

## DENSECITY: Innovation in Practice | A View from the City of Angels

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**How can architectural practice inform policy? How can design promote social change and heal those who have suffered through homelessness? How do city bureaucracies innovate and how can architects respond through their practice? The State of California, the City and the County of Los Angeles are requesting innovation from developers and architects through grants and proposal requests. Ballot measures are being passed to fund solutions; architects and developers can leverage this movement to innovate and create solutions for the future.**

### INTRODUCTION

Homeless populations are surging in Los Angeles (The New York Times, California Today, June 5, 2019) bringing the total un-sheltered homeless population in LA County up to 58,936. This is an urgent local crisis, and the voters of Los Angeles have approved several measures to tackle this problem:

LA's Measure H sales tax brings in \$355 million each year.

LA's Measure HHH is a \$1.2 billion bond to build permanent supportive housing (1,400 units are set to open in the 2019-20 fiscal year).

LA's Measure JJJ (which passed with nearly 64 percent of the vote), sets affordable housing mandates and hiring restrictions favoring local laborers on residential projects requiring a zoning change or an amendment to the city's General Plan. It also creates incentives for developers building near transit stops, codified under the Transit Oriented Communities Affordable Housing Incentive Program (TOC Guidelines). The guidelines are organized in a tiered format, depending on distance to transit (with additional density and less parking requirements, if the site is closer to transit). Projects that are 100% affordable garner more incentives and less parking requirements, aligning actual market need with code and our transit goals.

Unfortunately, even with all of this good policy, two glaring impediments still exist: an overall lack of affordable housing and a political structure that favors the singular over the needs of the many. The lack of supply is a direct result of the lack of comprehensive zoning reform throughout the city and the county. The political structure, a city of 'silos', consists



Figure 1. Gateway Apartments, 13368 Beach Ave, Venice, Ca. 21 one-bedroom apartment units. 100% affordable housing for homeless adults. 111 units/acre. LEED Platinum. Architect: Brooks + Scarpa Developer: Venice Community Housing Corporation. Utilized the local density bonus ordinance (# 179681) and the State of California's low-income housing tax credit program.

of council districts and various city departments, with no 'umbrella' of future planning that could weave all of the disparate needs into a cohesive, livable whole.

The origins of Los Angeles' urban fabric began in 1781 with a Spanish plaza, farms and homes along what is now known as the LA River. Over the next 200 years, the city sprawled outward and the zoning code created in the 1940s (which did not get updated), spawned a specialized industry of land use attorneys, entitlement experts and permit-specialists who are required to navigate the byzantine bureaucracy that controls the built environment. This, in turn, works hand-in-hand with the political structure of a 15-district city council, representing almost 4 million people, each of whom have their own 'planning deputy'; a process that entails first asking for permission from the local council member, then embarking on a sometimes 3-year process obtaining various 'entitlements' to develop or repair the urban fabric. In 1925 Aldous Huxley

famously wrote that Los Angeles was '19 suburbs in search of a metropolis'; now one could say we are 92 neighborhoods in search of a city. What will the city look like in 50 years? Or 100 years? No one knows. What is known is that the city needs current and comprehensive zoning that will allow architects and developers to build and renovate 'by-right', without entitlements. This very important work has started and is called 'ReCode LA', the first comprehensive revision of the City of Los Angeles' Zoning Code since 1946.

### ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE CAN INFORM AND SUPPORT POLICY

Architectural design is a significant piece of the solution, showcasing how elegant density, reduced parking and open space can contribute to complete streets and livable cities. Most often, design is a necessary determining factor when developers begin to assess how they will develop a property, given the myriad of options. How does one fit a required density of 245 units/acre on a 50' x 150' lot and meet high building-performance goals, within existing urban fabric? At Step Up on Fifth, this consisted of designing an innovative system of parking lifts (the first-ever permitted in the city), micro-units with wall-mounted murphy beds and passive design which incorporated two small open courtyards on a tight urban lot. Shading the south façade with a four-story perforated screen and the street façade with a series of water-jet cut aluminum screens, met design, cost and building performance goals.

In downtown Los Angeles, a large percentage of the urban core is zoned 'industrial', a blanket zone that precludes the ability to build housing on any of these lots. A large portion of these industrial zoned properties can actually be termed 'very-light', 'light' or 'moderate' industrial use, which is not mutually-exclusive to housing. Various industries can co-exist with various housing types and architects know how to mitigate concerns through design, materials and details.

Illustrating the possibilities inherent in the existing urban fabric, architects can help policy makers tailor zoning to new uses and new ways of living. Making connections between disparate elements to create a comprehensive whole is what architects do and cities can leverage this by teaming with designers on actual demonstration projects, on research proposals or on innovative ideas which attempt to solve seemingly intractable problems.

### DESIGN CAN PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE AND HEAL THOSE WHO HAVE SUFFERED THROUGH HOMELESSNESS

The homeless population in Los Angeles increased by 12% last year. This is an urgent local crisis, and a 2005 state-mandated density bonus law (SB1818, providing incentives such as increased density and reduced parking) has not proven effective enough. More and varied policy is needed,



Figure 2. Step Up on Fifth, 1548 Fifth Street, Santa Monica, Ca. 46 micro-apartments. 100% affordable housing for homeless adults with mental and physical disabilities. 245 units/acre. 2011 AIA Top Ten Green award. Architect: Brooks + Scarpa Developer: Step Up on Second and A Community of Friends. Utilized the local parking code for reduced parking and the State of California's low-income housing tax credit program. Built below the height limit to lessen the impacts of discretionary review.

and developers are taking advantage of newer policies such as SB35 (2017), which streamlines the approval process for affordable housing projects in cities that are not meeting their housing obligations, AB2162 (2018) a by-right approval process for Permanent Supportive Housing and AB744 (2015) which provides further density and parking bonuses for affordable housing. Utilizing these new policies allows designers to create innovative homes that eschew the ubiquitous parking floor for a series of spaces that favor the social needs of the tenants over empty parking spaces. At The Six, a program of computer labs, community and recreation rooms, case management offices for support services and open space in a variety of scales and locations are all centered around a common courtyard. This protected open space is designed to be visually connected to the street while also being physically separate, bringing dignity to those who live here and becoming the social heart of this home, supporting the well-being of those who live here.

In the past, non-profit developers of affordable housing often required innovation and a high level of building performance because they own and manage their buildings for 55 years. California law will soon require every building owner to take the future into account. Environmental policy in California (AB32-2006) has been so successful that bottom-up codes are updated every 2 years and architects must design net-zero residential buildings by 2020 (three stories and below) and net-zero commercial buildings by 2030. The State of California must get 60% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030 with zero-carbon electricity by 2045.



Figure 3. The Southern California Flower Market, 755 Wall Street, Los Angeles, Ca. Mixed-use, 323 apartments over office, parking, retail, restaurants and a working flower market. 10% moderate-income units. 84 units/acre. Architect: Brooks + Scarpa Developer: The Southern California Flower Market. Obtaining entitlements to allow housing in the industrial zone, the new ReCode LA zoning update is anticipated to allow this type of project by-right.

What does this mean for architects? Practice must change and adapt...to accommodate this changing policy landscape. We have always believed affordability and sustainability are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, are necessary for high-quality design in practice; designing passive buildings and utilizing solar power are key, but how the building is designed spatially, its sense of place, still remains the most important element. If the place is not loved, it will not last. Luckily, the principles of passive design are also the principles we use to create well-liked spaces (access to natural light, air and ventilation!) and we try to always capitalize on this key fact. Utilizing various policy incentives and entitlements, we have illustrated how communities can be enhanced with new models of housing at various scales, densities and locations, ranging from a 13-bedroom shared house in the R1 single-family zone to a 46-unit urban-infill apartment house at a density of 245 units/acre to a new 323-unit mixed-use community that incorporates a working flower market in an industrial area of downtown Los Angeles, where it is currently still illegal to build housing.

