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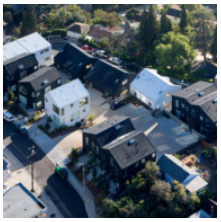
Density, L.A.-Style: Michael Maltzan's One Santa Fe and Barbara Bestor's Blackbirds

By **Justin Davidson**



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Can a car-loving city of sprawl embrace shared space and public transit? This week, New York*'s architecture critic, Justin Davidson, delves into the wave of new buildings and parks that are redefining Los Angeles, beginning with an*

Los Angeles is both dense and widely dispersed. While New York packs millions of people into a few square miles and gets much airier around the edges, L.A.'s diverse and growing population spreads like peanut butter over a vast urban expanse. Depending on your point of view, that's either L.A.'s distinctive beauty or the cause of its crippling traffic. Planners tend toward the second view, and they're busily trying to foster efficient East Coast–style nodes and knit the city together with public transit. Los Angeles's City Council recently fended off furious protests and gave a unanimous go-ahead to a pair of 28-story towers — monstrous by L.A. standards — flanking the Hollywood Palladium. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has spent $9 billion on expanding the light rail and subway network and has just put out a 40-year plan to spend $120 billion more. UCLA architecture professor Dana Cuff wrote that her hometown could become "a model metropolis for the 21st century," if it would only build more, denser, and taller housing.

Still, density is a bruising topic, because neighbors often see it as an attack on low horizons and ample skies. Hoping to transform the city without trauma, L.A. architects are trying for density without towers. Having inserted attractive housing complexes into some of L.A.'s least desirable sites (the New Carver Apartments just feet from the I-10, for instance), Michael Maltzan produced One Santa Fe, a red-and-white skyscraper flipped on its side. To the west, it faces the Southern California Institute of Architecture and the Arts District, where new apartments and warehouses turned galleries have created that magical moneymaking cocktail of art and real estate. The building is effectively a boundary wall: The east façade stretches out along the rail yards that flank the Los Angeles River, an industrial nothingscape that would depress most designers. To Maltzan, though, it's a signpost to a transit-rich future: "You're starting to see interest up and down the river in developing buildings that aren't hermetically sealed off, but that connect to each other and create economically diverse neighborhoods," he says. "The goal is to invent the forms of those buildings on L.A.'s own terms."

In his pursuit of an architecture that is both fresh and local, Maltzan takes the typical low-slung courtyard building and unfurls it into a long ribbon that arcs into the air and curls around a wedge of park. Part rampart, part live-in viaduct, this almost comically long and narrow complex of 438 apartments is hard to see all at once, except from the air. It has public zones, a swimming pool, and ground-floor shops, including a bookstore and a grocery store. Here, residents can do what Angelenos don't often take for granted: run downstairs for a quart of milk. But its most radical amenity may not come along for years, if ever: a new Metro stop linked to the building by a pedestrian bridge. For now, One Santa Fe resembles an elegant hunk of infrastructure, but Maltzan is confident that the evolving neighborhood will one day stitch his creation into a new context. "When you work at that scale, the building has to be successful from day one, but it also has to be anticipatory," he says. "You have design for what the city will be like in 15 or 20 years."

Photo: Mel Melcon/2015 Los Angeles Times

As I march along the building's length, feeling as though I were hunting for the on-ramp of the Brooklyn Bridge, I wonder whether One Santa Fe represents a gesture of extravagantly wishful thinking. Transit advocates celebrate young commuters who rent apartments close enough to a rail station so they can bike or walk, and share cars when they really need wheels. But it will be a long time before anything disrupts Los Angeles's matrix of freeways and single-family houses. Progress toward a post-car L.A. is fitful— for now Metro ridership has actually dropped, and, as of 2014, the number of Angelenos who commute by bike had barely inched up over one percent. Neighborhood dynamics are explosive, though. In the last 15 years, the population downtown has nearly doubled, even though owning a car there is almost as masochistic as it is in Manhattan. And the market tracks Maltzan's optimism: New subway lines boost rents, which means that in the future those who can least afford cars will need them the most, but also, and more reassuringly, that public transit still has the power to shape a malleable and unfinished city.

At the other end of the intimacy spectrum from Maltzan's great red-and-white whale is Barbara Bestor's Blackbirds, a villagelike huddle draped over a steep hill in Echo Park. Bestor's making no grand bets on public transit, but she has managed to smuggle in what she calls "stealth density." Where five single-family homes once stood, 18 new houses now ring a daytime ball court or community plaza that fills with cars at the end of the day. In form, the buildings recall standard mid-century dingbats, one- or two-story apartment buildings hoisted over a layer of parking. But Bestor toys with the formula like a jazzman tweaking the blues. With their expressively placed windows, a row of façades resembles a lineup of smirking emoji. In order to save space but avoid the taint (and the costlier mortgage) of a condominium complex, she pushed the structures close together, leaving an invisible six-inch strip of air in between. Some houses only have side doors, opening onto narrow, alleylike staircases. Others have skylights and chalet balconies, echoing the area's bohemian bungalows. For now the plantings are still low and patchy, but it won't be long before they soften the stark geometry, and landscape embraces the architecture.

Bestor has spent years chipping away at the issue of communal life in L.A., equipped with a smaller chisel than Maltzan's but an equally long view. Her influential Silver Lake café, Intelligentsia, created a de facto village center by pulling the glass wall back from the sidewalk and turning the arcaded storefront into a covered outdoor plaza. And even as she's been designing new hangouts and restoring homes built in SoCal antiquity (the 1960s), she's also been thinking about what her own Generation X will need from architects as it approaches old age. Like Maltzan, she is designing not just for the city she lives in but for the one it is becoming.