Housing Solutions

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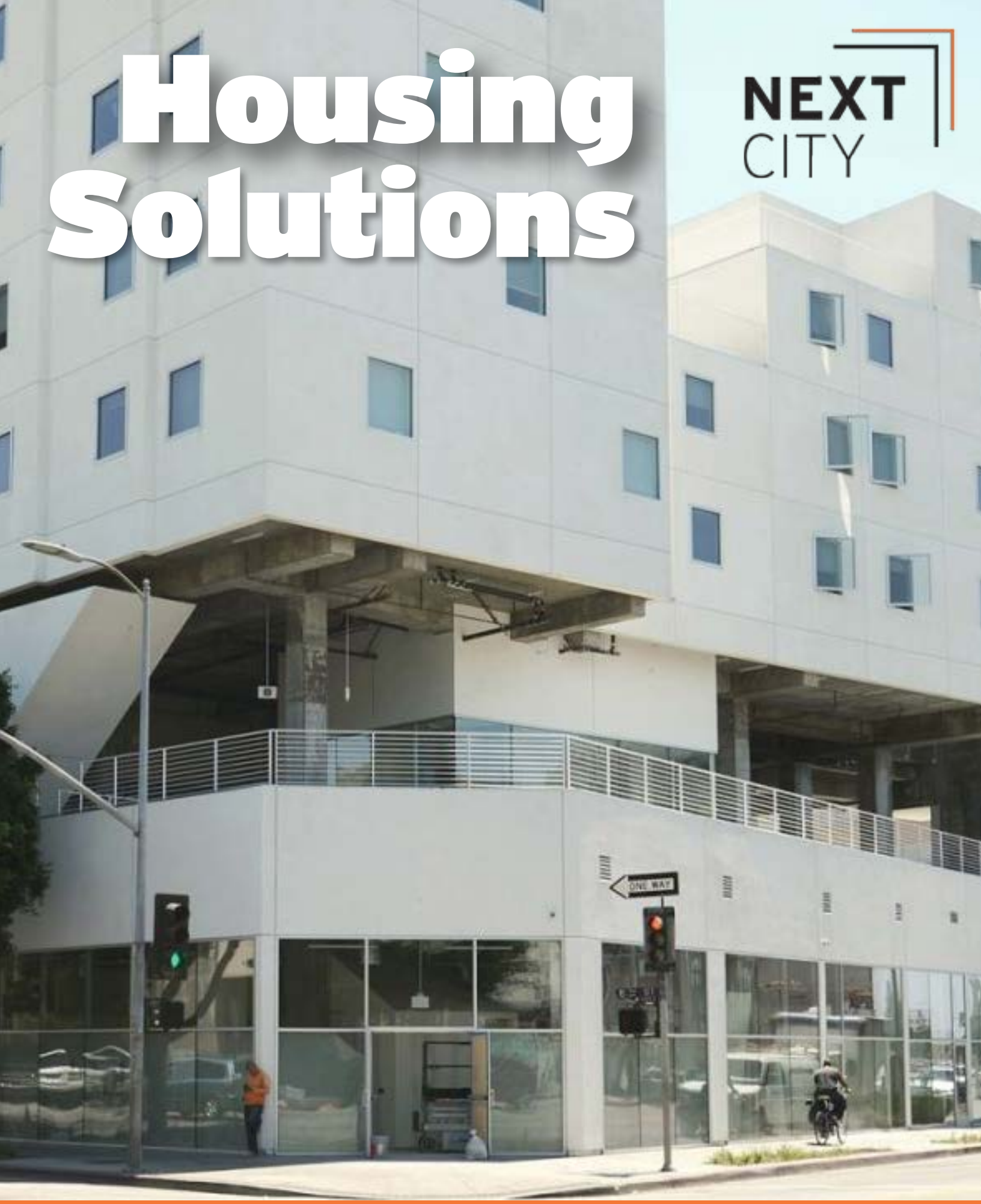

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Next City is a nonprofit organization with a mission to inspire social, economic and environmental change in cities through journalism and events around the world.

(Cover photo by Katrina Ohstrom)

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Introduction

If you've spent any time in the last year or two trying to rent housing, you've likely come away stunned at the cost of a decent place to live.

Rents are high and vacancies are low across the U.S., and not only in hot markets. A number of trends have converged to make this reality, not least of which is a cultural shift away from purchasing homes. Over the last decade, more Americans have turned to renting than in any 10-year period in recent history, bringing the number of renter households to nearly 43 million, or 37 percent of the nation's total, according to Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies.

