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Gensler proposes an awning over apartments to reduce the need for air conditioning.

ARCHITECTURE URBAN DEVELOPMENT THE HOUSING CRISIS

## We Asked Top Architects for Bold Solutions to L.A.'s Homeless Crisis. Here's What They Came Up With

Can smart architects short-circuit opposition to affordable and permanent supportive housing? These 13 designs may do the trick

By Emily Young - October 1, 2020



Long before the pandemic hit Los Angeles, homelessness was widely regarded as one of the city's most urgent problems—an ugly fact of life in one of the world's wealthiest cities. As home prices and rents ballooned in the past decade, more and more people had to trade the roof over their heads for a friend's couch, a car packed with all their belongings, or a tent on a hot, dusty sidewalk. COVID-19 has only exacerbated this crisis. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, more than 66,000 homeless people are now living on the streets of L.A. County. As unemployment spikes and pandemic relief funds dwindle, the number of people facing foreclosure or eviction is expected to double.

Everyone agrees that the city needs more housing for low-income and homeless Angelenos. But steep construction costs, insufficient housing subsidies, and time-consuming regulations have hampered efforts to meet the demand.

Even some proponents of affordable housing balk at the prospect of hosting the homeless in their backyards. Critics complain that such projects threaten the character of their neighborhoods and increase congestion. Others worry about rising crime rates and plummeting property values. But what if the design of affordable housing could address these objections? Is it possible for smart architects to short-circuit community opposition?

Dana Cuff, a UCLA professor of architecture and urban design, thinks so. In 2017, she increased housing density in L.A. by coauthoring a state law that made it easier for people to build accessory dwelling units (ADUs)—aka granny flats—in the backyards of single-family lots. “We need to change the general—and misplaced—prejudice against affordable housing with housing that is smaller, targeted, and well-designed, and fits within the community,” she says. “We need to make more neighborhoods for more neighbors.”

Over the past year, *Los Angeles* invited 13 of the city's top architectural firms to leverage their design expertise to come up with innovative concepts for affordable or permanent supportive housing. Their ideas, which include maxxing out the number of ADUs on a lot and devising mobile dwellings that fold out of a suitcase, range from the eminently doable to the futuristically far-out. The concepts highlighted here make clear that building housing for everyone in L.A. who needs it is going to require out-the-box thinking; mind-boggling amounts of money, land, and labor; and major political muscle. Can Los Angeles summon the will to finally solve its long-festering housing crisis? As the ranks of the homeless continue to grow, a better question might be: can it afford not to?

### Multiple Choices

#### Modal Design



COURTESY MODAL DESIGN

**The big idea:** By combining two lots currently zoned to allow two and a half units each, this concept would produce a single structure for up to five integrated households.

**How it would work:** The project would be laid out with multiple units along the perimeter of the adjacent lots' four sides. Studios and one-, two-, and three-bedroom units—plus some parking—would fit under one continuous roof. While a central courtyard would promote interaction among the tenants, an opening along the street would encourage residents to engage with the larger neighborhood.



COURTESY MODAL DESIGN

**Key features:** To minimize the structure's overall scale, the shared roof would slope downward on all four sides of the building so it matches the height of surrounding residences. Different widths of metal cladding on the facade would help differentiate the units visually.

**The upside:** “This proposal is a modern take on L.A.'s traditional and much-loved courtyard apartments,” says architect Daniel Monti. “We're imagining a familiar typology in a way that increases density but still builds community.”