

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT  
SPONSORED BY**CONVICTION**  
Watch The Trailer

February 21, 2010

## Designed to Help Uplift the Poor

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)

LOS ANGELES

LIKE almost every other American architect who came to prominence in the recent gilded age, Michael Maltzan built his reputation with commissions for prestigious museums and luxurious private houses. In 2002 he garnered national attention for his graceful design for the temporary Museum of Modern Art in Queens. His most recent projects include a flying-saucer-like house for the artists Lari Pittman and Roy Dowell in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains and a far grander, 28,000-square-foot Beverly Hills mansion — part art gallery, part home — for the investor and former Hollywood über-agent [Michael Ovitz](#).

Yet Mr. Maltzan may be the only American architect of his stature with significant experience in a far less glamorous field: providing shelter and other accommodations for his city's poor. Over the past 16 years he has worked on several housing projects for the homeless and an arts complex for underprivileged children that are remarkable for their architectural sophistication and their spirit of public service.

His newest building, the Carver Apartments, a drum-shaped residential complex, strikes a tricky balance between two fundamental and often conflicting needs of the chronically homeless, for a sense of being protected, on the one hand, and regular human contact on the other. His next project, an elegant composition of prefabricated blocks that is still in the design phase, could make that nuanced approach available to many more people. Together these designs deliver a major blow to the conventional notion of contemporary architecture as little more than an indulgence of the rich or highly cultured.

Mr. Maltzan stumbled into the role of socially conscious architect. He arrived in Los Angeles in 1988 and was soon working for [Frank Gehry](#), then still a cult figure for young architects looking for a way out of the malaise of postmodernism. In 1993, while at work on the early stages of the Walt Disney Concert Hall design, Mr. Maltzan was approached by Irwin Jaeger, a businessman, and Bob Bates, an artist, to look at a garbage-strewn lot at the edge of Skid Row where they were planning to build a home for Inner City Arts, an after-school program.

The project became Mr. Maltzan's first solo commission. A complex of studio spaces clustered around landscaped courtyards, its sculptured white stucco buildings and raw interiors evoked the lyrical architectural forms of Alvaro Siza as well as the sculptural compositions of Mr. Gehry's work, suggesting a young architect easing into his own voice.

It also demonstrated an unusual sensitivity for those who taught and worked there. The comforting scale of the gardens and studios, animated by light funneling 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.

The project attracted the attention of the Skid Row Housing Trust, an organization dedicated to providing permanent

homes for the most vulnerable members of the downtown homeless population — people with a combination of disabling conditions like drug addictions, mental illnesses and physical disabilities who had drifted in and out of shelters for years.

Mr. Maltzan's first building for the trust, the Rainbow apartment complex, is surrounded by Skid Row's sprawling encampments. To shelter the tenants from the nearby misery, Mr. Maltzan oriented its 87 apartments around a big ceremonial staircase and an outdoor courtyard. From a shared top-floor terrace, tenants look over toward the glittering towers of the business district a few blocks away, which in this neighborhood can sometimes seem an unreachable oasis of prosperity and calm. The project, completed in 2006, offered a sharp contrast to the soul-crushing atmosphere of more typical homeless shelters, from which many of its tenants had been plucked.

"People who are in the shelter-shuttle, going from one to another, are relatively anonymous," said Mike Alvidrez, the housing trust's director. "And in an old-fashioned S.R.O., you're sealed off from the outside and each other. Rainbow spawned this whole interaction between people who didn't know one another.

"You never know what form it's going to take," he added. The kitchen opens onto the courtyard, for example, which promotes outdoor gatherings; the courtyard's planters spawned a gardening club; the community room gave rise to [yoga](#) classes and other activities. There are now 15 to 20 clubs operating in the complex.

By the time Mr. Alvidrez hired Mr. Maltzan to design the Carver Apartments, a 97-unit building on a corner about a mile away, the group's architectural ambitions had grown in scope.

"Rainbow triggered a lot of ideas," Mr. Alvidrez said. "What we started to learn is how the design can help people get stabilized as a community. For us the building became part of the recovery."

The Carver Apartments were designed to serve the same population as Rainbow, but the context of the new building raises distinct challenges. It stands in the middle of a neighborhood of dilapidated warehouses and empty lots, with an elevated section of the 10 Freeway pressing up against it to the south. On a recent weekday morning the only sign of life on the ground was a homeless man silently setting down his shoes just outside his tent underneath a freeway on-ramp.

At first glance the building seems to hold itself somewhat aloof from this setting. Its crisp white cylindrical exterior is broken into a series of saw-tooth-like vertical ridges. A pattern of narrow horizontal and vertical windows, designed to keep out the noise and exhaust fumes, contributes to its slightly defensive air.

As Mr. Maltzan explained the first time we toured the site: "One of the first things people do when they live on the street is put up walls around themselves to try to create some feeling of safety. You need to provide those walls before you can start to open things back up."

He brings the same level of architectural intelligence to those walls that he does to the design of a mogul's house. The building's curved facade, for example, mirrors the curve of the freeway on-ramp, so that as you approach along one of the two streets that border it, the curves seem to converge, creating a sense of acceleration and pulling you around to the front of the building. When you reach the main entrance, the momentum slows, and the scene becomes more peaceful. The faceted concrete box of the lobby pushes out toward the sidewalk as if to invite you inside.

The anticipation builds once again as you move toward the building's central courtyard, a dreamy cylindrical space that is dominated by a grand staircase. A ring of sheet-metal fins climb the full height of the space, accentuating its vertical thrust, and your eye intuitively follows them up past several rows of balconies to a perfect circle of California sky.

The sense of compression brings to mind the “social condensers” created by Soviet avant-garde architects in the 1920s, communal spaces designed as a means of breaking down bourgeois individualism. But the courtyard has more to do with psychological healing than with utopianism. It is an inner sanctuary meant to nurture a sense of security — not mass conformity.

To keep this feeling from becoming too suffocating, Mr. Maltzan makes a series of bold cuts through other parts of the building, creating surprising visual connections to the world outside. A counter in the communal kitchen, for example, lines up with a slot that runs diagonally through the entire ground floor, framing views of the freeway’s underbelly on one end and back toward Skid Row on the other.

The most unexpected of these views is in the laundry and community room on the third floor. Conceived as the building’s domestic heart, the room overlooks a section of the elevated freeway through a long horizontal window. The window is made of acoustical glass, so that even at midday the noise is reduced to a soft hum. But it is so close to the passing cars that at rush hour, when traffic is barely moving, tenants and drivers can make direct and prolonged eye contact. Late at night, when the freeway is nearly empty, the cars flow by in a dreamy rhythm.

It’s a witty, even poetic moment, one that captures the dueling essences of Los Angeles: the promise of freedom and opportunity embodied by its freeways and the degree to which that promise has turned out to be a fantasy.

But Mr. Maltzan’s housing experiments also suggest another way of thinking about the city. For much of the 20th century many architects vehemently believed in the world-changing power of their art. The age of mass production would create light-filled environments, sweeping away the squalor of urban slums. A profession that had traditionally served an aristocratic elite would now raise up the masses.

That dream, of course, collapsed decades ago, a victim of corrupting political and economic forces, mediocre talents and its own ideological rigidity. In its final days it was reduced to a few dehumanizing formulas for generic housing blocks and office towers. A generation of architects never recovered from the trauma.

Like others who were raised in the postmodern era, Mr. Maltzan is not directly invested in that history. Nor is he interested in coming up with a new ideological formula. His idea of progress is incremental — the kind that can be tested through careful observation of everyday experiences. His aim has been to find a rhythm that accounts for the often conflicting needs of the human condition.

The Carver Apartments are the next step in this quest. The building not only manages to provide a feeling of security while easing the crippling sense of isolation that can often afflict the homeless; it also makes visible, through its strong architectural form, a group of people that many in our society would often prefer to ignore.

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)