That trend is most acute in the nation's biggest cities, where there are increasingly more renters than homeowners, according to a 2015 study from New York University's Furman Center and Capital One Financial Corp. The shift towards renting cuts across age groups, household types and income levels and seems unlikely to go away anytime soon.

But even as we become a nation of renters, our public policies continue to favor homeowners and the American dream of decades past. That bias hurts cities and their most vulnerable populations.

According to the Joint Center, a record 49.3 percent of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent. It is a new high for the affordability crisis and one that demands new solutions. This ebook provides a look at four of those solutions being tested in cities today.

Ariella Cohen
Editor-in-Chief

Will U.S. Cities Design Their Way Out of the Affordable Housing Crisis?

"Missing middle" architecture could ease rents — and allow more Americans to build real estate wealth.

AMANDA KOLSON HURLEY | JANUARY 18, 2016

(Photo by Jeffery Cross)

The house I've lived in for almost 10 years isn't a single-family home or an apartment in a tall building. It's something in between, a two-story "condominium townhouse" on wooded grounds in a suburb of Washington, D.C. There are 166 townhouses in my complex, and whenever one is listed for sale, it gets snapped up. This is a popular place to live.

But the funny thing is, it shouldn't be — not if you trust the conventional wisdom about real estate. The townhouses here are 75 years old and they look it. Built quickly and cheaply as military housing during World War II, they're small (in the range of 1,000 square feet) and architecturally plain. Except for a few that have undergone renovations, they lack pretty much every feature now deemed essential in a "nice" American home: kitchen islands with granite countertops, walk-in closets, bathrooms galore.

My family doesn't have a yard. We have a patio out back, and share a landscaped plaza with dozens of our neighbors. We don't have a dedicated parking space. Yet I'm confident that if we put the house on the market tomorrow, it would sell, and fast. How can that be?

Just a few years ago, a name emerged for the kind of community I live in. Neighborhoods like mine represent "the missing middle" in American housing, say architects and planners: not a big subdivision, not a high-rise apartment

tower, but a middle option in terms of scale and density.

We used to build lots of in-between housing in this country: rowhouses, duplexes, apartment courts. In other countries, the middle is still the default. Britain is the land of the semi-detached house; the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark have dense, low-rise (and attractive) housing of various kinds. But the United States stopped building this way decades ago.

The result, critics say, is huge unmet demand from millions of people whom our bifurcated housing supply doesn't serve. Young families are priced out of new single-family homes, which now have a median size of a whopping 2,453 feet, but can't squeeze into studio or one-bedroom apartments. Older adults want to downsize and economize without giving up their own front door or a patch of garden. Lower- and middle-income Americans struggle to pay climbing rents while new housing is increasingly marketed as "luxury."

As of 2014, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 63 percent of the nation's 117 million occupied housing units were detached homes. Another 13 percent were apartments in buildings with 10 or more units. Only about 19 percent of America's housing stock is composed of all the types in between, from attached single-family (aka townhouse) up to nine-unit multiplex. It hasn't always been like this — as recently as 1986, 20 percent of all new single-family homes sold were attached, rather than detached; by 2014, that share had dropped to 10 percent.

If we had a richer variety of housing options, we might be able to solve a number of problems.

First, it would give Americans more choices about where and how to live. Many people — especially growing demographic groups like single people and couples without children — would be relieved to say no to the large houses and luxe condos currently being offered them, and find a home or neighborhood they prefer. Restoring the missing middle would also increase the supply of housing in tight markets, putting the brakes on rising rents.

Second, because these forms of housing are quite dense, they would help communities meet the threshold where transit and neighborhood retail become viable: In other words, they would foster the walkable, 24-hour neighborhoods that Americans are clamoring for, but often can't afford. Sixteen units per acre is that density threshold, according to many planners. Missing-middle housing ranges from 16 up past 50 units per acre, enough to undergird lively, connected, pedestrian neighborhoods, and wean some residents off their cars. These neighborhoods would also have the virtue of being mixed-income because of their diverse housing.

Third, if you favor traditional urban design, the missing middle yields the pleasant massing of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, rather than the spiky skyline of Manhattan (or the desultory sprawl of some New Jersey suburbs). To New Urbanists, many of whom loathe both modern skyscrapers and sprawl, the missing middle promises "goldilocks density," as the writer Lloyd Alter terms it: not too high, not too low, but just right.

So why isn't more of it getting built?

DESIGNING THE MISSING MIDDLE

If you're not familiar with the term "missing middle," you're not alone. Before this year, "I'd never heard of it," admits Stockton Williams, director of the Terwilliger Center for Housing at the Urban Land Institute. "The term really was coined by that guy, just three or four years ago."

"That guy" is Daniel Parolek, an architect and urban planner in Berkeley, California. Parolek heads a small firm called Opticos Design, and his resume bursts with impressive New Urbanist credentials: working for Robert A.M. Stern, collaborating with Leon Krier and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, writing form-based codes for cities around the country.

Parolek says an interest in overlooked housing types has been "inherent" in the work of Opticos since he founded the firm in 2000.

Historic bungalow courts used to be built often in Southern California, but the model has given way to single family homes. (Credit: Opticos Design)

"Opticos' first major project, which started in 2000, was a master plan for Isla Vista in Santa Barbara County," he says. It was the first time they raised the concept of the missing middle (at that point unnamed) with community members concerned about high-density infill. They walked the group through a downtown neighborhood in Santa Barbara, looking at historic bungalow courts and courtyard apartments, as well as newer housing. "The group loved one of the courtyard apartment buildings, so we stopped to talk about the characteristics of that type," Parolek remembers. "They said they wanted infill like this in Isla Vista." That infill, it turned out, had a density of 40 dwelling units per acre—twice as

high as what residents thought they would be OK with.

The lightbulb went on for Parolek and he began to think about the housing styles that he knew from his childhood growing up in Columbus, Nebraska.

"My great-grandmother lived in a small duplex two blocks off of the main street in the small town I grew up in," he says. "My great-uncle lived in a stacked duplex in a small town in Iowa. I remember visiting them in these homes."

These traditional urban forms had worked so well for his family. Why wasn't anyone talking about them? A few years ago, Parolek started to lobby for midscale housing in earnest, and came up with the catchy alliterative name. At the time, Christopher Leinberger, an influential real estate developer and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, was extolling the rise of walkable urban places ("WalkUPs," in Leinberger's parlance), and Arthur C. Nelson, a housing analyst at the University of Utah, was predicting that a wave of small households would reshape the country's housing preferences. Parolek took note.

SELLING MISSING MIDDLE DEVELOPMENT TO 21ST-CENTURY AMERICANS

In some of the cities where Opticos works, officials worry about how to retain young people and baby boomers. Despite the considerable progress urbanists have made since the 1990s in figuring out how to build large mixed-use centers, Parolek realized that when you go down a notch in scale, things get trickier.

"Historically, as planners, we do a really good job of regulating conventional suburban development," explains Parolek, who commutes by bike to Opticos' office in a three-story building in downtown Berkeley (Walk Score: 79). "And over the past five to 10 years, we've figured out the larger-scale TOD [transit-oriented development]." But what about how to build a successful low-rise, mixed-use block, or a 12-unit apartment building? This is the blank that Parolek hopes to fill. He has given dozens of presentations on the missing middle around the country, including to influential advocacy groups like AARP, and Opticos is the lead consultant on Austin's current initiative to revise its land development code.

Parolek and Opticos define the missing middle as "a range of multi-unit or clustered housing types compatible in scale with single-family homes that help meet the growing demand for walkable urban living." This translates to a number of housing varieties that used to be common in American cities: townhouses, duplexes, triplexes, two- and three-flats, and bungalow courts, among others. Parolek prefers missing-middle structures not to be taller than two and a half stories — the better to blend with single-family neighborhoods and avoid opposition — but he recognizes the need for more three- and four-story buildings, too, which he calls "upper missing middle." Generally, Parolek says, missing-middle apartment buildings have no more than 14 units, but he stresses that the height, depth and width of the building are more important for compatibility than the number of units.

It can be hard to visualize the missing middle precisely because it has been missing so long, left behind in the decades after World War II as single-family subdivisions ate up the land around U.S. cities. But the period between about 1870 and 1940 was the heyday of medium-scaled housing in American cities. In Chicago at the turn of the 20th century, two-flats (two-story houses with an apartment on each floor) multiplied; for that city's Eastern European immigrants, buying a two-flat and renting out half of it was a rung on the ladder of social mobility. Rowhouses, which speculative builders could put up quickly and tailor row by row to different kinds of buyers, proliferated in Brooklyn, Baltimore, Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia.

In Boston's streetcar suburbs between 1870 and 1900, single-family homes were just one form of housing in a diverse mix. According to one historian's analysis, the roughly 2,000 single-family homes built in Roxbury, West Roxbury and Dorchester during this period were far eclipsed by two-family homes (4,000) and "triple-deckers" (6,000). Bungalow courts, which cluster one-story dwellings around a courtyard in a best-of-both-worlds compromise between private and communal, spread across Southern California from the 1910s through 1930s.

Then came the war, the FHA-backed mortgage and Levittown, and that was more or less the end of that.

Other housing experts interpret the missing middle more broadly than Parolek, viewing it in terms of price point more than architectural scale. Parolek would argue that these things overlap anyway: Midsized housing is "affordable by design," he says, thanks to its efficient use of space, communal features and recommended location near public transit, which obviates the need for a car.

The relationship between housing type and price is fuzzy. Generally, missing-middle housing is cheaper than average, but some of that comes down to age — it tends to be older and therefore in worse repair. In new construction, low square footage and (potentially) the lack of a garage or yard should translate to lower prices, assuming the location is not prime — which it is in Berkeley and some other missing-middle exemplars, partly an effect of the relative scarcity of such neighborhoods. In 2014, the median price for new, detached single-family homes sold was $284,500, and attached homes came in only slightly cheaper at $267,800. (The size of townhouses has ballooned, just like that of detached houses.)

Experts do agree that such housing is difficult to build today, and they point to the same culprits. Number one: zoning. The prevalence of low-density residential zoning gives developers few opportunities to build big(ger), which exacerbates another problem, the high cost of land.

So where developers can build big, they're not going to squander that chance on a measly three stories if they can help it.

"If you have a big site, you tend to go for the absolute maximum you can," says Alan Mallach, a prominent urban scholar who is a senior fellow at the Center for Community Progress. "And you can't get small sites because there's no suitable zoning."

Given the costs of land, labor and materials, plus conforming with regulations, housing that is midscaled or mid-priced — or both — often doesn't pencil out for developers. In places where zoning allows for a large building, maxing out on height and footprint yields a better, safer return. As does going "upscale," with nice finishes and amenities. The extra investment is small, but the rent or sales differential, Mallach notes, can be significant.

As the middle has dwindled to a niche, financing it has become trickier. Projects in the range of four to 49 units generally have a hard time finding backers. "In some cases, it's a little bit of a circular thing," Williams, of ULI, explains. "The developers proposing … missing-middle developments are not necessarily the same type of developers that would do larger properties. They tend to be smaller enterprises, perhaps with less strength in their balance sheets."

Finally, there's the slippery role of public sentiment. Christopher Leinberger is right when he says the demand for walkable communities, whether in cities or suburbs, exceeds the current supply; places like Evanston, Illinois, and Bethesda, Maryland, are expensive for that reason. Parolek estimates that the U.S. needs another 35 million units of multifamily housing to accommodate all of the country's carless millennials, Marie Kondo-ing boomers and dissatisfied suburbanites.

Yet it's one thing to acknowledge the need, and another to look on as someone builds those units next door. NIMBY opposition to development projects is still often fierce, even as cultural preferences shift toward higher-density living. There is no better illustration of that than what happened in Seattle over the summer.

In 2014, Seattle's Mayor Ed Murray asked a citywide task force, the Housing Affordability and Livability Committee, to find ways to ease Seattle's severe shortage of affordable housing. In July, the committee released its recommendations. One of them was to allow the construction of duplexes, triplexes and other multifamily structures in Seattle's single-family zones, which cover about 65 percent of Seattle's land area. The new structures would have to come under the current height limit.

Reaction was swift — neighborhoods erupted in protest. With elections approaching, city officials and candidates backed away from the controversial recommendation. One candidate sent out a mailer with a picture of a bulldozer poised to maul a single-family home: "City Hall is coming our way," it read. Only two weeks after the report appeared, Murray dropped the upzoning idea.

A paradox of the missing middle: Its biggest advantage would seem to be that it makes density less scary, even palatable, for owners of single-family homes who fear being crowded by tall buildings or hundreds of new neighbors. But many homeowners remain so immovable on the issue of local development that in-between housing doesn't always go where it would work best as stealth density. That means it's mainly going where it's already expected (and zoned for) — and cities are losing an opportunity to create more housing and knit suburban-style neighborhoods with denser development nearby.

Hard-line urbanists might grumble that the missing middle just kowtows to Americans' fears: Cities need more housing, and if people are scared of high-rises, tough for them! In fact, these forms of housing could increase density in low-rise neighborhoods substantially while still allowing urban cores to go tall. ("I'm not going to advocate that it's the highest scale a city should go to," Parolek says.)

Missing-middle housing does slip past the barriers, usually in places where it fits with a local vernacular. Architects are designing it, often in more contemporary styles than Parolek's historicist examples suggest. (Parolek, however, maintains that his missing-middle campaign is "totally style neutral.") In Southern California, the architects Lorcan O'Herlihy and Barbara Bestor have designed new iterations on courtyard apartments and small-lot homes. