are some indoor spaces on the second floor, too: an exercise room, yoga studio, ceramics studio, several classrooms, and a library. A thin white railing runs the perimeter of the deck.

Above the second floor are the residences, seemingly held aloft by a few large concrete supports that pierce the second-floor deck at forty-five degree angles. Each of the 102 apartments has about 300 square feet in total and contains a kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. These units are rectangular, roughly the proportions of a shipping container, but they are not stacked in neat verticals as shipping containers often are. Instead, they are terraced, the units stacked one above the other and rising like stairs instead of towers, their rooftops made walkable.

(Baan 2014c)
The building has no one geometric pattern, but the apartment units’ organization follows a clear logic of spatial connection; you can walk in between the apartments as if they were a series of bungalows connected by catwalks. In a lot of other apartment buildings, these spaces would be indoor hallways, a single floor plan repeatedly arranged one above the other, each unit (and your access to it) identical to the floors above and below. Instead, the apartments at Star feel unique, each route of access its own.

Star is meant to feel special. It was designed by Michael Maltzan Architecture (MMA), a firm that swiftly rose to national prominence during the project. The building’s total budget is listed as $35.1 million. It is certified as a LEED Platinum building, making it one of L.A.’s most environmentally sustainable buildings (National Equity Fund 2013). It was named one of TIME Magazine’s 25 Best Inventions of 2015 (alongside a soccer ball that “teaches kids to code,” the Tesla Model X, and a “sensor that sniffs out gluten” for those with Celiac disease) (Lacayo 2015). Star has been awarded so many prizes within the architectural community that it would seem cruel for the reader to list them in the main text of this thesis.¹

Yet, it is important to note at this point that Star was also developed by the Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT), which means that, despite the accolades, Star is not a glamorous apartment building for downtown L.A.’s young elite but a collection of affordable housing units for the formerly homeless.

This thesis is an anthropological exploration of Star—from its conception as a project to its occupation by residents—through the people and the forces that shaped it and brought it into existence, including the developers and architects as well as the homeless of Skid Row who are now its residents. But asking why Star looks the way it does? is a question that has as much to do with the individuals involved as with the social, political, economic, and spatial history of Los Angeles.

When architectural critics like Níal McLaughlin say that Star’s architecture has a “powerful rhetorical presence” that projects “safety, sociability, and intimacy,” these lovely terms with which he describes the building and the sentiments it evokes should not be taken to mean that Star exists in a vacuum. Star’s architecture is much more than a physical structure as it is intrinsically tied to specific visions of Los Angeles’s past and future; its architecture and programming are in dialogue with the larger built environment. Through focus on Star, then, this thesis ultimately is about social and spatial power in L.A., my hometown. It is about how people shape urban space, and how urban space shapes people.

I will be touching upon many different authors, but a brief discussion of two major theoretical frameworks will introduce much of what is coming. These are two frameworks that offer different but interrelated understandings of power, one mainly
concerning political economy and the built environment and the other concerning the concepts of biopower and the construction of “the self.”

Urban Marxist theorist David Harvey looks at cities as manifestations of the dynamics of capitalism. In his book *The Urban Experience*, he argues that the circulation of capital depends upon and becomes inscribed in the urban landscape as governments forge a relationship with market forces and take specific positions relative to public and private interests. A question Harvey asks at the beginning of the book and that guides his entire inquiry is: “How does capital become urbanized, and what are the consequences of that urbanization?” (1989c, 17). In the rest of the book, he maps out the dynamics of capital’s circulation in relation to what urban forms become possible in different historical, political, and social contexts.

The aspect of Harvey’s theory that I wish to emphasize here in an introductory way, however, is that the built environment is for him not simply a product of capitalism, and the city not simply the result of its forces and dynamics. The city and its infrastructure are themselves actors within them; in other words, they are assets that have historically enabled (or disabled) political-economic processes. Harvey thus explains that the “geographical structures of commodity markets are more than mere reflections of capital circulation and function as real determinants of capitalism’s dynamic” (1989c, 17). Harvey’s theoretical analysis of the relationship between the city and capitalism is critical to understand how the work, imagination, and experiences of individuals are embedded in the broader forces of politics, ideology, and economics.
The second theorist I want to introduce at the outset is Michel Foucault, whose epistemological theory in *Technologies of the Self* informs my entire analysis of how space shapes human sociality and subjectivity and is particularly crucial to this thesis’ third chapter. In Foucault’s own words, these technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18). While these words cover a broad terrain in terms of the sought outcomes of such “operations,” their importance lies in the idea that through management of the body and “the soul,” the *self* is rendered a constructed and transformable object.

However, these methods of transformation are naturally relational, meaning that with their normative power to produce “normality,” comes the ability to “otherize.” In this sense, personhood exists on a kind of social spectrum, and for all of the acceptance and praise awarded those that demonstrate a successful “cultivation” of the self, those that fail to demonstrate it – as in the focus of this thesis, the homeless of Skid Row – are ostracized for it.

Harvey’s political economy lens on urbanization lends explanation to the dynamics of capital and state power as they relate to space, while that of Foucault offers a framework to understand the nature of biopower, understood as power over and management of human life, which includes institutional power as well as power exercised between individuals (Foucault 1990, 136-138) with the goal of increasing productivity. Both of these theoretical approaches are crucial to this thesis’
exploration of Star, the problem of affordable housing, and homelessness. They are certainly not the only theorists I draw upon, but they are the main pillars on which much of my analysis rests.

The final term I wish to introduce here is a broad one: *form*. Simply put, and as I intimated at the beginning of this text, I use it to discuss architectural form: what a building, or a larger built environment, looks like. But this is only where the definition starts, not where it ends. In my use of the term “form,” I also include the spaces in between the physical structure – the spaces enclosed or opened up by the walls, the roofs, ceilings, and stairs – which are just as crucial as the structure to any building’s function. Architect Jeremy Till calls this more holistic definition of form “architectural space,” which “may not be physical in the scientific sense of the word, but as long as it is conceived in the shadow of form, the objectlike qualities will stick around space” (Till 2009, 119). This is my definition of form—the physical structure and its “shadow.”

My use of the term “form,” however, like many other thematic elements in this thesis, is consistently rooted in a larger contextual discussion. Twentieth century architectural critic Sigfried Giedion focused on architecture as “a completed object,” and “form” is commonly used, as it will be here, in this sense (Giedion 2009). It should also be stated, however, that if the what of “form” is central in this thesis, so is the why. In contrast to commonplace ideas among architecture practitioners, I reject the notion that form merely exists, that it is the result of pure aesthetic inspiration.

As a student of anthropology, my analysis of architectural form thus finds inspiration in the work of other anthropologists studying architecture, like James
Holston’s work on spatial construction in Brasilia, *The Modernist City*, or Teresa Caldeira’s study of segregation and space in São Paolo, *City of Walls* (Holston 1989, Caldeira 2001). Like these works, mine is anchored in an attempt to understand the social, economic, political, cultural—as well as aesthetic and material, of course—processes and forces that shape space (Lawrence and Low 1990).

The more contingent element is the individual: if Star had been designed by anyone else it would look completely different. But the spatial, historical, and cultural forces that have shaped it are many, and they intersect in complex ways. Of these forces I focus on the ones directly influencing the “housers” (affordable housing “developers”), Star’s architect, and Star’s residents. As a work that relies on the methods of ethnography, the scope of this thesis is limited. My ethnographic research lasted a little over a month in the summer of 2017, where I interviewed multiple housers, several tenants, and studied firsthand the architecture of Star as well as its surroundings. While this thesis aims to synthesize as much of this research as is possible, I don’t aspire to generalize beyond the specific experiences my interlocutors discussed with me.

Star is a real and tangible place, its form realized in the urban context of Los Angeles, and as such it is analyzable from an anthropological point of view. Not only does the building exist, but it has claim to the current perception that it is thriving—all the awards bestowed upon it constituting evidence of its importance, at least to those with a stake in the project. Because one reality of the built environment, across towns and metropolises, suburbs and farmland, is that many more buildings are designed than are built (almost like natural selection in biological evolution). Why
Star’s specific form was able to be built is of high interest to my ethnographic study. The relationship between fantasy and reality, imagination and material realization, is crucial to architecture. Also crucial: fantasy doesn’t have consequences. reality does.
Chapter One

Housers

The broad aim of this chapter is to understand the formation of form in affordable housing. This chapter does not focus so much on the form of Star itself (its architectural form is more the subject of chapter two) but instead seeks to understand form as a text through which Star can be read. In affordable housing, individuals, money, and ideology all congeal into the form that buildings and other built environments take, and those who work in this field—housers is a term I heard several times throughout my research—are the main focus of this chapter. Without housers there would be no affordable housing; from securing land to securing funding to securing an architect, they are the practitioners of the process that creates form in this area of work. This chapter aims to understand the process of creating affordable housing through the people and principles behind them, telling the story of Star as well as contextualizing its creation. And there is no better entryway to this understanding of form than an account of my own introduction.

The Iron Chef

At first I went to the wrong building. Clifford Beers Housing used to be located on Wilshire Blvd. just north of downtown LA. Now suite #520 in the midsize and midcentury office building was, apparently, corporate offices for a branding/PR firm (above the desk it said as much in pristine chrome lettering). As the elevator doors opened, I made eye contact with the receptionist and waited as I contemplated
the error and a few seconds felt like a dozen. The doors closed again. Only then did I call Cristian Ahumada, the Executive Director of Clifford Beers, and was informed that I was indeed at the wrong office and that he would wait for me at their new location to talk over lunch. Through the windows of the lobby I could see the latest iteration of the downtown LA skyline that had grown and transformed slowly when I was younger but that recently has sprung upwards in quick staccato bursts, massive luxury apartments clad in deep emerald glass sharing the air with sweeping office buildings that tower over my mostly horizontal, sprawling city. I was late, and the Skyline seemed pretty permanent.

Clifford Beers’ new offices were a 25 minute drive up the 101 freeway into the neighborhood of North Hollywood. As I walked through the doors of the building
I almost immediately heard “is that Henry?” from the other room. Just as I got “...Cristian?” out of my mouth, he rounded the corner and shook my hand. His handshake was firm, one of those that makes me self-conscious of my own technique. He wore a dark blue POLO polo shirt with light khaki pants, and his dark hair sat on top of a kind and confident face. According to his cbhousing.org bio, Cristian has been practicing Tae Kwon Do for over 35 years. He quickly introduced me to the small staff, and we walked out onto Victory Boulevard.

“We were going to go somewhere else for lunch, but since we lost some time we can’t. Do you like Mexican?”

“Oh yes,” I replied trying to not seem too excited.

“Great. This place is very good.”

The place in question, Mi Tierra (“My Land”), was indeed very good and was conveniently located across the street from the CBH offices. We jaywalked across, sat down in a booth, and were greeted by a waitress. She and Cristian spoke in beautiful-sounding Spanish about the menu, laughed a bit, then turned towards my side of the booth.

“Red or green salsa?” Cristian asked me.

“Red” I answered after quickly swallowing what would have been a bastardization of rojo. Above us a half dozen ceiling fans worked to cool Mi Tierra, a small breeze making it down to the table.
I began by asking him about his career. I had a broad understanding of the timeline already: Cristian used to work at Hollywood Housing and then joined the Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT) where he was heavily involved in the creation of Star. Unsurprisingly, he had more to say than that.

“When I got off school, it coincided with what today is called the LA Civil Riots, but back then we just called them ‘the riots.’ And at that time I did two community plans for two of the ten impacted neighborhoods from the riots, but what I learned about myself is that these planning documents that I created, while beneficial for the community, to me they didn’t seem like anything tangible you know? So at that point I shifted over to affordable housing”.

The italicization is mine, and I should explain why I place this emphasis on Christian’s use of the word “tangible.” Cristian is someone who wants to change the world around him, to address its problems with boots-on-the-ground creation rather than criticism from afar. These are people for whom the act of building, of creating something that you can touch, carries genuine weight. There is motivation in doing something that helps others, certainly. And it seems that affordable housing, for these individuals, can be the product of this motivation. That being said, Cristian entered the industry in a time when the density of LA was rapidly increasing, a trend that has not let up since. There is a lot to be done.

For all of LA’s palm tree promises, this urban growth is not free of tension. Downtown neighborhoods, while connected by a web of surface streets and pierced by ten lane freeways, have gentrified at different rates. A pyramid of shot glasses
filled from the apex down, the top overflowing are supposed to fill the glasses below. Not so much trickle down but trickle out, across, and over.

But to Michael Maltzan, the architect behind Star, LA is a city of overlapping layers, its scope demanding that we ask complex and contemporary questions of design.

Slowly, the city’s form revealed itself around me, incomplete and genuine. I knew at that first moment that Los Angeles condensed all of the challenges and all of the possibilities of the contemporary city and resembled the future of what was to come. (2011)

While “changing” is an easy characterization of LA’s sprawling landscape, equally important is the idea of possibility that Maltzan alludes to. It is reminiscent of James Holston’s description of the design behind Brasilia, one of the 20th century’s largest experiments in architecture and urban planning: “The project of modernist planning is to transform an unwanted present by means of an imagined future” (1989, 117). Within the “imagined future,” for Maltzan, is opportunity for affordable housing. In line with Cristian’s terminology, it is tangible change; affordable housing is both a text to be read and progress to be written.

On this theme, Cristian continued: “I worked with two syndicators, who syndicated tax credits for housing. I wanted a change, though. I was making good money, but the passion wasn’t there. I felt completely detached from a sense of social responsibility.”
As he talked, our waitress brought us our chips. The red salsa was hot and delicious, but Cristian had gone with the green, which he quickly pulled in front of himself. I wished I had ordered exactly what he had. Not to be fooled twice, I copied his order of the enchilada special.

“I went to work at a tiny nonprofit called Esperanza in the West Adams neighborhood, which back then was in South LA. Today, it has completely gentrified and “South LA” has moved lower.”

Peculiar how a demographic change can rearrange the geography of neighborhoods. White people who moved to South LA didn’t, in fact, move to South LA. They moved to West Adams. Under this new configuration, South LA remained separate. Overcoming the requisite cognitive dissonance, this conceptualization of space and geography is becoming accepted. Real estate prices in the neighborhood support this theme of transition. According to Zillow.com, the median home price in West Adams 2017 was $713,000, and increase of 16.9% from the previous year. Between December 2008 and December 2009 -- the thick of the housing market’s collapse -- median home prices in Jefferson Park and Crenshaw -- two historically poor neighborhoods that are near to West Adams -- dropped 20.3% and 14.8% respectively. While Zillow isn’t known as a trusted source of academic data, the fact that it is a resource for real estate agents offers important context towards another detail; Zillow didn’t begin to keep records of West Adams real estate as a unique neighborhood until late 2010.

Obviously, West Adams has existed long before its Zillow page. But the history of the neighborhood could be described as anything but consistent. In the
chaotic early days of Los Angeles around the turn of the 20th century, wealthy white homeowners looking to escape downtown in West Adams Hills (as it was called then) were required to sign racially restrictive covenants as part of the deeds on their properties, barring them from selling to African Americans. These covenants were not uncommon across the country in the early 1900s, a “reaction to increasing black mobility” that meant West Adams Hills and much of the city was legally unavailable to them (Simpson 2012).

During the 1910s and 1920s, the value of the neighborhood declined as shinier neighborhoods like Beverly Hills sprang up. By the end of the depression, many white homeowners began to overlook the covenant as money became tight, and the neighborhood presented an opportunity; “Sensing an opportunity to establish a new foothold for the numerous middle class and affluent members of the black community, social leaders started to buy homes in West Adams Heights”, and the area was rechristened Sugar Hill (Gross 2017, Mears 2018).

However, by the mid-50’s, many of the upper class black figures had moved from the neighborhood. By 1963, Sugar Hill had been bisected by the Santa Monica Freeway, confirming rumors that had been swelling for over a decade.

“The road could have been built without cutting through the so-called Sugar Hill section,” explained the Los Angeles Sentinel in 1966, “however, in order to miss Sugar Hill, it was ‘said’ that the route would have to cut through fraternity and sorority row area around USC. Sorority and fraternity row still stands and Sugar Hill doesn’t, so you know who won out!” (Mears 2018).
This small example of the malleability of urban space evokes a larger conceptualization of “spatial practices” within urban form, courtesy of David Harvey:

Spatial practices in any society… are not innocent with respect to the accumulation of capital and the reproduction of class relations under capitalism, they are a permanent arena for social conflict and struggle. Those who have the power to command and produce space possess a vital instrumentality for the reproduction and enhancement of their own power. Any project to transform society must, therefore, grasp the complex nettle of the transformation of spatial practices. (1989a, 261).

This characterization of spatial practice – ultimately constructed by and made in the image of the dominant class – offers a social explanation for West Adams as well as gentrification in general. Gentrification is an entrenchment of the norm, an expansion of what is spatially, economically, and socially accepted at the expense of the lived spaces (and people and communities within them) that are not. And while Holston’s idea of the “imagined future” may imbue affordable housing with a sense of possibility, at the same time “any project to transform society” – like affordable housing – must understand that their mission must operate within (and often against) the broader force of political economy that is the center of Harvey’s theorization of how capital became and continues to become urbanized in the latest stages of capitalism.

As the ceiling fans hummed in unison above, Cristian continued on, “After I spent three years there, I moved on right as the term PSH was coined. The concept of Permanent Supportive Housing was centered around terms like ‘special needs’, ‘HIV
AIDS’, those were the sort of projects that had that designation. These designations were attached to populations or demographics that triggered the sort of money that funded housing projects. Then the opportunity arose to join the Skid Row Housing Trust, and I said you know what --”

He was interrupted by the Latin radio that abruptly started playing out of previously dormant speakers. We both looked pitifully at my iPhone on the table with which I was trying to record the conversation and laughed. He continued, speaking louder.

“-- Anyways, I said that this area, Skid Row, has the hardest housing to do. I wasn’t married, I didn’t have any responsibilities, I didn’t have a kid or anything, so it was the perfect time to become ‘the sponge’. The financial situation wasn’t very good at the time, and I was given [by Mike Alvidrez] a lot of creativity. I cranked out a lot of new construction, something the Trust hadn’t done yet. After 6 years there, I felt I needed to expand and spearhead my own thing. So that’s how I ended up a Clifford Beers.”

I almost missed the end of his story, hung up on something he had said a few sentences before. Eventually, I recognized his silence and was prompted to ask.

“When you say you had more ‘creativity’ in Affordable Housing, what does that mean?”

“It’s very non-linear. A traditional education will be a disadvantage to you. You are accustomed to a path. This creativity is when there is the path of no path.
“Let me give you a metaphor,” he said before pausing to enjoy a chip. “Have you watched *Iron Chef*?”

“Yes!” I responded, fondly remembering the mid-2000s *Food Network* classic.

*Iron Chef* goes a little something like this: you get to create a masterpiece, but you don’t know what your ingredients are. You open up the fridge, and you want to make a steak, but you pop it open, and you have, like, an old piece of bread, cheese, and some broccoli. Whatever you had in mind is totally not what’s going to happen. But you can *create* something from that that could be a masterpiece, but it may not be in any cookbook, largely unprecedented.”

The metaphor then seems to become more real for Cristian, and his voice hardens with pride. “Pretty much everyone will be against you at the time. But they are masterpieces and wonders of God once they are completed.”

His pride is infectious. I ask for clarification on why the fridge seems so understocked -- what forces force him to make a masterpiece out of bread, cheese and broccoli. His second metaphor was as fascinating as his first.

“You are bounded by the public monies that are brought about in the pendulum at this point in time. For example,” he says, dangling a tortilla chip in his hand and slowly swinging it to his right, “there was a time when there was a lot of money available for assisted living.”

The chip then swung left.
“Today those monies are basically dried up, and they’ve gone towards permanent supportive housing,” he said, continuing to rock the chip back and forth for emphasis. “Fifteen years ago, it might have been for HIV/AIDS, which was heavily funded. That was where the pendulum was then. To some degree you’re chasing a project, but then to some degree you are also chasing money. These things change year to year, you have to adapt.”

Housers are between the theoretical and the tangible. They are not just facilitators of affordable housing, but a component of their creation. If form can be read as a text, then housers like Cristian are an important strand in the story. Their potential influence – from the limits of subjectivity to the revolution within creativity – can be felt within the form affordable housing takes; a dish is defined by its chef.

That being said, cooking is nothing without ingredients. In the process of determining form, funding is just as important as the individual; affordable housing is politically and economically dependent, often attached to larger events, social causes, and institutions before any resources are even spent on it. Not only is money scarce, but it is also variable.

While individuals and money are crucial to affordable housing, there is a third influence over the form of affordable housing I wish to enumerate: Ideology. This term refers to a history of how states and communities have provided answers to a fundamental question: If homelessness is a problem, how to solve it?
Housing for Health

It was my first day at Star. Mike Alvidrez and I stepped out of the small parking garage and onto the intersection of Maple Avenue and 6th. We had just driven from the offices of the Skid Row Housing Trust, the nonprofit that developed and currently operates Star. Mike is the current CEO, a position he has held for over a decade. He has a square face, rectangular glasses, grey hair, a healthy mustache, and a disposition that manages to balance being kind and direct. This is the beginning of a tour he has given before.

When we get to the street corner, Mike gestured diagonally across the street at a two-level strip mall across the intersection. A bright yellow “For Lease” sign with a repeated phone number hung above the former storefront. “ZAPATOS - 3 PARES $20” was printed in red lettering on the outside of the glass while large sheets of plywood boarded the inside, preventing any view of the interior. The rest of the storefronts in the strip mall were covered by large metal sheets that unrolled downwards, like window blinds. Only one was rolled up and open, a staple-seller called “6th & LA Wholesale Plaza”.

“The building looks like it has its nose chopped off. There was a parking deck on top.” Mike says, referring to the strip mall. “And a lot of what was in this neighborhood was what was here. This building [across street] sold a lot of things related to the foot: shoes, hosiery, socks, more hosiery, don't ask me why, but…”

“They picked a theme and went for it,” I offer, continuing to look around. To our right, across 6th, is an enormous brick building. A blue street sign that reads
POLICE STATION sat atop a totem pole of parking signs. The building’s official title is the Central Community Police Station and its large brick form takes up an entire block. The brick surface itself is noticeably weathered – more dulled brown than deep red – and would be completely continuous if it weren’t for the large mural that faces Star’s northeast side. Depicted is a scene from the point of view of an LAPD helicopter pilot, who looks out at an LA filled with obtusely positive interactions between cops and the community; for example, an officer helps a mother and daughter home. In the background, the LA skyline emphasizes mission-style architecture alongside the contemporary skyline, while a supervisor instructs aspiring officers next to a large nine-digit phone keypad that emphasizes the numbers “9” and “1.” “To Protect and Serve” is written in script just faint enough to still be still be legible.

To our left, across Maple, are the offices of County+City+Community, aka C3. C3 combines health and other county services with community engagement to create “a partnership designed to systematically engage people living on the streets of Skid Row and help them regain health and housing stability” (C3 2016). They divide Skid Row into four quadrants, sending out teams aiming to engage and connect homeless individuals with specialized city health services. They opened a sobering center down the street from these offices next to Star and are continuing to expand. “They've done a lot of work to help get people off of the street and out of emergency rooms faster than ever before,” said Mike. I asked him if C3’s growth was the result of more public money becoming available. Integrative government funding like this is
pretty rare, as housing money and health money are usually separated by department and program.

“They’ve used their own health dollars to support a solution in the housing sector so they’re bringing money in from another sector which is atypical for public agency,” Mike responded. “If they do experience savings they usually keep them,” he said, with a shrug that implied an understanding of their dual motivations; “they are concerned as much about health outcomes of clients as much as they are fostering sustained growth of their own department.”

This seems like a simple notion, but programs like C3 – at least those that use a multi departmental approach to funding – are only now beginning to grow. While the general principle of “using public money more efficiently and effectively” seems like an obvious platitude for a government department. Of course they want to. But the level of cooperation between these three departments is largely peerless, at least in Los Angeles. While these organizations were all fighting homelessness individually, combining resources allowed for a more thorough supportive approach. Similar programs have been developed in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Salt Lake, but it is “rare to find a program that combines C3’s wealth of resources with such a specific geographical focus” (Chiland 2016).

I look away as Mike turns around toward Star, shifting my focus toward the glass-walled offices on the first floor. *Housing for Health* is written down the side of the main door, with *Los Angeles County Department of Health Services* in smaller script alongside it. To the left of these offices is a clinic run by the same department, designed to serve the tenants of Star. While mixed-use programming is an established
and ever-growing trend in housing and real estate, efforts in affordable housing are more specialized, applying the possibilities of mixed-use to the issue of homelessness by attempting to create more comprehensively supportive housing. The general dictum being followed in this mixed-use approach is this; separating housing from health in nonsensical, because ultimately housing is health, or at least contributes greatly to it. If people are housed, and if services are close and accessible, health in general will improve by virtue of these services simply being in place.

“These people needed high quality medical attention,” Mike says, “we have been already incorporating medical clinics, called satellite clinics, which are medically qualified health centers. We have typically embedded them on the inside of our buildings. Specifically here, what happens, is that when these clinics move into our buildings, cost is initially high, but clientele is here and they can make it back.”

There is little arguing with Mike’s logic. Any initial costs on floor 1 are guaranteed to be covered by a constant stream of clients from floors 3 through 6, and crucial services are highly accessible for those who need them.

However, actually getting the County Health office on the lease was complicated. Initially, the SRHT had a relationship with the Community Clinic Association of Los Angeles County, but mutual interest couldn’t overcome a lack of funds, “so that was sort of stalled,” Mike said matter-of-factly. However, the San Francisco Department of Health and Human Services had found success in converting single room occupancy spaces (often older motels) into space for health services. “[Housing for Health] had already started the process of rethinking how to get people out of emergency rooms who were homeless and needed to be medically addressed,”
said Mike, really emphasizing the similarity between this thinking and the Trust’s.

“So they brought [the C3] model down here and this space was gonna be a commercial space probably with something you’d see across the street. When we started talking to them [Housing for Health], they ran a lot more of their key personnel from San Francisco to take a look at the place and they say [to us], “What are you doing with the commercial space,” and we say ‘we're gonna rent it out to someone. Housing for Health says ‘we want it’.”

As Mike is about to finish, he adds a small addendum to his story, clearly deeply grateful for what they were able to piece together: “Fortuitously we were able to get a grant from the Yoon Health Organization and some County money.”

C3 would probably exist in some other form if these offices and clinic at Star hadn’t come together, but as one program finds success, it can make it easier for others to follow. To Mike, this approach is not only innovative but paradigm-shifting: “It would be sort of like the prison system funding early childhood education, so they don’t see those kids in prison.”

Mike’s words reflect a dynamic that is as inescapable as it is precarious. They address the larger policy and government question of how to do you change existing systems while still working within them? The ideology of supportive housing does not exist in isolation, but instead has a place within a broader history of U.S. supportive housing. Of the three components of affordable housing form I established earlier in this chapter, ideology should be understood as relational to the other two. Concerning housers like Cristian and Mike, their perspective as individuals is shaped by larger ideological trends, whether in embrace and rejection of them. As far as money is
concerned, relative scarcity or abundance is dependent on broader ideological schema that influence policy. This understanding is not meant to conflate all three under the umbrella of ideology but instead to frame the production of form in affordable housing as an inherently reflexive and intersectional process.

“Urbanization,” writes Harvey, “means a certain mode of human organization in space and time that can somehow embrace all of these conflicting forces, not necessarily so as to harmonize them, but to channel them into so many possibilities of both creative and destructive social transformation” (1989d, 54). The ideology of affordable housing – having evolved towards the trend of supportive housing that we see today in Star – has to continually fight for a place within this confluence of “conflicting forces.” The ideology within affordable housing has had to emerge through these changing dynamics of urbanization, and the ideology within Star’s form, as well as the process of its creation, cannot be understood in isolation; it is a product of history.

Towards Supportive Housing

At their very core, systems of affordable housing in the United States are designed to cure social ills. However, the spectrum of forms within these systems, as they have evolved over time, is immense. Star was completed in 2015, and the broad imperative of providing “health and safety” established before the 20th century still holds true, but ideology has shifted towards Supportive Housing, of which Sam
Davis, in his book *Designing for the Homeless*, provides an excellent spatial definition:

Supportive housing is not limited to a single type of structure (it might be an apartment, a house, or a collective dwelling), but much of the new urban supportive housing takes the form of buildings with housing situated above shops or public facilities. Placing shared facilities at the ground level provides a transition between the housing and the urban life beyond, which is precisely how the facilities function. (2004, 54-55)

It is easy to see the Star within this interpretation of Supportive Housing. Star goes a step further by embracing what Mike calls Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), where housing is guaranteed once given, regardless of tenants’ sobriety or financial status. (The PSH ideology is also sometimes referred to as “Housing First” policy.)

These are two modalities – Supportive Housing and PSH – that are foundational to the Skid Row Housing Trust, Clifford Beers Housing, and their respective directors, Mike and Cristian.

Star, as a spatial product of this ideology, should not be seen in isolation, but understood within the context of older forms of affordable housing. Form is a text through which intent can be understood, an idea Davis expresses succinctly in a chapter of his book titled “Housing Design as Social Policy.” For every iteration of affordable housing there have invariably been those (individuals or institutions) in the same position as Mike and Cristian. This role is, in many ways, that of the catalyst, combining resources and ideology toward developing a solution as a response to
social and political will, in effect creating “social policy” through varying dynamics of ideological aggregation. However, solutions are invariably built on finite definitions of problems.

The examples that follow relate to Star and the SRHT ideology behind it on two levels: 1) Cumulatively, they sketch a history of the ideology driving American affordable housing programs as progressing towards PSH and Supportive Housing; and 2) Individually, each example explores dynamics between enumerated problems, proposed solutions, and the barriers and influences in between them. They are by no means comprehensive histories, but targeted examples of the same social challenges organized around different variables.

*Riverside Tenement Yard: Health, Housing, and Philanthropy*

In 1790, the population of New York City – geographically limited to the island of Manhattan – was 33,131. By 1890, a century later, the population had risen to 1,515,301 with a further 639,943 listed as “foreign-born” and reflecting a decade’s worth of immigration that equaled roughly 42% of the existing population in the rapidly growing metropolis. Naturally, statistics for those “foreign-born” are not listed until about 30 years after demographics began to be reported (Rosenwaike 2004).

As New York City neared the middle of the 20th century, overpopulation was emerging as a considerable and distinct problem, as sanitation infrastructure offered little or nothing to the poor and densely populated masses (Jones 2005, 7-10).
Diseases like cholera, tuberculosis, and typhus came over on the boats from Southern and Eastern Europe, and while the Department of Health had made progress in identifying the microorganisms that caused diseases and facilitating quarantines at the city’s ports, the health “problem” was becoming an epidemic (Jones 2005, 10-12). In 1783, a ship filled with Russian Jewish immigrants reached the city ravaged by a typhoid epidemic. The Department of Health launched a quarantine that effectively curbed the disease’s potential spread from the ship to Manhattan, but four department employees died carrying out their duties. While the city’s immigrant poor had long suffered high mortality rates and a low life expectancy, New York’s increasing density made compartmentalization of the problem – out of sight, out of mind – untenable for more well-off residents (Jones 2005, 18, Filiaci 2016).

At the time, tenement housing – run down apartments that were populated well beyond their intended capacity – was the only real option for the city’s poor. While tenements had success in the basic function of housing the poor, they were less successful in eliminating the “problems” of poverty:

The continuous walls of housing built over shops were not altogether bad, for they firmed a consistent backdrop for lively social interaction. But these facades masked desperate circumstances. Poor ventilation, inadequate plumbing, and infestation of rodents and roaches fostered smallpox and tuberculosis, creating such mean conditions that civil unrest erupted. (Davis 1995, 8)

A report in 1865 by the Council of Hygiene, a “group of New York sanitary reformers” that was comprised of wealthy physicians and activists, attempted to
universalize the crisis. Public health was now no longer an issue limited to the poor, as “a great body of the former middle class [were] rapidly becoming absorbed into and allied with the poor tenant-houses class, and [were] experiencing the [same] lamentable evils” (The Council of Hygiene and Public Health 1865, Filiaci 2016).

They were successful. New York City passed the Tenement House Act of 1867, which “gave the Board of Health authority to regulate tenement conditions” (Filiaci 2016). It was a step towards a “cure” in a both a literal and metaphorical sense; it attempted to address the dangers of disease through (a type of) social support for the poor.

While the Tenement Act codified bare minimum requirements for living, it did so as the result of societal will. While ultimately foundational to future affordable housing policy, the act was the result of proximity rather than empathy, but nonetheless an important step towards a policy of affordable housing. At this time, there were no Housing Authorities, no government subsidies, no public funding, and certainly nothing resembling Housing for Health or C3; however, through a collection of individuals, funding, and most importantly ideology, the seeds of this contemporary construction took root in New York during this health crisis. Health was a metropolis-wide issue, and the Tenement Act was a first step rather than an ultimate solution.

Enter Alfred T. White.

White was a prominent New Yorker with a vast fortune (worth over fifteen million dollars at his death in 1921) amassed through the fur business, but by the
1870s, his focus shifted towards the housing crisis around him (NYT Editorial Staff 1921). As “New York's tenements were reaching new depths of density and squalor, White became convinced that people of wealth not only could, but should, build working-class housing that would be both humane and profitable” (Grey 1992). White saw no reason why affordable housing couldn’t be an investment; there certainly was demand.

White founded the Improved Dwelling Association, which was governed by a simple principle; in the words of White himself, “philanthropy, plus five percent” (1992). The organization limited its dividends at 5%, and the architectural design of its flagship building – the Riverside Tenement Yards in Brooklyn Heights – is filled with programming governed by a clear reactionary ideology rooted in the aforementioned social anxiety about safety and health. White hired architect William Field to enact this vision; a spatial response to these broad anxieties (1992).

One repeated problem within tenement housing were indoor common stairwells, “thought to spread odors and disease, and serving as giant flues in a fire” (1992). Across Riverside’s terra cotta facades, there appear to be a series of balconies stretching across the building’s inward facing walls. These balconies are, in fact, open hallways meant to address the “cesspool” effect of the tenements. Riverside is composed of three large blocks arranged in a right-angled “U” shape, connecting each apartment while looking over the large communal courtyard. The courtyard “provided ventilation and light to units but also served as an area for children’s play and shared social activities,” while the apartments themselves were arranged in “a series of
projected bays [that] reduced the overall scale of the building by delineating sets of
apartments within it” (Davis 1995, 8).

This dichotomy – between designed communal space and individualized of
living space – is an important one. This separation is a reaction to the lack of
differentiated spaces in tenement housing; space is so cramped in public housing that
each area must serve every programming function, from social activities to children’s
play to eating, sleeping, and relieving ones’ self. Clear within this ideology is a focus
on physical health and sanitation, but there is also a focus on social health.

(Unkown 1909)

Communal interaction is balanced with conventions of privacy and individual space,
something not possible within the tenements.

Looking at the three factors behind housing in relation to Riverside, Alfred T.
White contained all three. This individual philanthropist worked from his own
ideology, framing New York City’s housing crisis as a public health issue and
constructing Riverside as a spatial reaction to these issues. Back in 1890 this kind of thinking was just emerging, and it would take a motivated individual to create something tangible; without recognition within policy, funding, and in turn the space itself, would have to come from the private sector.

At the time, the idea of public health was a nascent one, with the New York Board of Health only just beginning to scientifically examine scientific causes of mass health issues, and they were “more powerful than any other local public health body in the United States” (Jones 2005, 15). An example of the farthest reaches of the board’s power: in 1966, they mandated 160,000 tons of manure removed from vacant lots, 4,000 yards to be cleaned, and 6,418 outdoor toilets to be “disinfected” (2005, 15). By the 1890s, however, some doctors were refusing to report cases of tuberculosis, seeing it as an “infringement on their autonomy”; the New York Department of Health (no longer the “Board of Health”, which had become too intrusive and had been reigned in, so to speak) wouldn’t contribute substantially to public health until the early 1910s, when they made large strides in the treatment of child mortality (2005, 18-24).

In this same vein, there was no societal expectation of affordable housing, only a burning need for it. While this health crisis was predicated on curbing the effects of poverty only insofar as their effect on the wealthy, White and Riverside represent a move toward a more cohesive view of urban living, in which affordable housing is understood as important for the health of the city as a whole.

White’s concerns went beyond his own, showing a kind of sympathy that is foundational to any affordable housing; he is someone who, in Harvey’s words, could
“command and produce space.” His view towards his tenants was one of admiration rather than disdain; “ambition to do better is the first and moving impulse of every immigrant on our shores” (Grey 1992). While this ideological sentiment was a driving force behind the completion of Riverside, it also reflected, as Harvey would agree, a fundamental dynamic of the urbanization of capital; “Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings rather than being attributed to any systematic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)” (Harvey 2005, 65-66).

This concept is crucial; within it lies a social dynamic within Harvey’s larger explanation of the urbanization of capital. Here, social standing is seen as indicative of the choices and decisions of the individual themselves, as opposed to an understanding that is rooted, at least partly, within the context of larger socioeconomic trends. Essentially, there is a prevailing belief that one’s “lot in life” is earned, be it good or bad. This prevailing belief, intimated by Harvey, is in many ways a justification of the parity within capitalist urbanization. Those on top deserve to be there, likewise for those at the bottom. This dynamic is not insurmountable, yet its importance to affordable housing and homelessness cannot be understated, looking well beyond the small story of Alfred T. White.

**Carl Mackley Houses: Reform in Design**

In the first decades of the 20th century, private funding – like that of Riverside – remained the primary model for the development of affordable housing. Not every
developer had the same philanthropic designs as Alfred T. White. “[Affordable] housing,” writes Sam Davis, “was sponsored by interest groups or industrialists, who were increasingly criticized for creating the demographic shifts that gave rise to the tenements. In some cases, the owners of major industries saw housing as yet another way of controlling workers and making a profit” (1995, 10-11). One railroad car magnate created a veritable town in Philadelphia to house 1,400 of his workers; each dwelling company-owned and units were “outfitted and sited according to employment rank”; its design deliberately linking social and economic hierarchy, “physically [reinforcing] the notion that worker status and housing type were interrelated” (1995, 11).

Government subsidies, and the subsequent institutionalization of housing as a responsibility of the state, did not yet exist. Those exploited by “affordable” housing or those who were homeless altogether were an unfortunate but ultimately acceptable product of an industrializing U.S. economy. Even in housing, titans of industry were unlikely to see the merit in a non-profitable enterprise. It was only after the Great Depression that the status quo shifted (1995, 11).

The idea that economic security was supplied by a free market was not so much altered but shattered. With the New Deal came a fundamental shift in policy that went beyond regulation and towards the concept of building a social safety net. With the economic crash causing so many to lose their homes, the concept that shelter was a right began to congeal in the American social and political consciousness. Subsidies for housing began to emerge, initially tasked with a threefold mission:
Money was allocated to “build whole model communities, rural assistance programs, and urban slum clearance” (1995, 11).

Socially minded architects were drawn to these new opportunities, and, subsequently, design began to serve an expanded role that “represented much of the [New Deal] reformer’s agenda: sound housing supported by community amenities.” While the early subsidies could support part of these developments, nonprofits and trade unions often picked up the rest of the costs (1995, 11). A Philadelphia affordable housing development, built in 1931, would change that.

In the late 19th century, Philadelphia, the present-day City of Brotherly Love was known as the “City of Homes.” It was the second most populous city in the country behind New York, and an enormous portion of residents owned individual homes, but as the city expanded and densified, fundamental questions were asked of the single-home mentality’s practicality. “Between 1880 and 1930,” Gero writes, “Philadelphia’s population grew by over a million from 847,170 to 1,950,96,” pushing the housing supply to its limits (2009).

As an island of finite acreage, New York embraced its verticality early. Philadelphia had no such spatial constraints, but as its population ballooned, the model of the single-family home became less and less economically viable for much of the population. By the 1920s, new housing in the city was only “affordable” to the top third of incomes. As in the rest of the country, the Great Depression hit construction hard; between 1929 and 1932 new construction in Philadelphia dropped by 95% (Gero 2009). Within this hardship, however, was opportunity. During the New Deal, Catherine Bauer was one of the most notable voices for housing reform
Along with architect Oscar Stonorov, they aimed to create a “humane modern housing complex” named the Carl Mackley Houses (Gero 2009, Davis 1995, 11). Its design was a revelation.

Viewed from above, Mackley consists of four linear structures that run parallel to each other, the space between them adapted into two large courtyards. In total, the development consists of 284 units on five and a half acres. However, what was largely unprecedented about it was the variety of social and recreational services contained within; tennis courts, a swimming pool, laundry service (the cost of which was included in the $9.45 monthly rent), a kindergarten, a library, a cooperative market, retail space, a print shop, a carpentry shop, a model shop, auditorium,

(Historical Society of Pennsylvania 1935)
and meeting rooms “intended to encourage seminars on current political and social issues” (Gero 2009, Davis 1995, 11). In addition, the entire building was made out of concrete, a sturdy and (then) cutting-edge material in residential buildings; at the time, “[this] was seen as providing the best available technology to low-income housing” (Davis 1995, 11).

Upon its completion, Bauer and Stonorov used Carl Mackley as a critical case study in their advocacy efforts to increase government spending on affordable housing. The project was successful, and, in 1935, federal funding directly allocated for low cost housing was included in the National Recovery Act, in large part thanks to their efforts. The Carl Mackley houses showed what affordable housing could be; in the words of Stonorov, “[affordable housing] is no longer so much a question of naked shelter only… it is the demand for the reorganization of rotten communities into stable, sane and healthy societies” (Cliff 1971, 53). A year after the National Recovery Act was issued, the first fully subsidized housing project -- fittingly named First Houses -- was constructed in New York. For the first time, publicly funded Affordable Housing began to truly resemble its contemporary ideology, in both funding and form.

*Cooking with Crumbs*

There was a plaque in the lobby of Star, just to the left of the stairs. While centrally located, the plaque was also relatively small and (least for me) impossible to read from more than a few feet away. As Mike and I walked up to it, he began to
explain what it was as my eyes were scanning. Etched in the plaque was a list of names – individuals, corporations, and foundations – and each was being “sincerely thanked” for their contributions to the SRHT.

“Since this building was done during the recession [of 2008] … we needed many more sources to go out and get funds from,” Mike said, with a determined tone.

“For a variety of reasons, to make the building pencil out, we thought about abandoning the building of the elevated tray. Instead, we decided to keep to the original plan, so we had to recruit capital.” Scrapping the elevated tray would mean that Star’s residences – the third through sixth floors --would rest directly atop the first, a cost cutting measure that would have eliminated the programming contained on the second floor, from the yoga studio to the classroom to the garden. Instead, they kept it. The programming on the second floor was ultimately too important to compromise on.

“How long was this process?” I ask.

“How long. In general, it takes about five years, but [Star] took a little longer since we couldn’t get a section 8 contract.”

Seeing the raw confusion on my face, Mike proceeded to explain how one goes about finding funding for a project like this. “Every housing authority has a number of vouchers. So basically, think of crumbs, and you put them all together to make a cookie.” As he continued to explain, I started to grasp the scope of the search for these crumbs. While the money they collectively provide is pivotal, to find it is to

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2 Cristian said six, for what it’s worth.
wade into a swamp of minutia of policy stipulations that constrict design, with one important distinction pertaining to retail, services, and residential spaces: “You can’t have these funds tied to retail or leases; [instead] they have to be tied to the building, otherwise the building would be unfunded.” But, because Star’s services are linked to housing, these services have users of these services literally built-in; “actually” says Mike, referring to another funding qualification symptomatic in Star’s tenants, “if they’re in debt that enables another funding source for us.”

From across the lobby a tenant waves at Mike, and they say “hi” to each other. He turns back to me, continuing his story.

“We couldn't get it because the HA\textsuperscript{3} director at the time wasn't giving any of these vouchers to us because he wanted to recapitalize public housing. There's this rule about Section 8 vouchers only to be used to ‘deconcentrate poverty,’ and he said we weren't deconcentrating poverty.” Essentially, what this HA director was demanding, was for affordable housing development diffused across the city, the housing and services far from Skid Row.

“What's your take on the phrase deconcentrating poverty?” I ask, doing my best to understand how such a mandate would actually help affordable housing.

“I understand that from a policy perspective, [spreading out] housing is sort of the best use of subsidies. But we can't build housing for homeless in Brentwood. So

\textsuperscript{3} Housing Authority
for me, finding people a decent place to live that can qualify for SSI[^4] is
deconcentrating. There's no worse poverty than being homeless.”

Today, with Star completed and celebrated, it is easy to forget the difficulties
overcome along the way. Call it Iron Chef, “collecting crumbs,” or whatever you
would like, but this “game” is a veritable run through the gauntlet, the funding rules
so specific and the resources so scarce that it seems improbable for a project like Star
to actually come out the other side of this complicated process complete.

**Of H and HHH**

“You think Star has had a tangible impact since it opened?” I ask, about to
take a bite of my Italian sub. Cristian and I were meeting again for lunch, this time at
Roma Deli, an eatery that sits next to Roma Banquet Hall in a one-story storefront
about a block from CBH and Mi Tierra. Across the street, I could see Venus Faire, a
so-called adult entertainment space that offers “Show Girls, DVDs, Lingerie, and an
Adult Arcade.” Beside it stands Pirate Staffing, an employment services company
that offers “Temporary Labor, Permanent Placement, and Payroll Services”; on the
signage above, a skull-and-crossbones flag on a pole forms the “P” in Pirate. To the
right of that is a marijuana dispensary, made legible by a green cross on the storefront
and a “$25 CAP” sign resting on the curb.

[^4]: Supplemental Security Income is a welfare program that supports low income elderly and disabled.
“We broke all kinds of new ground, all kinds of uncharted territory with Star. In Los Angeles it was the first of its kind. No one had done modular construction for permanent supportive housing and certainly not over a superstructure. You have commercial on the very bottom, and you also have this deck that we activated [with social and health programming], I mean it’s a unique project, most definitely.”

I remember thinking that being unique is not the same as having a tangible impact going forward. My mind jumped to an ambitious expectation of upward progress; for all the accolades crowning Star a “milestone” in affordable housing, shouldn’t that mean changing lives and paving the way for others to do the same?

Cristian’s answer felt unsatisfying, but it is understandably diplomatic. In November of 2016 and March of 2017, Los Angeles County passed two pieces of legislation concerning homelessness, Measure HHH and Measure H. Both ballot measures were approved by county voters, receiving 76% and 69% of the vote, respectively. HHH will “authorize $1.2 billion in bonds to pay for the construction of 10,000 units of housing for homeless people” while H will impose a 0.25 percent county sales tax for a decade to “fund homeless services and prevention” (LAT Editorial Staff 2016, LA County Homeless Initiative).

Both measures claim to (and can) have a positive impact, but their complexities are, for some housers, cumbersome. While HHH secures over a billion dollars in construction bonds, this influx of capital comes with restrictions. In a pre-HHH world, Los Angeles’s affordable housing funding was mostly dealing with construction bonds that appreciated at a 9% rate. Under HHH, the bonds that are available appreciate at a 4% rate. For housers, this means that they are working with
two thirds less potential equity than they were before. Considering that it took about
six years to amass the capital for Star working with 9% bonds, that rate would
translate to about eight or nine years working with 4% bonds.

Based on macroeconomic business cycles, the yield rate on such bonds will
change in 2019. Some economists predict a recession at the end of this cycle,
potentially leaving housers with even less equity to work with. This is a persistent
problem within economic debates about proper subsidization; the business cycle
dictates that within some years government subsidization will be successful, but also
necessitates the inverse (Taylor 2010, Dickler and Epperson 2018)

However, this isn’t Cristian’s first game of Iron Chef. While his mission is
singular, his methods are not. Then he addresses my expectations of tangible impact
and replicability. “We are taking all the lessons learned on Star and applying them in
this new HHH environment. You want to create a model that you can replicate and
build from. But in order to do so, you need to consistently put yourself in the
uncomfortable position of…. As a matter of fact, that needs to be a part of your DNA,
because if you do not, you will never grow, you will always be doomed to do the
same thing over and over and over.” Cristian sees it as the houser’s duty as one of
innovation and creation, with routine and complacency this modus operandi’s true
enemy.

As in Iron Chef, here “cooking” is limited by the availability of ingredients.
But understanding Affordable Housing as an act of realizing an “imagined future”
feeds an expectation that progress will be made in spite of whatever obstacles of
money and ideology hinder that vision. I ask Cristian if affordable housing in LA is,
in his words “putting itself in an uncomfortable position” and attempting to build off
some of the ideas within Star.

“[Some housers] want to, but when push comes to shove, they won’t. Because
what you have to do is to create a new model that goes against the grain. I’ll give you
a little example – and know that I call this archaic, I call it Flinstonian, I call it all
types of old, old, old Neanderthal-type names. Our industry is linear. That means
[that] when I have my capital stack then I approach a construction vendor to say that I
want to do pre-fab construction [like Star] and they say OK.”

Cristian set down his sandwich and asked, “Are you aware that a construction
vendor will only pay for work completed on site?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Whether its Bank of America, Wells Fargo, whatever. That’s the
industry.

“So to make a pre-fab building you would need to pay two vendors? One for
pre-fab construction and one for assembly at the site?”

“Yep, that’s the industry. If I say I want one unit that’s totally completed, and
not only totally completed but permitted, then I have to go to Joe Blow lender and say
‘you’re not willing to give me money for work that’s permitted just because it was
completed off-site?’

“What about contractors?” I ask. “Do you need to go through the lenders?”,
trying to mull over this circular logic, which appears to me almost Kafkaesque in its
cruel impenetrability; one will not give you the money for envelope-pushing projects like this, but to do that, you need, well, money.

The prevalence of this dynamic is not lost on Cristian. “OK, sure. So say the lender gets back to you and says, ‘ah shit well, that’s not my problem.’ So you go, ‘Hey, Mr. Contractor, can you pay for the construction, and I’ll refund you when its completed and installed on-site?’ to which he goes ‘Sure! But its gonna cost you.’ And by the end of this, pre-fab is gonna cost as much as it would to do it conventionally. So, as you can see, I’m not preaching modular construction (pre-fab) per se but saying that these are the pieces that we need to undo to get to a new place.”

Star is a product not only of individual work, money, and housing ideology, but of luck. The Iron Chef dynamic within public, subsidized housing binds resources in a way that complicates the potential of the housing process to be realized; housers have to work within with a system that isn’t necessarily tuned into the logic of the building process; in order for the funds to really target the intended purposes and populations, regulations contain what, from a practical perspective, is a series of contradictory demands on builders that ensures that only the most savvy and persistent ones will succeed. Success, in this sense does, not necessarily promise continued progress. Instead, it is instead stymied by a system that is not designed to break, or even barely bend.

Cristian points to his small plastic water cup on the table in front of us. “What I’m saying is, we need to become the water, and the water needs to adapt to its vessel. And if the vessel happens to be this cup, a salt shaker, or a cylinder or whatever it is, then the shape will be discovered. Right now, we don’t have water.” By this, Cristian
underscores how crucial the trait of adaptation is, or at least how it important it should be in affordable housing. “We have this giant square peg that we shove into a round hole. Until we are able to do that, we will not be able to solve these social ills, which are only getting worse. You know, homelessness in LA has gone up 23% this year.”

_Crisis_

In respect to this chapter’s initial offering, an understanding of form within affordable housing, I would like to close with several thoughts. While this chapter often refers to the “game” or the “process” of affordable housing, defined here as enabled by a confluence of individuals (housers), money, and ideology, it is important to recognize the wide range of permutations of low income residences that are included under the umbrella term “affordable public housing.” The issues that drive the creation of affordable housing (which go far beyond “homelessness,” Star’s specifically targeted demographic) are intrinsically local, yet at the same time they are inescapably national, historical, and at this point in time even global.

In that vein, the need for a solution has been a constant since the end of the 19th century, and individuals from Alfred T. White to Mike and Cristian have taken it upon themselves to develop one. But this process has never been straight-forward; housers are always scrounging for another crumb to make the cookie complete; money is always more inaccessible than accessible.

Generally, at least in the U.S., affordable housing has been steered away from cheap tenements and towards more supportive housing. The crumb-collecting process
that we see with housers like Mike and Cristian is part of a larger picture of affordable housing where individuals, ideology, and money all converge to address the myriad issues surrounding homelessness. Currently in L.A., and broadly across affordable housing, the opportunities for this convergence are limited. When certain types of money are available, housers have to “fill that cup” within the targeted allocation of money, supply determines demand. Policy, to a substantive degree, determines the type of housing that will be available.

While adaptability is important to housers (as Cristian explained) the fact that this adaptability is necessary shows that the production of affordable housing is in inherent tension with the systems of general urban production around them. There is a general principle in political science called “path dependency,” which argues that the longer a policy is in place the harder it will be to change or reverse it; its ideology melds with the larger tapestry around it, engraining itself as the norm. This is precisely the dynamic housers operate within. Certain solutions gain archetypal status and ways of thinking and doing in the field follow.

This is where you will find most housers, trapped between an “imagined future” and what is possible. How then – to revisit – do you change the existing system while working within it? In many ways, the only real answer lies between the lines of the question itself. Change cannot come from outside the system, yet the system itself is designed to be resistant to change; money is available only from the state, an extension of class hierarchy that “is seen as basically beneficial and controllable, assuring security and helping keep undesirables out [of communities]” (Harvey 1989a, 266).
As Harvey alludes, the only foundational progress is made when those with power are made to feel the effects of the issue. This is a dynamic that extends to inscribe social hierarchies into urban space. Just as “path dependency” entrenches ways of operating within policy, capital urbanizes in its own image. Supportive housing works to provide services that actively improve the lives of its tenants. Looking at the downtown L.A. skyline filled with new apartments and condominiums available but at a premium, housing is a clear part of the city. It is also clear that “being housed” is only a promise only insofar as you can afford it.

Harvey considered, this makes sense; when capital urbanizes it does so in service to the lives of the affluent. Gentrification, in this way, is merely the “opening up” of neighborhoods to these lives. West Adams serves as perfect example of how urban space is malleable. Minority exclusion was the norm, until the rich and white moved to the “hipper” neighborhoods like Beverly Hills. In 21st century Los Angeles, however, there is no more room for new roads to be paved towards some undeveloped land of infinite urban possibility (see: Brasilia); instead, gentrification in the city is an exercise in redeveloping, a re-exploration of space’s viability for use by those with power. Gentrification is not the only example of this dynamic, merely one level of its operation; the concept of malleability should always be understood alongside its inverse property, rigidity.

Affluent groups can “command space through spatial mobility and ownership of basic means of production (houses, cars, etc.),” and there appears to be a main catalyst for its use, at least concerning the progression and evolution of affordable housing (1989a, 266). This catalyst exists when the safety that accompanies this
power is threatened; think of the disease pouring out of the tenements into Manhattan that spurred Alfred T. White into action; think of the fact that the first affordable housing subsidies were only possible in the wake of the Great Depression. The system’s failures must touch and threaten the upper classes before the long-suffering working class and urban poor populations are considered.

Yet, on the idea of crisis as a catalyst for change within the urbanization process, Harvey balks. “Objective crisis may be necessary but it is never a sufficient condition for major social transformations… [instead, they] depend upon the rise of some political force capable of stepping into the vacuum of power and doing something truly creative with it” (1989a, 277). Crisis in capitalism exists until the ship is righted, and it continues along its path.
Chapter Two

Architects

This chapter is about form, an examination of the relationship between the architecture of a building and its surroundings, both with regard to the social and spatial dimensions. Housers may be responsible for guiding the money and general ideology, but architects are the ones that translate these into physical and spatial form. Housers gather the clay, but it is the architects are at the pottery wheel.

Architecture, as a discipline, is also an important part of this chapter beyond Star’s specific form and Michael Maltzan Architecture (MMA). It considers itself an insular discipline, one that exists largely in its own theoretical space, “a linear route from problem to solution in instigated, unaffected by external forces” (Till 2009, 14). From an anthropological perspective, that idea is untenable. Nothing is unaffected by external forces. Star demonstrates that architecture is very much in conversation with external forces, reacts to them, is made possible or impossible by them.

This chapter expands upon this dynamic in its application to the form of both the city of L.A. and Star. This assumption of insularity often found within Architecture should replaced with an understanding of its broader context of space and the dynamics of power that help shape it. Till helps drive this very important point home: “how could anything conceived in a vacuum cope with the conditions it has denied were there?” (2009, 19).

Architects are highly influential individuals in the creation of affordable housing, just like Housers. Their domains differ, but they exist symbiotically, not in
adjacent isolation; Star’s architectural form is certainly a conduit for the ideology housers sought to implement, but the process of design and realization of the building was firmly in architect’s domain. This chapter examines the relationship between the architect, Michael Maltzan, Star’s architecture, and the city where the building is located, Los Angeles. At the most basic level, the architect’s role is defining his building’s relationship to the surrounding city. In a densifying, housing-scarce Los Angeles, the city’s capacity to create affordable housing is a difficult one to navigate for an architect: how do you design Skid Row architecture given the increasing inaccessibility of L.A.?

**Maltzan and the Bilbao Effect**

Michael Maltzan moved to Los Angeles in the late 1980s, with undergraduate and graduate degrees in architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design and Harvard, respectively. “My wife, Amy, and I came to L.A. after I finished graduate school,” Maltzan told *Interior Design Magazine* in 2017, “because it seemed to us that it was an exciting moment as a city and as a creative culture. It had a sense of openness and possibility and was an extraordinarily supportive place to try and make things.”

Coming from the East Coast, Maltzan quickly established himself in L.A.’s competitive world of design: He began working for Canadian-American architect Frank Owen Gehry, who, in 2006, the New Yorker said “may be the most famous architect at work today” (Goldberger 2006). Gehry Partners, as his firm is known, is
responsible for one of Los Angeles’ most iconic buildings: downtown’s Walt Disney Concert hall. Clad in stainless steel, the Concert Hall appears as a collection of billowing curves that evoke the sails of a ship snapped taut by a tailwind.

Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, characterized by undulating metal faces similar to those of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, is one of the most well-known buildings in the world and the root of the “Bilbao Effect.” The term was coined to describe Gehry’s remarkable accomplishment of almost singlehandedly reversing the fortunes of the city; “Bilbao has completely changed its image worldwide, with a subsequent positive effect in terms of visitors to the city” (Gomez and Gonzalez 2001).

The Bilbao Effect, which has been described as “a phenomenon whereby cultural investment plus showy architecture is supposed to equal economic uplift for
cities down on their luck”, is not replicable but the idea that it could be was incredibly compelling (Moore 2017). Such is the potential power of “showy” architecture to transform the larger context in which it is located. The Guggenheim Bilbao, and in turn the Bilbao Effect, seemed as close to an urban renewal “silver bullet” as could possibly be conceived.

Later projects looking to imitate what Gehry had done in Bilbao found little success. The sole reliance in architecture’s effects was misguided: “In Spain, in the bubble years, cities became particularly fond of monuments whose appearance outran their content, architectural dumb blondes by Santiago Calatrava or Oscar Niemeyer or Peter Eisenman that looked especially redundant when the [2008 economic] crash came” (Moore 2017). Relatively successful emulations of the Bilbao Effect tried to fit the Gehry archetype to the inch. The committee that selected Daniel Libeskind to build an extension to the Denver Art Museum described him as a “shining star,” a categorization that continues on to “[include] comments like he was “magical” or “lyrical” or “unique”” (Lindsay 2013, 56). Libeskind himself described the project of the “museum as a destination building” (Libeskind 2000, Lindsay 2013, 56).

While the Guggenheim remains Gehry’s most famous and influential work, Maltzan’s former boss (speaking to The Guardian) seemed more embarrassed than convinced of the Bilbao Effect, and he seemed to attribute the perceived impact of the building to the media: “It’s bullshit,” Gehry said. “I blame your journalist brethren for that” (Moore 2017).

What the Guggenheim Bilbao does show (in isolation) is the potential of architecture to transform spatial norms and social perceptions. While calling it a
“magic bullet” may offer more of an empty promise than a pragmatic option to other cities the building’s effect on Bilbao should not be underestimated.

It was during the period that the building was being constructed in 1995 that Maltzan left Gehry Partners to start his own firm, Michael Maltzan Architecture. His firm’s official philosophy – intentional or otherwise – strikes me as very much in step with this idea of transformative possibility:

The work of our practice is dedicated to engaging the public realm, to exploring the complexity and possibility inherent in architecture. It is in this public realm, in the interaction between the built environment and its users, where ideas can find their expression, where virtual relationships can foster actual experiences and change. (Michael Maltzan Architecture)

Embedded in this statement is the idea that architecture is, to at least to some degree, aspirational. And it is within this consideration that it is important to think of the intent behind a building as a force that aspires to effect social change through the design and management of space. It has been argued that architecture tends to fetishize the ability to produce social change at the expense of design that effectively acknowledges its context. Till, an architect and architectural theorist, understands that the discipline can conflate the power of intent with the promise of results. He writes, “It is the apparent stability and the presumed logic of architecture that appeal to the foundational aspects of traditional metaphysics, providing a form of legitimization for the construction of philosophy” (2009, 43).
This all comes back to the folly of Architecture’s assumption of insularity. Till helps us think through the complex relationship between design and its potential social impact. He criticizes the idea that architecture is impermeable to social and ideological forces, that it deals in some pure manner with form. This same assumption is present in the Bilbao Effect and those that would try to replicate it. I do not bring up this argument of Till’s to inherently criticize architecture as a whole or Maltzan specifically, but instead to reemphasize that ideology and design are inherently connected.

Part of architecture’s power comes from this assumption of insulation from ideology and politics, from worldly, mundane concerns, an idea that “legitimizes” the discipline’s own process of decision making on aesthetic grounds. It is this traditionally unacknowledged porosity that can truly connect a building – and the intent behind it – to the systems of society and the urban space around it. In Architecture, says Till, “we need more people who dare to eschew the greats and the specials, and look to the everyday, the social, and the economic as forces that shape architecture” (2009, 19).

This dynamic strikes me as outwardly simple yet inwardly complex. On their face, Till’s words reinforce that architects and the buildings they produce are in a constant and unavoidable dialogue with their site and its surroundings, both spatially and socially.

However, beneath fact of this connection lays complex questions of responsibility. So many fundamental aspects of people’s lives as well as the lives of their communities are dependent on the architect getting everything “right,” from the
building’s overall footprint, to the kinds of social interaction it allows or precludes, to the materials employed and what these symbolize with regard to the community of people a building houses. At the end of the day, all of this falls to the principle architect and their team. That is a heavy and complex responsibility to shoulder.

After all, architecture is not naturally occurring, but created; the practice rests on a hope for success that is always handcuffed to the possibility of failure. The reality is that just as architecture can affect it can, in turn, be affected.

In the context of responsibility within architecture, what Till provides is ultimately an explanation of failure, and his tone can impose an expectation of it. Again, the weight and nuance of this responsibility certainly resonates with me. I can attest to the partnership of ambition and fear, and it is a layer I find important to parse out when thinking critically about architecture.

Even in success, the doubt that accompanies this responsibility is there, fixed to architecture’s contingent nature. After arriving in Bilbao for the opening of the Guggenheim, Gehry said, “I went over the hill and saw it shining there. I thought: What the fuck have I done to these people?” (Moore 2017).

**MMA Around Town**

In 1993, businessman Irwin Jaeger and Bob Bates approached Michael Maltzan with a proposition. They were from Inner-City Arts, an arts-based education program designed for underprivileged L.A. youth, and they wanted Maltzan to design their new headquarters on “a garbage-strewn lot at the edge of Skid Row.” At the
time, Maltzan was working on the design of Walt Disney Concert Hall, but the Inner-City Arts building would become Maltzan’s first solo commission as well as the first official project of Michael Maltzan Architecture.

The building of Inner-City Arts is less than a mile away from Star, its form a collection of small white buildings designed carefully around its educational mission: “A complex of studio spaces clustered around landscaped courtyards,” wrote an architecture critic for the New York Times. “Its sculpted white stucco buildings with raw interiors evoked the lyrical architectural forms of Alvaro Siza\textsuperscript{5} as well as the sculptural compositions of Mr. Gehry’s work, suggesting a young architect easing into his own voice” (Ouroussoff 2010). The reason this project caught the eye of Mike Alvidrez and the SRHT, however, was the attention Maltzan paid to both experience and efficiency. Ouroussoff zeroed in on these qualities when he wrote that “The comforting scale of the gardens and studios, animated light funnelling through big skylights and windows set at the eye level of a small child, imbue these spaces with a warmth that is rare in low-budget construction” (Ouroussoff 2010).

The white stucco forms both The Inner-City Arts building and Star share are a staple of both Maltzan and Los Angeles. His projects take “the generic stuff of a typical L.A. apartment building – a wood frame slathered in white stucco” and apply them to the design task at hand (Hawthorne 2014). In his review one of Maltzan’s apartment buildings, Los Angeles Times architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne

\textsuperscript{5} A Portuguese modernist architect who received the Pritzker Prize in 1992; “like the early Modernists, his shapes, molded by light, have a deceptive simplicity about them; they are honest” (Frearson 2014)
makes an observation that applies to the relationality of Maltzan’s work in general: “It’s not based on the immediate context but on how much of the larger city looks. It’s hypercontextual, built from a kind of super-vernacular” (Hawthorne 2014).

(Baan 2008)

His work is connected to the city and vice versa, intending to embrace the reciprocal relationship between architect and context, precisely the relationship that Till chastises the discipline at large for ignoring. After building the Inner-City Arts center, but before building the Star, Maltzan designed buildings all across Los Angeles, including but not limited to One Santa Fe, an apartment longer than the Empire State Building is tall in Downtown’s gentrifying Arts District; a forthcoming addition to the ArtCenter College of Design in South Pasadena; and a proposed administration building at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (Michael Maltzan Architecture 2018).
While Maltzan has been in practice, L.A. has undergone serious changes in population, density, and real estate. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Southern California (Los Angeles – Long Beach – Anaheim) is the most densely populated urban area in the country, with nearly 7,000 people per square mile. The New York City, Newark, NJ area was fifth with 5,319 people per square mile, while the national average for urbanized areas nationally was 2,534 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Between 2010 and 2015, L.A. added 157,000 new jobs and 238,318 new residents, but housing didn’t keep pace, adding about one new home for every 5.9 new residents (Khouri 2017).

Consequentially, real estate prices have risen dramatically. The real estate market has ballooned in response; in L.A. Country, the median sale price for a home in June of 2017 was $569,000, an all-time high and the 61st consecutive month where prices had increased year-over-year (Chandler 2017).

This housing crisis is crucial to understanding the context within which Maltzan designed Star, and before this chapter turns its attention towards this “hypercontextual” relationship between MMA’s buildings and the city, I want to briefly focus on Maltzan’s own stated relationship to and views, as an architect and citizen, towards L.A.:

I knew at that first moment that Los Angeles condensed all of the challenges and all of the possibilities of the contemporary city and resembled the future of what was to come (Maltzan 2011).
Maltzan’s words, challenge and possibility, speak to the fundamental tension within architecture between the limitlessness of fantasy and the limits of reality. This dynamic of duality is really an acknowledgement of architecture’s natural “contingency”, an understanding that form and context are inexorably interrelated. He is fully aware of architecture’s transformative power and the incredible complexities being asked of an architect in Los Angeles, especially one designing affordable housing. “Extreme scales of activity, development and social intensity are evident in examples of powerful metropolises” he writes, not mincing words, “the same indicators are present in Los Angeles, [and] we are about to tip over, accelerating at an unrelenting pace” (Maltzan 2011).

This is Star’s context, according to Maltzan. As to what, exactly, L.A. is going to “tip over” into, is something this thesis (or Maltzan) does not try to know; the point is that such a change would be irreversible (Maltzan 2011). This portrayal of the city lays out a crisis of densification in broad strokes, and it is a portrayal that I wholly agree with. But again, these are the broad strokes. Star exists in a more immediate context.

Skid Row, Briefly

I remember the first time I went to Skid Row. I was young – about ten or eleven – and my parents drove me downtown to an art gallery to see the collaged creations of one of their friends. I remember my parents telling me to stay close to them as we walked on a sidewalk lined with dozens upon dozens of ragged tarps,
tents, blankets, and homeless individuals. My parent’s pace was brisk and their eyes didn’t wander from the ground before them. I followed suit. As we turned right towards the well-lit street that housed the gallery, I vividly remember a man who passed by us. He looked at me and then at my parents, and in a deep, weathered voice, said, “This ain’t no place for kids.” (While that memory may seem dramatic, I would like to point out that it was written by the brain of a 4th grader.)

(Zeigler 2014)

This small anecdote fits within the larger narrative surrounding Skid Row, a small section of L.A. just south of Downtown roughly mapped as the area between 3rd and 7th Streets (North-South) and Main and Alameda (East-West). It is associated with homelessness and poverty to the point of definition. Travel guides of L.A. usually have some version of the following:
Any traveler who stumbles across Skid Row is likely to feel uncomfortable... There aren’t any signs designating the boundaries of Skid Row, but it’s recognizable by the presence of makeshift homes in the form of tattered tents and cardboard boxes… Skid Row is not far from many popular destinations, including…the Walt Disney Concert Hall, so it’s fairly easy to wander into the area unintentionally… Keep in mind that taking out an expensive phone to call a cab may put you in a more vulnerable position… If you're driving it's advisable not to park around here. (World Nomads 2017)

This reputation did not come about by chance.

In 1975, Los Angeles implemented a policy of “containment” to combat rising levels of homelessness that resulted from the economic recession. Skid Row had long been “the haven of last resort for alcoholics, the unemployable, and disabled people,” but by the mid-70s Skid Row was too unruly, too emblematic of “social ill” for the city not to intervene in some capacity (Holland 2018).

They doubled down on the idea of “containment”. City officials decided that instead of wall-to-wall “slum clearance,” they would instead concentrate “very-low-income housing and homeless services in the 50-block district.” This strategy only compounded the problem. With these services in place, the physical boundaries of Skid Row became enumerated, and the problem continued to be conflated with the solution; Skid Row “became a dumping ground for hospitals, prisons, and other cities to get rid of people with nowhere else to go” (Holland 2018).
By the early 1980s the container began to overfill. When “encampments began to appear under downtown freeway overpasses,” the people of the city – as they drove through its freeways – were confronted visually by the homelessness crisis. Then-Mayor Tom Bradley acquired FEMA trailers intended for Skid Row, but City Council members refused to let the trailers into their districts (Holland 2018).

Mike Davis, in his 1990 sociological history of L.A. *City of Quartz*, describes the containment policy of the 80s as an “urban cold war,” a strategy that “[bred] its own vicious circle of contradiction” since by “containing” the problem in one single spot in the city, it allowed it to grow and even get out of control (1990, 232). Davis writes, “By condensing the mass of the desperate and helpless together in such a small place, and denying adequate housing, official policy has transformed Skid Row into probably the most dangerous ten square blocks in the world” (233).

Regardless of whether these ten blocks truly were singularly the most dangerous in the world, this narrative – not lacking in evidence – was, and still is, how the city saw Skid Row. While attitudes towards the homeless have liberalized, Skid Row is still the city’s homeless capital.

As of 2017, there are about 55,000 homeless individuals in the city of L.A., with 75% of them listed as “Latino” and “African American” (Los Angeles Homeless Authority). Not only is this number increasing at the highest rate of any U.S. city, but if you were to remove Los Angeles from the national homelessness count, it would drop for the first time since the 2008 financial crisis (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development).
The Crossroad City

Facing a weakening image on the eve of the 1986 California gubernatorial race, mayor Bradley needed a public show of face. “Under siege from angry homeowner and environmental groups protesting out-of-control development” and under the growing specter of a housing crisis, Bradley established an independent committee (of business and development executives) to create a grand plan for “strategic” urban growth in Los Angeles. The Committee’s final report, L.A. 2000: A City for the Future, gained ideological traction when published in 1988 and was dubbed by Mike Davis “the manifesto of a ‘new regionalism’.” New regionalism, as Davis describes it, aims to “forge a unity of vision between mega-developers and the haute intelligentsia,” a reconciliation that appears more about justifying systems of power than reworking them (1990, 82).

In historian Kevin Star’s epilogue to L.A. 2000, he “reminds” readers that the last truly “coherent” Los Angeles existed in the 1920s, and that this unity was made then-possible by “a dominant establishment and a dominant population” (LA 2000, 86). Davis discusses this idea in his book: “The report clearly implies that because of the decline of the Anglo herrenvolk – i.e., the absence of a dominant culture group in an increasingly poly-ethnic, poly-centered metropolis – a ‘dominant establishment’ is more essential then ever” (1990, 82).

Since deindustrialization, the “dominant establishment” has less and less resembled this driving force in urban development, and instead adapted in Late Capitalism. Today and since the 1980s, the methodology of the “dominant establishment” has changed, says Harvey, focusing on public-private partnerships that
strongly resemble Davis’ description of new regionalism. This new establishment of public-private partnerships “[focuses] on investment and economic development with the speculative construction of place rather than amelioration of conditions within a particular [urban area] as its immediate political and economic goal”, a dynamic that clearly resembles that same one Till criticizes within architecture. The “speculative construction of place” is like architecture within a vacuum, liable to reproduce conditions of power by denying design the consideration of the larger contingencies that surround it (Harvey 1989b, 8).

In 1988, when *L.A. 2000* was published, it proposed that the future Los Angeles was that of the ‘Crossroad City’. This is the utopian vision of “an extraordinary city of cities, a congregation of livable communities”, where public-private development promises to benefit individual communities while actually “becoming such a focus of public and political attention that they divert concern and even resources from the broader problems that may beset the [area] as a whole (1989b, 8).

Under the pretense of socially comprehensive development, this idea of the Crossroad City is compelling, but the reality is that this development is selective in who it benefits because ultimately, this is a report by and for the (supposedly absent) ‘dominant power’. In this vein, *L.A. 2000* offers no real specifics as to how this blueprint for the city will benefit the poor as well as the already successful. There are a few cheap and superficial social services named, alongside some tepid allusions to the “scale of the task at hand”, but nothing to actually complicate its message of idealistic development (Davis 1990, 82).
This vision of the Crossroad City is crucial to an understanding of Los Angeles as a city torn between two blueprints of urban development; one that sees the L.A. economy as an engine “generating endless growth”, and one grappling with the consequences of this highly selective narrative (Davis 1990, 8).

_The Brickyard at Playa Vista_

The Brickyard at Playa Vista is one of Michael Maltzan’s newest and largest Los Angeles constructions. Playa Vista, or _Silicon Beach_, as it has been renamed by developers, is located in southwest Los Angeles. It is a small community bounded by an elevated bluff to the east (upon which Loyal Marymount University and LAX sit), hip and pricey Venice Beach to the west, lower-class Palms to the north, and the Pacific Ocean to the southwest. The Brickyard itself is surrounded by businesses flush with cash and 21st century prestige.

On the other side of the Maltzan-designed “Central Park at Playa Vista” are the production offices of Fox Sports, a beer-on-tap-in-the-breakroom advertising firm called 72andSunny, and YouTube Space LA, a state-of-the-art production studio for those who vlog professionally. Just a half-mile up Centinela Avenue is a twenty-million-dollar practice facility for the NBA’s Los Angeles Clippers, a team recently bought by billionaire Microsoft CEO Steve Balmer for two billion dollars (Crowe and Vincent 2005, Brown 2014) Only a block west of the Brickyard is Beatrice Avenue, where the immense warehouse-like studio of Maltzan’s old boss and ‘L.A.’s architect,’ Frank Gehry, is located.
Clad in MMA’s trademark white stucco, the Brickyard at Playa Vista appears from the street as a snaking collection of elongated rectangles, held off the ground by pillars that are small and elegant so that the structures almost seem to float. Each window is also rectangular, yet no two adjacent windows are the same size. Instead, as they perforate each side, the pattern seems to undulate as the windows shift from smaller to larger. On MMA’s website, the firm states that “the distinctive building facades made of thin brick with white engobe⁶ finish create a visual gateway into the Playa Vista campus while also serving as an extension of the highly active recreational spaces of the adjacent Central Park at Playa Vista” (“The Brickyard”, MMA). Said recreational spaces include: A soccer pitch, a basketball court, a beach volleyball court, a playground, a native garden, wildlife ponds, and a billowing white Maltzan-designed outdoor stage that faces a field of lush green grass.

(Kerhart 2018)

⁶ A texturing material used in pottery and many stucco buildings.
Just across from these parks are four glass clad office buildings that serve as the exterior set for the fictional Google-parody *Hooli* from the HBO show *Silicon Valley*, a comedy devoted to skewing the titular town and the tech industry it has become known for. In one season 2 scene, the bright orange fence surrounding the Brickyard’s blue basketball court reads, in bold black and dimensional lettering, *Hooli Sport Court*. Visually, the Brickyard fits right in; over the course of the show’s four seasons, *Silicon Valley* has earned three Emmy nominations for production design, winning in 2015.

These developments in Playa Vista are an example of the promise of limitless growth and spatial improvement within the premise of the Crossroad City. As previously mentioned, the reality of the ‘Crossroad City’ is one of increasing inaccessibility.

“Liquid asset poverty” is a term that, as of 2011, applied to 43.5% of American households. The same year, 45.9% of California households lived in liquid asset poverty (Prosperity Now 2011). In a report published by the San Francisco Federal Reserve in 2016 detailing financial inequality in L.A., titled *The Color of Wealth in Los Angeles*, shows an enormous disparity in liquid assets along racial lines. While whites in the city claim a median value for liquid assets of $100,000, Latinos averaged liquid assets of just $7, while Mexicans specifically had a median value of $0. “This not only implies possible financial hardship in the long term,” the

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7 Assets that are easily convertible into cash: checks, savings, stocks, bonds, etc.
report cautions, “but it also makes short-term financial disruption much more likely” (De La Cruz-Viesca et al. 2016, 8).

But why is liquid asset poverty important to this type of development? How does it translate to inaccessibility of space? While crucial to financial stability in the wake of, say, a job loss, liquid assets also represent the opportunity of economic mobility. In other words, cash on hand offers security just as it also offers the opportunity to buy a house, to send your children to college, or to start your own business. Conversely, liquid asset poverty confirms immobility. Liquid assets not only provide the freedom to take financial risks but are an enormous part of what allows areas like Playa Vista to gentrify so rapidly.

Those with the resources have the power to entrench their class spatially, as the Brickyard functions more like a barrier than bridge. Before this wave of construction, the fact that real estate was affordable to the lower and middle classes is what made it desirable to developers. As the value of the area increases, the developer profits and the relative purchasing power of the preexisting community’s liquid assets naturally decreases. “Although the intent of [L.A.] city officials was to create neighborhoods with a more balanced development of small businesses, jobs, and housing, these efforts have led to gentrification, in particular the displacement of lower-income families and small businesses,” reads the Color of Wealth report.

As such, Maltzan’s design of the Brickyard serves the new Playa Vista. The changes in this small beachside area are indicative of processes that have taken occurred in many parts of L.A. through extreme growth and densification over the past two decades. The Brickyard is filled with amenities meant to smoothen day-to-
day life for its upper middle-class residents: recreational areas, ample parking, and an enormous daycare center. Maltzan’s design is unavoidably linked to who he is catering to. To be able to produce spaces like the Brickyard – where working space is organized around the values of convenience and comfort – these spaces must be predicated on consumption.

While architecture has the power to be socially transformative, for economic reasons it consistently produces its opposite, class entrenchment. Architecture tends to be less like a rising tide and more a dammed river, where resources are pooled at the expense of turning downstream. That being said, the Brickyard was not conceived or funded with a large social justice agenda in mind; as for the purpose it serves – to maximize space in terms of amenities and design to turn profits for the developer – it certainly achieves its task.

But for Maltzan, housing, and affordable housing specifically, represents a different kind of design task, one that he, nevertheless, perceives as naturally linked to other types of architecture. Says Maltzan, the concept of affordable housing “manifests an incredible complexity of architectural ideas, touching on social, economic, political, aesthetic, and urban questions. [Our office is] intensely interested in how housing reinforces our other work, as well as how the other work fuels our thinking about housing” (Maltzan 2016, 21). The value in this intersectional approach to housing design is its understanding that architecture cannot and does not exist in isolation.

As density, homelessness, and gentrification increase in Los Angeles, Maltzan insists that “the city’s social and cultural interests are starting to take on a more
collective character” (2016, 22). These words may echo the utopian vision of the Crossroad City, but they also strike me as recognition of L.A.’s fundamental inequalities – rather than a whitewashing of them – as a reality that concerns all residents, the city as a whole. The design of Star is an ambitious attempt to address the tension produced by these inequalities within the urban space of Los Angeles, to create a work of architecture that rejects the simplicity of the Crossroad City for the complications of an increasingly inaccessible reality.

In Maltzan’s words:

From the air, if you squint, the vast carpet of freestanding houses can seem to add up to one big housing project. On the ground, the city’s psychology is still very suburban, very much about the individual. (2016, 21)

**Designing Star**

This section aims to explore the ideological roots and social intent of Star through Michael Maltzan’s discussion of its design, largely from a lecture given at Columbia University. It is clear that for Maltzan the world, as far as architecture is concerned, is not a blank canvas; there are restrictions born of the social and physical environment around them. Design is ultimately the synthesis of a solution; in the case of Star, a prioritization of space and programming to reflect the intent behind this type of housing (PSH). I think back to the Riverside Tenement Yard and the Carl Mackey houses in Philadelphia around the turn of the 20th century, each a part of the
same larger narrative of affordable housing yet both belonging to their own spatial and historical context and surroundings.

While the ideological themes within affordable housing can stretch across eras, as the problem of homelessness continues to exist and challenge urban governments, the individual spaces in which housing projects are developed must engage with the urban present, with the existing world around them. However, this is a dynamic able to be harnessed productively toward the completion of projects, the narrative of particular residential buildings creatively open to the influence of their immediate surroundings.

Star is a balancing act between the practical and the symbolic. Form works both outwardly and inwardly, as the perception of its exterior needs to be considered alongside the amenities of the interior. Expressing the ideals and goals behind the project, Star’s design demonstrates to be both cognizant of and deliberately oppositional to the spatial and social realities of the densifying Los Angeles that surrounds it.

Michael Maltzan fits my stereotype of an architect. When you listen to clips of his lectures, his voice is soft and even, and each sentence seems to be the product of comprehensive internal deliberation. When he appears in photos, posed or otherwise, he is almost always wearing a jet-black crewneck and navy jeans, a minimalist uniform not unlike like Steve Jobs and his turtleneck. His face is pale and his features focused, an embraced baldness affording him the look of an ageless academic.

I wish to begin with Maltzan’s words on Star’s overarching design goal:
[We should] look at density not by importing models from more traditional cities, but to try to invent density, to try to invent a communal living on our own terms. What we are looking for is exactly the right balance, by finding a way to produce great density for the community to allow for the space of the individual but to also provide for opportunities for the building to connect in realistic ways, through retail spaces, through outdoor community functions, through landscape functions that will, I believe, weave the life of this new community more consequentially, more deeply into the ongoing life of the city that surrounds it. (Idenburg 2016, 113)

In this assessment of the potentiality of affordable housing in Los Angeles, Maltzan establishes two important principles for the design of buildings like Star: 1) density is increasing invariably; and 2) homelessness comes with a social stigma that is not easily washed off and whose isolating effects on populations are not easily overcome. Maltzan understands that if affordable housing is going to succeed in (re)integrating the formerly homeless into lives of stability and even prosperity, their space must connect “consequentially” with the established environment around it. These spaces and individuals have been left behind as the Crossroad City “evolved” without them.

L.A.’s spatial inequality – past, present, and future – is the reality within which Maltzan’s work, and by extension Star, must be understood. It is in the context of this totality that the building’s design aims to tackle a deeply complex question: how the homeless can ever be viewed as equal if their housing situation is not?
The old building had a parking lot on top, which wasn’t going to be necessary for us, so we tucked the parking that we needed into the back of the building and maintained two facades of retail use. The existing structure became a podium. The retail clinic of the Los Angeles County health department is among the ground floor tenants moving in. (Maltzan 2016, 65)

(Baan 2014d)

While Maltzan’s description above of Star’s first floor as a “podium” for the residencies and programming is largely a physical one, I was struck by the idea of this as a metaphor. This podium itself – what would become Housing for Health and their offices – functions first as the most basic support, as the physical structure that enables the provider of an invaluable service to a community that is systematically affected by mental and physical health issues.

A December 2017 study by the RAND corporation compared the aggregated costs to Los Angeles county among 890 participants before and after joining Housing
for Health’s program (Palta 2017). The program, RAND’s study concluded, is a success: It “has cut county expenses related to emergency medical services, mental health care, substance abuse, and criminal justice for participants by about 60 percent… [B]alancing that out with the costs of housing and case management services, costs fell about 20 percent overall.” The report even admits that it could have “missed some savings to other departments that also serve the homeless” (Palta 2017).

Applied to the idea of the podium, this success is integral to what I am here positing as the larger reciprocal relationship between architecture and its surrounding environment. In this sense, affordable housing is constantly trying to justify its own existence. This is a role Maltzan understands; Star’s podium endorses what sits atop it, just as a podium bearing the name of a school or organization endorses and imbues credibility to the person speaking from it. Star’s message is one of social awareness, of the crucial importance of physical and social activity for the overall health of the community it houses:

There is a community kitchen, eating area, offices for caseworkers, an art classroom, a general education classroom, and a computer classroom. Outdoors there is a jogging and walking track, half-court basketball, and a gym and yoga deck. All of these larger community functions that we would normally not be able to fit into the building, or what would be outside of the building, are now increasingly being pulled into the building. The hope is that the residents aren’t just connected to social casework or medical functions, but
also to a more expansive range of education and recreation. (Maltzan 2016, 66-67)

Like those (of a larger scale) on display in The Brickyard, this recreational programming is designed to support both individual health and community life. To Star, this function is potentially vital to residents who would not otherwise have access to these types of space; at the Brickyard, they are amenities meant to drive up the developers’ margins in addition to contributing to the residents’ health benefits. However, this comparison is potentially more of a positive endorsement of Star’s mission than the bald disparity between the two may seem. Star’s design supports a mission that goes beyond simply providing highly supportive design: It seeks to normalize it, to extend to less affluent populations what would appear to be luxury amenities as basic spaces for healthy living.

The ultimate goal of Star, Maltzan, and the SRHT, is for this type of affordable housing – one that strives to be supportive (and even “luxurious”) in its design – to have the opportunity to proliferate. However, the building itself must be viable, both financially and socially. By way of Housing for Health, the first floor of Star’s design has shown promise as a repeatable success. The second provides amenities both pragmatic and recreational, the former crucial for social support and rehabilitation, the latter worthy of a Silicon Beach startup. But it is the next four floors, all residences, are where Star’s design does its most important work, bridging economic solutions with detail unusual in affordable housing:

Because the units are built in a factory, the interiors can have a higher level of finish – and these units get a little beat up. By “higher level of finish,” I don’t
mean a fanciness of material, I just mean that the controlled conditions under which the components are put together should have long-term benefits for maintenance costs. The interiors are, again, quite functional. You have the essential ingredients of a full kitchen, a large ADA⁸ bathroom tucked behind that, and then a bedroom. While the components themselves might be fairly perfunctory, from a design perspective, the overall plan is arranged in a way that grants residents a lot of access to light and air. (Maltzan 2016, 67)

All of this residential programming is at a high bar relative to more boilerplate design. Compared to the SROs (Single Room Occupancy; often repurposed hotels) the SRHT was developing in the 90’s, let alone earlier iterations of affordable housing, both a full kitchen and a private bathroom are a definite step up.

Typical of both Maltzan and Los Angeles, the units are wood clad in white stucco. The material is rough and textured, almost like the frozen surface of a pond in heavy rain. It is the “perfect sheath” for the light wood frame houses built to withstand Southern California seismic activity, as well as incredibly low cost: “the marble of suburbia” (de Turenne 2005).

The “access to light and air” and panoramic views they offer residents is atypical of affordable housing in dense urban areas, and Maltzan’s aesthetic style deliberately connects, aesthetically and historically, the architecture and social mission of the building to the city that surrounds it.

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⁸ “Standards for Accessible Design” required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.
Bridging the Gap

As the Los Angeles of the 21st century grapples with densification – and the housing crisis this dynamic has wrought – it’s difficult to see this as an isolated incident. Rapid growth has characterized the city since the turn of the 20th century. In 1890 L.A.’s population was 50,395 (Redner 1990). In 1892, oil is discovered across the city, and by 1897, five hundred oil wells in operation, making L.A. the third-largest oil producing state in America (LA Tourism Board 2018). By 1930, the population was 1,238,048. During World War II L.A. grew at the fastest rate of any U.S. city, becoming a hub of military production and didn’t slow down in the decades to follow, as (mostly latinx) immigrants came to represent more and more of L.A.’s population (Osbourne 2011, LA Tourism Board 2018).

By 1990, the population was at almost three and a half million, over 40% of which were born outside the U.S., but the city itself had long lost its ability to expand indefinitely (Brookings 2003). The economic difficulties of the 1990s “seem to have further separated Los Angelenos by race and income”, and median household income fell at a faster rate than any other major city (2003). Almost two decades later, the city is – in Maltzan’s words – about to “tip over”.

For perpetually stigmatized Skid Row, Star’s form offers its own narrative. Its architecture is both modern and classically of L.A., weaving a vision for the densifying city’s future with its spatial past and present. In this way, aesthetic viability is just as much a factor in the reproduction of Star’s social and spatial ideology as financial or social viability. These two other factors are surely immensely important, the financial mainly under the purview of housers while the social
generally dependent on the residents that live there. But aesthetic viability, a task saddled squarely on the architect’s shoulders, is relational to the dominant powers that have control over space, those for whom the Crossroad City isn’t a fiction and who are deeply invested in maintaining the city’s image.

It is through its sharing of a common architectural aesthetic and logic – exhibited in the Brickyard, Inner-city Arts, and a host of Maltzan’s other projects – that Star is lifted into the visual vernacular of the new, gentrifying, densifying, Los Angeles. Normalization – through context-dependent design that presents financial, social, and aesthetic viability – is a challenge that Star attempts to meet. In this respect, I imagine Star would be foundational rather than exceptional.

Star functions like a bridge between Skid Row and a densifying L.A., one that seeks a connection between the codified narrative of social containment and the city’s vision of its own future. In the way that the Brickyard works for the exclusivity of the Crossroad City, Star pushes the possibility of increasing parity through architecture. In a way, this dynamic is remarkably the inverse of the Bilbao effect. Where Gehry’s twisting and shimmering Guggenheim Museum reversed the image of a city struggling to modernize, Maltzan’s Star is trying to reintegrate an area of social collapse into the city around it, which had long designated it a lost cause. The first shows architecture’s ability to reinvent and reenergize the space around it; the second shows its ability to rejoin and redefine it. Instead of rejecting contingency, Star attempts to harness it.
Chapter Three

Tenants

This chapter is about Star and its inhabitants. It is focused on the people who are housed there, their experiences and perceptions of the building as well as how they themselves are perceived by the city of L.A.. There are several thematic questions at play: How does supportive housing like Star treat individuals and their personhood within the context of rehabilitation? What form does this “personhood” – constructed at least partly through Star’s supportive programming and architecture – take? Lastly, how does an understanding of identity and personhood fit within this thesis’ broader consideration of L.A.’s past and present, architecture, and housers?

This chapter takes these considerations and follows its own line of questioning: What kind of subjects do the builders of Star want its tenants to be? And why? What role do they attribute to the built environment in the formation of these subjects? How do residents’ experiences of the building’s spatial arrangements contribute to this process?

The Moat

Mike and I were in Star’s elevator going up to the top floor. We had been talking for over an hour, and I remark that the notes I was jotting down for myself were becoming less and less useful.
“How did you guys find Maltzan,” I asked him, hoping for some tale of a brilliant pitch or some professional version of a serendipitous “meet-cute.”

“He designed a building about a block away from our office. We passed by it on our way here, actually.”

Mike was referring to the Inner-City Arts building (Maltzan’s first solo project although that was something I wouldn’t learn until months later). “Yeah, I know it,” I answered back automatically.

“My predecessor [at the SRHT], who’s an architect, somehow knew of him, and said [to Maltzan] ‘do you want to do this next project for us?’ These were the Rainbow Apartments. And then he left [SRHT], and I became the ‘big cheese’ while the project was under construction.”

“Oh, so, your time in charge kind of mirrors Maltzan’s in a way,” I say, still looking to crystalize some kind of narrative in my head.

He cut to the chase. “Yeah. It was sort of like, ‘Wow, look at what we can do,’ ya know? ‘Look at what we can do with space,’ to make it more conducive to how people recover from the effects of homelessness.”

Mike paused, and the elevator doors slid open to reveal Star’s roof. The prefab units, which appeared faintly beige from the ground, shone with the light of a crisp bright afternoon sun. Light blue paint, only a couple shades different from the expansive sky above, playfully covered a small number of walls, breaking up any sense of monotony. The grey walkways were girded by metal railings, allowing the levels below to be clearly visible through its thin horizontal bars. As we walked past
the residences, this quality of quasi-transparency felt reassuring, a balance between refuge and community.

While it is easy to gaze narrowly at Maltzan’s design, the view outward, from its rooftop, is – put simply – scenic. Downtown L.A. looms to the north, skyscrapers of glass and metal jut out of the ground. They appear ordered but strangely organic, redwoods in some forest governed by some all-knowing and right-angle-obsessed algorithm. The more contemporary of these forms are adorned with international names like Pricewaterhouse Coopers, AT&T, and Korean Air, and they sit about a mile from Star. The San Gabriel mountains sit motionless behind them, almost like the painted background of a diorama.

(Baan 2014a)
In the mile or so between these towers and Star, the urban topography drops off and reassures the viewer downtown did indeed exist before the skyscrapers of the ’80s and ’90s went up. Older buildings of stone and brick sit alongside modern apartment complexes, the city’s Beaux-Arts and Art-Deco past shoulder to shoulder with the yet-to-be-weathered modernist and other forms of the 20th and 21st centuries. While dwarfed by these two sections of downtown, Star itself seems to rise above its immediate surroundings, a castle separated from the bustle and business atmosphere of downtown by a moat. By Skid Row.

Mike continues talking as my thoughts struggled to keep up with my eyes. “Obviously, we’re aware that this…” he pauses and gestures towards the forest of buildings beyond the moat. “You can see us from all these apartments.”

“There’s a little ring of lower buildings, a low floor around you guys.” I say, my “moat” metaphor still gestating.

“Star was an opportunity to create a two-way conversation [between Star and the city around it], you know, [for people to] see what we are doing for homeless people. Actually, one of the things I was thinking about earlier was that we could put some LED lighting – as in those sort of strings – and computerize it to send messages. Even just our name.”

“You could probably do that fairly easily,” I throw back, picturing Mike perusing Home Depot for lights with which to further advertise Star’s presence and mission in the neighborhood.

“Probably.” Mike sighs. “But we never got around to it.”
The implications of such a sign would be powerful, as much for those looking out from their upscale apartments and mammoth offices as for those looking up from Skid Row. It would be powerful for them to see something that subverts expectations. Homelessness, its causes and its reality, is a somewhat fixed narrative, and, even for “showy and inventive” architecture, the battle is necessarily uphill. Think of the containment policy that welded the homeless of Skid Row to their social and spatial fate. Or of the gentrification waves that have “redefined” neighborhoods while density, housing costs, and homelessness all soar uncontrollably. Without a castle at its center, a moat becomes a pond, a single entity to be looked through rather than at. But the metaphor is weak, because it isn’t a moat. Its Skid Row, a human space that is connected to the city as much as it is separate from it.

Mike and I turn our attention back to the roof, across which a few residents walked to and from their various units. One resident sees Mike and walks over to ask how he’s doing. They have a quick and private conversation, before Mike says something to turn the man’s attention to me.

“How you doin’ man, I’m Dennis. Really nice to meet you,” Dennis says, reaching out his hand. I shake back and say that it’s good to meet him, too. He asks me what I’m doing there, and I try to quickly explain my research project, since he’s in a hurry. “I gotta get going, nice to meet you again. Good luck!” Dennis says as soon as I am done speaking.

Mike shakes the man’s hand again, says that it’s really good to see him, and wishes him luck, too. Mike turns back to me, another talking point already in queue given the obvious way in which the building’s form, particularly in its common areas,
generates encounters of the kind I had just witnessed, a certain casual sociality that enhances the community feel of the otherwise private residences: “So we’ve got these terraces spaced all throughout the building. It doesn’t feel repetitive either, it’s really interesting what you can do with boxes.”

Later that day, Mike and I were sitting up on the terrace of another SRHT project, an extensively renovated SRO a few blocks from Star. We were surrounded by large, square red planters filled with thick bushes, flowers, and billowing palm fronds.

“Our projects are really resident-driven,” Mike says. “Any opportunity we have to put people at the front of their own ‘environmental experience,’ we’ll try to do it. Because it’s empowering.” He pauses before continuing, “But honestly, I don’t like that idea of empowering.”

“Yeah,” I say. “It’s a shitty word. It’s kinda condescending. You know what I mean?”

It appeared we were on the same page. “I remember when I sent my kids to an alternative school, and it was a school where some people had affluence in their lives and [were there were] also some working poor families. The poor families would get this ‘empowerment’ speech at the school, they got this ‘empowerment’ speech for their healthcare, they got this ‘empowerment’ speech for jobs.”

Mike continued, sans diplomacy. “You know, its like, ‘Boy, poor people sure need a lot of ‘empowering’… I don’t know how they keep up with it all.’ And to deal with the constant expectation that they are taking an active role in their
empowerment? They’re just trying to survive, [and] it’s hard trying to just get by. Let’s not dump that on them.”

“Empower this,” he says, raising his middle finger.

I laugh, and we sit up to leave. “Oh, that reminds me,” Mike said. “I had an interview once, [with] this guy from some newspaper in Wisconsin who heard about us and had a bunch of questions about what we do and why. He said, ‘well, what do you [think of] the people that complain that the housing you’re building for homeless people looks a lot better than where they live?”

The question asked of Mike by the radio host offers a look at how the dynamics of external contingency discussed in the first two chapters extends to the streets, to social relations of the everyday. For housers contingency refers to the scarcity and difficulties in assembling the “ingredients” of affordable housing, and it was adaptation to these contingencies that motivated those behind Star to come up with a novel approach. For architects contingency is inherent to the discipline, a spatial and social fact that Maltzan embraces as a challenge to connect Star’s form to its surroundings and to the spatial context of Los Angeles.

For tenants, their experience is contingent on dynamics of social perception and categorization; when the radio host asks, essentially, if Star is too nice for these formerly homeless tenants, it is because Star, as an affordable housing building, subverts expectations of what homelessness should look like. The idea of Star as a subversive force in the realms of affordable housing and architecture was discussed before, but here we are dealing with Star as it relates to the creation of personhood,
exploring how those on the outside of Skid Row see personhood in homelessness in conjunction with how Star aims to transform it.

*Problems out of Place*

The words of Mary Douglas, “dirt is matter out of place,” have been foundational to a wide range of anthropological theory on notions of social pollution and stigma (Douglas 2000, 36). That being said, I wish to focus it quickly and squarely on Skid Row. The landscape of homelessness in Skid Row is central to the perpetuation of the area’s overall narrative, to the area’s stigma. It is filled with the details that are the content of tropes, many of which can be confirmed with even a cursory glance out a car window: tarps, shopping carts, tents, dogs, drugs, blacks, Latinos, and the notion of squandered opportunity; it is also very dirty. “Dirt,” says Douglas, “is a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications” (Douglas 1975, 51).

Descriptions of Skid Row as “dirty,” and as a result the object of stigma, has taken many forms. Systematically denounced, its residents are dehumanized, and portrayed as largely culpable not just for the quality of their own lives but for the existence of Skid Row as a whole. The area is “a cattle pen, an outdoor outhouse, a human calamity” reads a *New York Times* article from 2003, titled “Skid Row Resists an Upgrade” (LeDuff 2003). “It looks like a war zone, with sleeping bags and bedrolls strewn in disarray and bodies asleep where they have fallen, dead to the world” reads a *Los Angeles Times* article from 1990, going on to describe the
“bizarre, foreign-looking quality to these 200-or-so feet of sidewalk crammed with filthy humanity” (Dietrich 1990).

The fixation on the “dirtiness” of Skid Row also works to characterize one of the main problems of homelessness. By associating homelessness with “dirtiness,” however, the problem itself is displaced, becoming misconstrued. Think of Alfred T. White and the tenements in New York, where the “problems” of poverty needed to be seen and felt in order to be acted upon. Across many affordable housing programs, in people’s thinking and in policymaking, the problem is enumerated as A, B, or C, whether it be the spread of disease or crime or the homelessness itself.

The “problem of the problem,” as Jeremy Till cutely puts it in relation to built environments, lies in the tendency of this kind of thinking to perpetuate acceptance of the causes of an issue by focusing on the surface problems: “Problems look determinedly backwards, while agency looks hopefully forward… implying that the best we can expect from the solution is to make the world a slightly less bad place, as opposed to transformative agency which is founded on a mutual aspiration to make the world a better place” (Till 2009, 167).

The policy of containment in the 60s and 70s was not so much a response to the problem of homelessness but instead to the problem of homelessness as it was believed to be spreading throughout Los Angeles. Dirt’s capacity to “smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications” incited an urge to classify, to separate, to control. Containment was, in many ways, a political and spatial realization of this urge. The homelessness in Skid Row was not thought of in terms of
its root causation but was instead itself shaped by downtown development and city policy into something spatially contained and acceptable.

Star maneuvers around this thinking, and the staff understand that the link between the need for affordable housing and this perception of “dirt” boils down to the perception of individuals. Further, Star represents the notion that this perception is something can be reframed and controlled through architecture.

The underlying issue, or “problem,” if you will, is ultimately the perception of individual personhood. Space, whether it be “clean” or “dirty” is perceived to be indicative of those who live within it. While the architecture of Star is fighting a battle of spatial perception, the war is on the ground, in the way we perceive the “other.” In order to change this perception, what Star offers its tenants is the opportunity to cultivate themselves.

_Serving the Self_

The programming of Star, building upon the principles of supportive housing, prescribe a context-driven mode of personhood that one could analyze with the theory developed by Michel Foucault in _Technologies of the Self_. The technologies he writes about entail a regimen of discipline aimed at the cultivation of the self, both the body and interior “soul.” In reference to the production of subjects, Foucault puts it in this way: Technologies of the self are those “operations on [subjects’] own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being” that they interiorize “so as to transform
themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18).

In reference to these technologies, Foucault explains that they deploy collective notions of “good” and “bad,” of deserving subjects or undeserving ones: “We are the inheritors,” he writes in regard to this idea, “of a social morality which seeks the rules for acceptable behavior in relations with others” (1988, 22). As Lawrence and Low explain, Foucault believed that space was fundamental in this process, since “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Lawrence and Low 1990, 485). The technologies of the self produce docile bodies that can be transformed and improved. “The control of space through enclosure and the organization of individuals in space,” Lawrence and Low write about Foucault’s analysis of the relationship between power and space, “are ways that this occurs” (1990, 485).

Looking at Skid Row as a “dirty” space naturally places it into contrast with the “clean” spaces that surround it, as antithetical but also connected to them, by an inherent tension. What I take this to mean is precisely that the personhood of individuals on Skid Row appears to be a threat to a “social morality” that prioritizes one foundational principle of modern subjects: “You have to care about your soul” (1988, 25).

In L.A. and in Skid Row, the visuals of homelessness appear to represent the opposite, immoral souls deserving of bodily and social ostracism. The track marks on their arms, their torn cloths, their unwashed bodies and hair, their words automatically assumed to be nonsensical rants. In Foucauldian terms, these are all the
marks of a corrupted humanity, and their concentration on a particular spot in the city thusly generates anxiety about its containment and confusion about their relationship to the system in their exclusion⁹. Caring for the soul is not a purely internal endeavor; the body in space is something to be built upon, carefully cultivated, and disciplined in conjunction with the soul. Exercise, introspection, control, intellectual exploration; these principles must be demonstrated, put into action.

“The [dominant] culture is soul-oriented, but all the concerns of the body take on a huge importance,” writes Foucault. He traces this preoccupation back in time to the Greeks, to the philosophical beginnings of the West: “In Pliny and Seneca there is great hypochondria. They retreat to a house in the countryside, they have intellectual activities but rural activities as well… [N]ature helps put one in contact with themselves” (1988, 29).

This connection between the body and the quality of the soul, as dual sites of personhood-building, is indicative of three things. First, leisure and retreat in “nature” are necessary for the fruitful cultivation of both; the ability to connect with oneself is predicated on spatial and (anti-)social opportunity. Second, the body – in both appearance and action – as something to be nurtured is seen within the context of the “inherited social reality” of the space and culture that surrounds it. Since the body is connected to this “social reality,” one can infer, in relation to the subject of this thesis, the homeless body (and by proxy the homeless soul), that it is in tension with that “social reality.” Third, all of these aspects of the body-space relationship are linked to

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⁹ For this kind of analysis regarding Vita, a place of social abandonment in Brazil similar to Skid Row, see: (Biehl 2013)
decisions that boil down to “choice”: *Who you are is how and where you choose to spend your time.* For this Foucauldian form of personhood, the ability to choose is a necessity.

Pliny, a pioneer of these humanist principles, which Foucault sees ingrained within Western culture, drew inspiration from the experience of “nature” as a site of introspection, but also from “the villa” – expansive rural residences characterized by gardens and architecture that sought to facilitate the experience of the natural world through “man’s” built or manicured environments. In Pliny’s letters, he stresses four “cardinal characteristics” of the villa’s spatial makeup that imbue it with this transformative ability: “to see and be seen; room to breathe; openness and movement; house and garden” (du Prey 1995). While villas and their forms varied greatly across time and geography, this Plinian description captured the essence behind this kind of Foucauldian personhood.

The construction of spaces that bodies can inhabit ultimately contributes to the cultivation of the subject’s interior. Aligned with Pliny’s vision is the idea of architecture as a political technology through which, Foucault explains, power and control are channeled by means of the spatialization of the everyday (Lawrence and Low 1990, 485) – not to reclassify or reorganize “dirt,” but to transform it, to discipline it, to cleanse it. But it is imperative that you choose to do so.

But – like living on Skid Row – recovery isn’t easy.
Anthony’s Story

“So this is Henry,” Mike says to Anthony, as I stand a few feet away “He’s doing a study about the Star apartments. He wanted to talk to somebody who knows more about this than I do. And I say ‘I know the perfect guy.’”

Anthony laughs. He is black, middle-aged, and works as a Peer Advocate for the SRHT. Before that he was a tenant in one of the Trust’s buildings, and before that he was homeless. Mike continues to joke with him, saying that I had flown all the way out here from Connecticut to see him. They continue to chuckle as I blurt out, “But I grew up around here.” Later in the day, I was told that the other case workers refer to Anthony as Mike’s son. The two of us sit down as Mike leaves.

Anthony turns to me, still chuckling. “So! This is the kit we give every new resident. When you come in off the street, you don’t really have anything, so we like to start ‘em off with a bunch of simple things.” The bag he is holding is filled with a spread of essentials, some of which would not have crossed my mind if I had to assemble one. “We have a pen, laundry detergent, tissues, silverware, bodywash, toothbrush, toothpaste, cleaning supplies, towel, dish towel, laundry soap… you know, we usually use the liquid, but we ordered from a new supplier, and we have this.” It wasn’t lost on me that, perhaps obviously so, most of the contents of the bag are about bodily hygiene.

He holds out an antiquated-looking box of dry detergent. “I don’t know the last time I’ve seen that,” I say, accustomed to dumping liquid detergent into a high-
“Maybe in some old episode of TV or something?” Anthony laughs, and I’m very happy he did.

“How long have you worked here?” I ask.

“I moved into the Abby Apartments in 2009. At that point, I was two years clean and sober, but didn’t no one tell me what it was going be like when I moved in. I had had apartments before, but I had them when my addiction was going, so they turned into a spot, you know,” he says as his eyes widen and his eyebrows rise, making sure that I was with it. “Yeah, a real fucking spot; my friends, they would come and party every day, but eventually I ended up on Skid Row.”

The breezy white L.A. suburb of La Cañada where I grew up and where my friends’ “spots” were, is very different; I think back to its manicured lawns, expansive and well-attended protestant churches, excellent public and private schools, and a Mexican restaurant called “Los Gringos Locos.” Anthony continued, his voice becoming less warm and worn.

“Six years. Six years I was there,” he says, before taking a breath. “And then I went to jail, and that’s where I made the change. Enough was enough, so I finally got out and got on the [SRHT] wait list, and after eleven months I finally got housed at the Abbey [Apartments]. And I was like, ‘Ok, cool. Now I’m fine. I can just get my check and watch Maury Povich and Jerry Springer.’ My main thing was that I wanted to stay clean and get housed, and things were good. But then my mental illness

10 “The Crazy White People”; a roaming “guacamole bar” is popular among the restaurant’s titular demographic.
showed up. When I was high you know, I would see a bunch of weird stuff and think ‘this is some good shit,’ but turns out it wasn’t the drugs!”

He delivers the punchline expertly, and we both laugh.

“Two years clean and sober, these hallucinations were just… I would see Bigfoot, but it would be a silhouette. I never seen details. It was like, [it was] in the house with me.”

“That sounds like a fucking horror movie,” I say.

“And I was diagnosed with PTSD. I used to think you needed to go to war be diagnosed with that.”

The Abbey, like Star, is permanent supportive housing run by the SRHT. It was built in 2009, and includes a “suite of social services” like a medical clinic, substance abuse recovery programs, case management, and resources to help tenants receive public benefits (Vaillancourt 2009). As Anthony’s experience shows, healthcare resources are crucial to rehabilitation. Not only can addiction keep you on the street by eating through any and all of someone’s liquid assets (cash), but those with mental health issues and/or substance abuse issues are “particularly vulnerable” to becoming homeless (SAMHSA 2017).

Having all of these resources under one roof and woven into the fabric of affordable housing safeguards against the “temptations of Skid Row” through immediate accessibility and a system of support that attempts to understand the dangerous reality of living on the street and the damage it can do to mental and physical health.
Outside the lobby, on the street between Star and C3, an ambulance and several LAPD cars started to drive away. I remember hearing these sirens earlier. Anthony sees my quick shift in attention.

“Someone got stabbed. Two dudes were fighting, and one guy stabbed the other like three or four times, and he took off running. The other guy, stabbed, went inside the DHS [C3] building, and that’s where they were treating him. In my addiction, seeing things like that – shootings and stabbings – that’s where my trauma comes from. Depression, man, it’s horrible. I thought it was just a mood, instead of a thing that’s always there with you. I don’t know if it’s worse than my addiction, but it ranks up there. I just want to lay on the couch and watch my Maury and Jerry, but depression won’t even let me turn on the TV. I wish I had [had] someone in my position – a peer advocate.”

The SRHT website explains what Anthony meant here:

Trained in psycho-social education techniques, Peer Advocates are current Trust residents that have experienced homelessness and are successfully housed. Having gone through the transition themselves, Peer Advocates offer mentorship and guidance to new residents based on firsthand experience. They help new residents connect to the wider community… A supportive community is critical for leading healthy and full life. (SRHT 2017)

“My job is to help new people who have come off the street, tell ‘em to stay away from loan sharks, stay away from the drug dealers, because all that still exists right outside. Just because you’re clean and sober doesn’t mean they quit doin’ what
they’re doin’. The reality still keeps goin’ on. But now I go to AA, I see a psychiatrist, and when I have hallucinations, they’re like the size of a roach.”

I cringe.

“No!” Anthony says, “remember they were the size of Bigfoot before. So I’m feeling good about that. I gained a lot of coping skills. When I was on the street, in my addiction, people used to come up to me and try to stop me and try and preach to me, and be like ‘this is what you need.’ But I’m just listening because every time they’d finish, I would go ‘you got five dollars?’” He laughs. “Because that’s the only reason I’m letting you stand here and preach to me.”

“Now, with housing first – where housing is a right – I know that people aren’t ready until they’re ready. I seen a guy who had heart surgery on Saturday, comes home Sunday, and on Monday asks me to get him some dope. He could barely stand up, and he pulled his chair to his front door and was asking people to buy him dope, saying ‘I got the money right here’. You’d think that would be ‘enough,’ but it wasn’t enough for him. I know a girl, pregnant, down at the hospital, who went to the bathroom and get high before labor. For her, that wasn’t enough. When I was getting high, sometimes I didn’t even want to. But I would walk to the dealer, crying. It was no longer my choice of what I did.”

Choice: What Anthony was saying to me reinforced Mike’s statement that the purpose of Star (and permanent supportive housing) is to “put people at the front of

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their own environmental experience.” The ability to choose, to realize that he could choose, and to have the support to make choices over the spatial and social aspects of his life is one rarely afforded to the homeless on Skid Row, and one emphasized in Star’s programming and design.

I’ll let Mike elaborate: “You can use the environment in this building the way you choose, whether it’s sitting over there and having a conversation or it’s being in the art room or it’s doing the walking track, the exercise, the garden, the healthy food, the classes, the yoga, whatever it may be, you can make those choices. It’s an attempt to kind of democratize the experience [or healthy and creative living] in some way... but also it’s something we take for granted: Choice. They don’t have the opportunities to have a choice. Generally, our observation has been that when homeless people are
allowed to make choices, usually they make better choices than the systems that make choices for them.”

Living on the streets damages people, but Star offers support in the form of spatial and social programming that considers the difficulties of adjustment because, even though moving into Star is a clear upgrade, the transition and adaptation to their new environment is challenging. With the emphasis on choice, Star tries to understand who the new residents are as people and what they’ve been through. The ability to choose is imbued with agency and, yes, empowerment by giving them the resources to separate themselves from the perception of Skid Row and to deal with and begin to heal from the damaging conditions of living on the street.

For all of the importance and the benefits of choice, it is of course, not a switch that can be flipped. It needs to be cultivated, often slowly. Again, Anthony:

“When I came in from the streets I didn’t trust nobody. Nobody. My mental illness had me paranoid against everybody. When I was out there getting high, I was comfortable on the streets. I wasn’t worried about nobody stabbing me or shooting me; ‘these are my people!’ But those last two years, being homeless and being sober, everybody was out to get me. I would just react, I didn’t care.”

“When people come in to check in for the waitlist, they just came out of a piss-soaked tent, having smoked all their money last night. You can’t give them attitude because they are there, where I was. But you have to tell them the waitlist is closed. You have to come back. No matter how much they cuss you out or call you
names, you don’t take it personal, because it ain’t about you. People are here for different reasons.”

_The Second Floor_

Our table is on Star’s second floor. To our left, half-bathed in sun, is a garden composed of rows and rows of concrete troughs from which a whole array of fruits and vegetables are in various stages of growth. A thin jogging path runs by us in a slow curve that gently weaves around the building. The yoga studio and ceramics studios are behind me. Mike is talking about the experience of being homeless, not necessarily the day-to-day perils but what he sees as a problem of dignity and dignity denied:

“One of the things that homeless people don’t experience and one of the things we take for granted, is that the [social services] system is pretty hostile and is not pleasant in ways we would expect it to be. It treats them pretty shamelessly. If you go to the welfare office or even prisons, the design is pretty utilitarian,” he says, referencing how these designs aim to meet the most minimal of standards, to “dispense” and “contain” respectively. Within these utilitarian designs is a distinct lack of choice, only an intense focus on maximizing the function of the space with little regard for the experience within it.

“The way we started to think about design is that it is a language that sends a message and communicates intention. Go in the welfare office and sit down for 30 minutes, and it sucks. They’re telling me I’m not good, they don’t really care.”
“We really began to think about how we can organize space in a way which prompts a feeling of pride or aspiration, self-affirmation, as a way to say we really do care about you as a human being, [about] your human dignity. We want to create spaces to live in the human environment that really impart self-respect and thoughtfulness out of a respect to your humanity. What we’ve found is, if you think really hard about how to uplift people from their previous experience into a different way of thinking about themselves or the world, that you can really do some quite amazing stuff. You can actually see it happen in the way it helps transform people’s lives.”

As Mike talks, a tenant jogs by on the track. He’s latino, is wearing glossy red athletic shorts, a white t-shirt, and has a portable radio hanging from a lanyard around his neck. Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” plays loudly.

“What about Star is designed to do that, to make a space that is ‘dignified’?” I ask, telegraphing the desired answer as my eyes follow the jogger around the second floor’s southern corner.

“So, what you have on this second floor deck – obviously you have the gardens, the healthy cooking classes every week, learning about the nutrition of the plants and problems like diabetes and high blood pressure and so forth. Living on the street ain’t healthy,” he laughs. “Whatever you eat is probably not good for you. We also have Yoga, we have a social enterprise art group, Piece by Piece, and the running track, acupuncture, [and] healthy smoothies in the morning. All this stuff is to encourage people to be in charge of their own health and wellness going forward.”
The idea of cultivating – transforming, choosing for – (one)self as a routine rings precisely of Foucault’s “technologies of the self.” And the belief that this ritual crafting of the self breeds success is inscribed beyond the Star in the urban landscape in the abundance of SoulCycles, juice bars, and the artisanal shops that pepper many a gentrified neighborhood. It is in Business Insider articles titled “How 19 highly successful people stay in shape,” which detail how “Mark Cuban gets at least an hour of cardio per day, “Hillary Clinton is a devout Yogi,” and “Virgin Group founder Richard Branson gets four additional hours of productivity every day by working out” (Gillett 2016). Cultivation, healthy living, productivity, and success are themes that come up over and over. Star’s designers and administrators understand that the kind of programming that is visible all across the second floor offers the possibility for transformation and reintegration, so to speak. However, Star’s social mission – and its spatial execution – will always be a complicated task.

“When you’re homeless, you only exist in public,” I say to Mike, adding, “I think that was a poorly paraphrased line from Maltzan on my part.”

Mike lights up, not with excitement but understanding. “You’re in a public space, but you’re ignored. I’ve heard of people living on the side of the road with all of their stuff, and how irritated people get when they walk by, like they should have the right to use all of the sidewalk.”

“For our purposes we wanted to create spaces that were most conducive to making people able to overcome their issues. It’s amazing the kind of things people have experienced in their lives starting often at teen years; living on the street, drugs, prostitution, and the fact that people actually recover from these conditions in a way
that they can participate productively in the community. With us, [we are] trying to understand how to help someone make [this] transition to housing.”

For all the attention and resources Star puts on these supportive principles, the frictions and the dialogue – those between the stigmatized and the rest of the city – never seem far from Mike’s mind.

Coming back to the question asked by the reporter from Wisconsin – What do you say to those who complain that Star is nicer than where they live? – it is clear that this tension relies on notions of personhood and identity and the related sense of entitlement that comes from having earned privileges. It also alludes to the broader framework of perception that these notions exist within, where forms of personhood are evaluated through a Foucauldian lens, with the body and soul as dual sites of cultivation and disciplining.

Space itself – either “dirty” or “clean” – acts as an indicator within the perception of the exterior; the tents, tarps, and drugs of Skid Row are seen as reflections of the personhood of homeless subjects, their situation the result of their individual choices and lack of discipline, and thus, to an extent, deserving of their surroundings.

To further understand how these dynamics of space and individual perception work together as a system of power, I turn to Foucault’s definition of “biopower.” Notions of “sovereign” power operate through the threat of force, like that of a king with the power to “take life or let live” with his sword (Foucault 1990, 138). This power is explicit, its control over individual lives predicated on direct action, whereas
biopower refers to control that has been institutionalized, absorbed into society and thus decentralized (Taylor 2011, 42). Biopower is “working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than being dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them [like sovereign power]” (Foucault 1990, 136).

Looking at how my perception of Skid Row as a “dirty” space affects the lives of the homeless, we can view it as an example of biopower. Each of these individual “forces” – from the stigmatization of space to the resulting moral scaling of personhood – combine to form a large-scale system of biopower. A system that decides whether “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death,” one that prioritizes lives within space implicitly.

Star, with its eye-catching MMA design, and the yoga, garden, running track (and so on) within it, aims to reject this system of biopower by attempting to connect tenants with their context socially. Just as Star’s architecture understands that spatial dialogue with its context can promote the ideology of permanent supportive housing, Star sees the importance of experience and perception in the formation (or rehabilitation) of personhood in its tenants. But by giving them access to means of cultivation that reflect societal norms, Star’s ideology is biopower in and of itself.

Through the cultivation of Foucauldian personhood, tenants can gain standing in this system of power, naturally predicated toward the otherization of the homeless. This dynamic is a crucial part of Star’s mission to provide housing and services to the formerly homeless but also represents the building’s and the project’s larger symbolic
message regarding their vision of what biopower in a densifying L.A. should look like.

Mike clearly lays out the potential power of this dialogue, of this vision:
“[Star] really begs the question ‘oh wait, those buildings are really for homeless people? Watching those two things fit together it prompts a conversation that becomes a part of an educational process as a momentum has grown due to the huge number of homeless people in Los Angeles and the need to create resources to deal with homelessness. I think you always need the proof [that] this is what the solution looks like.”

Star as a solution (or, more theoretically, as a revisionist take on biopower forces in L.A.) is an important concept in this thesis, but the role of the constitution of personhood in the context of the propagation of Star’s ideology is something I have yet to address. This is an important issue, because it concerns the implementation of the lessons of Star, toured frequently to this end:

“We’ve had people from all over the city, county, state, other states, other countries, that come to see this building in part because of the modular prefab and in part because of the idea to create this kind of community that's available to people outside the boundaries of the building in some capacity. [This connects to] other ways to think about how we house high utilizers and what kind of amenities help them regain a footing in their own lives.”

All of these different aspects of Star are important to Mike and to the aggregate biopower of Star’s ideology. Mike hopes that other would-be housers
understand the importance of each: prefab as a cost-effective design move, the balance of social space and private space, the ingenuity of the architecture, as well as, of course, the comprehensive support for the tenants based on a model of cultivation and self-care. At the same time that Star’s transformative power relies on all of these elements together it works with and through the larger urban context to alter dominant perceptions of homelessness and its solutions.

Individuals, be it housers, architects, or tenants, are a recurring theme in this thesis’ understanding of Star. Mike hopes the individuals who attempt to continue this mission, in L.A. or elsewhere, understand the nuances as well as the broad strokes of his vision. Something Mike said something offhand that has stuck with me as I think about the use of Star as a solution: “This building, I mean, I feel like we do more tours here than Universal Studios.”

**Star on Tour**

Amabella is tall, skinny, and white. Her blonde hair is done up a bun, every inch coordinated and taut. She was wearing a black button-up shirt, jeans, and a jade green scarf draped in a loose ring around her neck. Her jewelry was legion; each wrist supporting a half-dozen bracelets (both beaded and solid) while a necklace of interlocking silver and gold rings appeared in flashes throughout her scarf, like sections of a snake visible through grass. Amabella is standing with two of her colleagues and a SRHT employee, who waves to Mike. He and I have just returned from visiting a couple of the Trust’s other sites in the blocks around Star.
“How are you all doing?” Mike says as he approaches. I follow behind him.

“Giving our friends here a tour,” answers the employee.

“A tour? Sounds like fun,” says Mike. I nod in agreement, and Amabella’s head swivels towards me. She introduces herself, and asks how I am.

“It’s a nice day out, so I’m great. I’m also on a tour,” I offer.

“What’s your story?” Amabella says intently.

“I’m a senior in college, and I’m writing my thesis about the trust and this building,” I say, at that point being honestly unable to offer much more detail.

“Oh wow. That’s awesome,” she says, asking what school I come from.

“Wesleyan? Yeah I know it.” I tell her a little bit more about my experience with anthropology and architecture, to which she says, “that’s so truly wonderful”.

Mike, who had endured enough of this little exchange, interjected, “So, who are you guys?” with a gentle matter-of-factness that I have come to truly envy.

Amabella smiled and gently clasped her hands together, bracelets a-jingle.

“I’m from Colorado, and I am doing a lot of work with homelessness, and I was really interested by Star, really interested in trying to house the people at the moment – to see if we can increase the [economic viability of] PSH but also focus on people missing from the public eye. That’s really my mission right now. There are no champions, so I’m thinking that’s maybe a job for me. I have a consulting practice with my husband.”
“Anyways,” she says, looking deep into my eyes. “I feel like we can leverage anthropology, the understanding of humans, with good design and all the other authorities like business approval, housing law, and then come at this with a development mindset. There are opportunities for us to create a unifiable message.”

At this point, the problem of “distance” within the perception and formulation of solutions to homelessness becomes evident. Amabella, like Mike, Cristian, Alfred T. White, Bauer, Stonorov, Maltzan, and myself, are fundamentally removed from the experience of homelessness, yet we are the ones with (varying degrees of) influence over how homelessness is seen and addressed. The transformational ideology within Star operates through biopower, which exerts its influence more through norms than through laws, internalized by societies throughout culture and forms of spatialization (Taylor 2011, 43, Lawrence and Low 1990). What this power means in relation to building affordable housing is that one does not necessarily need to know anything about homelessness except that it makes individuals unproductive, wasteful with their lives and that they make the city “dirty.”

When approaching Star with this understanding, it suddenly appears to become reduced to a product that “transforms” homelessness into an acceptable form of personhood. There is often a celebratory tone taken with Star that can reinforce this limited conceptualization.

But, in many ways, that this is a dominant perception of Star is inescapable to some degree. It certainly is for me. Whatever privilege I am attributing to Amabella is certainly attributable to me as well. Of course, there is a feeling of connection when I talked with Anthony, but when the Foucauldian typography of personhood is seen as
cultivated within an arena of biopower in this era of what Harvey describes as “flexible accumulation,” the agency within Anthony’s experience is neutered; the freedom that should accompany the power of “choice” now hindered by expectation (Harvey 1989a). Abstraction is made easy by the distance biopower affords those with the ability to exercise it; inversely, cultivating individual personhood could be said to be the main sphere of agency within the system.

The ideology contained within Star, and its materialization in transitively permanent supportive housing, attempt to humanize – to individualize – those who are systematically otherized, who collectively “complicate accepted classification” by virtue of being “dirty.” As such, they are brought back to the side of productive citizens and subjects. While the idea of choice is fundamental to this self-formation, it is a concept that must be reconciled with the idea of architecture as a key element in the “technologies of the self.” Making the individual through a development of a healthy and introspective “self” is ultimately an attempt to shed stigmatization in a way that aligns with a narrative controlled by established power and internalized by all of us subjects.

Much of the praise for Star – from its place on TIME’s top inventions of 2015 to Amabella’s words on her tour – call it revolutionary. While it is progressive as far as affordable housing goes, it cannot but be so within the logic of the larger system of biopower in which it exists and in which it becomes a successful initiative. It cannot but be so also within the logic of the production of space in this phase of capitalism, dependent as it is on the existence of consumption spaces, public-private partnerships, and the elimination of “undesirable” spaces (2005, 1989a). There is certainly triumph
in Star’s design, in the agency and ability it offers Anthony and other Skid Row
residents to change, overcome enormous challenges, and achieve some control over
their lives. Star certainly attempts to subvert expectations, but it should never be
overlooked that as it stares back at L.A., it seeks acceptance as much as it does
revolution.
“When you’re walking down the street, you don’t necessarily think about how our built environment is designed or not designed,” Mike says to me. “You know, I’m reminded of a Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart I think it was, who famously said about a pornography case: ‘I’ll know it when I see it.’ In many ways, I have taken a liberal paraphrasing of that comment, been trying it out… Good design is like pornography. You know it when you see it.”

Just as Mike finishes his comment, a tenant walks up to us. He’s black, has greying hair, and walks with a limp. He waves to us and asks how we are doing. When he speaks, his words come out slowly.

“We’re doing okay,” replies Mike, jovially.

“Can I join you?” asks the tenant, his tone seeming to expect a ‘No.’

Mike nods while adjusting his sunglasses. “Pull up a chair!”

The tenant lifted the chair away from the small outdoor table and sat down.

Mike points towards the blue sky. “Nice day, right?” he says, and the tenant and I both agree. Mike turns back to me, picking up our conversation. “So anyways, I think implicit in that statement is that [design] is not something you think about a lot, until you’re confronted with it right? Look down Spring Street, at all these historic buildings—”
The tenant shuffles in his seat, before jumping in. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I got a story.”

“What’s that?” Mike quickly replies.

“A story, but it’s none of your business,” he replies, and Mike stutters for a second, trying to read where this conversation is headed. The tenant continued: “There is a lot of historic stuff around here. All this stuff been around for centuries.”

“Yeah,” agreed Mike.

“I didn’t mean to bother you,” the tenant says apologetically.

Quickly, Mike and I both say some version of “No, no, of course not.”

The tenant looks at Mike and me. “Now, I know you both are older, so you know a little something,” he says before turning his eyes back to the street, adding “all of this, this history, it’s beautiful man. I remember hearing about [the] old Western days, as if that started to exist just then. No, it always will be and always was.” He pauses, and Mike turns back to me, about to pick up our conversation.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” says the tenant, again. He takes another pause. “Do you think there are little ghosts around here? Do you believe that there are spirits in these buildings?”

“You know,” replies Mike, “I’ve heard people say that.”

“Because I heard this was built over a cemetery. Maybe in the Western days.” Perhaps sensing some skepticism, he added: “You weren’t here, you don’t know. I
know some people who have experienced some things.” He lights a cigarette, and quietly says, again, “History is crazy.”

“Well, can’t argue with that,” Mike says, before turning to me. “We should get going.” We each shook the tenant’s hand, and walked back down to the street, to the spot where Mike’s car was parked. He dropped me off where my own car was, and I hopped on the 101 North, away from Skid Row.

This might be a strange anecdote with which to end this thesis, but this brief and maybe trivial interaction stayed with me. Thinking back at what originally motivated my thesis project, this exchange struck me as some kind of skeleton key that could provide theoretical enlightenment through a neat little analogy. The words history is beautiful, history is crazy lingered in my mind like they could unlock some larger understanding of Star. But the idea that history is any one thing implies that history itself is something that stands outside cultural perception, and one’s understanding is only dependent on access to this knowledge. And perhaps this highly structuralist theorizing is partly true, but looking at that conversation, history appears to be a matter of perception, its truth dependent on the position from where one regards its unfolding.

When Mike looked down at Spring Street, he saw historic buildings of 20th century L.A., his attention turned to the built environment. For a houser, this focus on the spatial and material structures makes sense. An architect may see the street similarly, with a critical eye for form. This thesis was about a student of anthropology looking at both as these are influenced by ideological, economic, socio-cultural factors. The tenant, though, saw ghosts. When he thought of Spring Street and the
“historical buildings” down below us, he pictured a graveyard underneath it all. (Even if this was not accurate to this exact block, Skid Row, just a few blocks south, would do just fine.) This tenant seemed to be more aware than we were of the settler past of Los Angeles, now haunted by its histories of dispossession. All of these perspectives on the same street carry each their own legitimate claim to interpretation.

Past these individual differences, space itself can be selective about history. Thinking back to the idea of political economy and Harvey’s idea of “flexible accumulation”, spaces choose what history to value or preserve. When individuals or groups dominate the “organization and production of space,” the lower class have control taken away from them, “find themselves for the most part trapped in space” (Harvey 1989a, 264-265). In this same manner, what history is preserved or discarded is a product of these same structures of organization and production. This idea of selective history as a political and spatial act has roots throughout this thesis.

Mike’s proposition that good design is intuitive – “like pornography, you’ll know it when you see it” – seems to rely on the assumption that architecture exists in a bubble, understood in and of its form rather than seen as situated within its spatial and social context. Looking at design this way is necessarily selective, not just in how contingency is disregarded, but in how the forces that shape the production of this form are themselves ignored. These forces within affordable housing – money, ideology, and individuals – are necessarily a part of the systems of organization and production that Harvey outlines in “flexible accumulation”. To say that design exists on its own is to deny the validity of these forces, and in turn, the history within them.
Harvey’s emphasis on consumption as the way capital becomes urbanized is another dynamic that breeds historical selectivity. Think about how flexible accumulation relies so much on the commodification of space in its production of it; in housing, there is a strong focus on amenities in new condos, apartments, or even spaces like the Brickyards at Playa Vista. As neighborhoods gentrify, these spaces themselves are redeveloped with this amenity-rich housing, plus other economically exclusionary spaces of consumption (retail, restaurants, etc). The histories that are preserved within these spaces must be palatable, consumable, and commodifiable.

Even at the level of Foucauldian personhood, the dynamic of selective history is at play. When people say “star is too nice” is precisely because its amenities should be a luxury, not a free service. What integrated supportive housing aims for is modeled on the bourgeois, productive, and healthy individual. History has to be malleable to support this perception, continued production depends on it. The history of Skid Row as one of dispossession – as a “graveyard” – does not fit palatably within this selective understanding.

Thinking personally about L.A., this idea of selectivity even speaks to me on a spatial level. I’m not the first to make this point, but it is easy to skip through L.A. by car, using freeways to glide past neighborhoods until you get where you want to go, like fast-forwarding through a scene in a movie. When thinking of the city its easy look past the spaces between those you spend your time in. The built environment around you is aligning with a history that is either selective or honest, layer after layer.
In this light, maybe history is something crazy and something beautiful.

Maybe Star is too.
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