#### **CITY BUREAUCRACIES CAN BE CREATIVE AND LEVERAGE THE PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE FOR INNOVATION AND NEW IDEAS**

New models of housing are needed if we as a society intend to house everyone in livable, dense communities. Homelessness is a crisis in Los Angeles County with nearly 59,000 homeless people and because the supply of new affordable housing is not keeping pace with the need, both the city and the county are reaching out to incentivize new models of housing. Our firm partnered with PlantPrefab, a modular prefab home builder and Community Corporation of Santa Monica, a non-profit developer of affordable housing, to develop NEST: a prefab modular, sustainable kit of parts. Scalable and adaptable on any combination of typical 50' x150' lots, it is a long-term solution accommodating different housing types. NEST is a small-scale version of a much larger concept to quickly provide housing for the homeless through prefab design innovation; a solution that is scalable and adaptable, giving homeless people a sense of dignity and shared social spaces on underutilized parcels of land.



Figure 4. The Six, 811 S Carondelet Street, Los Angeles, Ca. 52 studio and one-bedroom apartments. 100% affordable housing for homeless adults and homeless veterans. 153 units/acre. LEED Platinum. Architect: Brooks + Scarpa Developer: Skid Row Housing Trust. Utilized the local density bonus ordinance (# 179681) and the State of California's low-income housing tax credit program.

The modular kit of parts is scalable and adaptable within different housing types: 'Blue Jay' is for temporary housing, 'Dove' is for small-scale permanent and shared space housing and 'Osprey' is for permanent larger family units, all can be combined for different size sites and different neighborhoods. It is a long-term solution meant to bring housing for the homeless to market quicker (reducing costs) and transform the way communities can provide housing for the homeless through dignity, density and design. Potential plug-ins for energy and water are being investigated.

This type of cross collaboration between prefab construction, developer and architect/designer disciplines can result in new models and processes for bringing housing to the market. Architects can positively influence housing policy through design; politicians, policy makers and financial institutions can be a part of the solution as well. The State of California and local municipalities are providing pathways for designers, but, as always, more can be done. The architectural profession is best suited to illustrate the positive outcomes of various policy measures and we can be proactive in pushing for more effective solutions; this is why I became an architect and this is what a livable future requires.



Figure 5. NEST Toolkit, awarded \$1mil grant in 2019 for 'thinking outside the box to address homelessness throughout LA County'. A 'kit-of-parts' that can be built off-site and assembled quickly. Designer/Architect: Brooks + Scarpa. Team members: PlantPrefab and Community Corporation of Santa Monica. Tailoring the prefab custom home building industry to permanent supportive housing development for temporary and permanent housing at all scales and types on lot sizes from the typical suburban lot size of 50' x 150' and up.

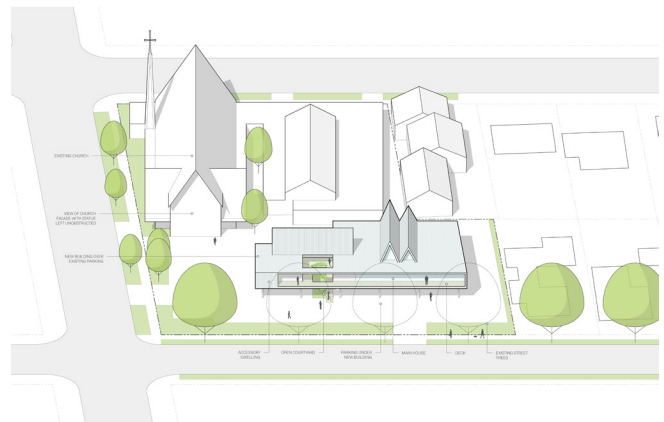


Figure 6. Concept diagram for a 13-bedroom shared house in the R1 single family zone, over an existing church parking lot. Architect: Brooks + Scarpa. Utilized the NEST Toolkit and the local Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Ordinance to incorporate two kitchens in a large house for up to 16 unrelated homeless community college students.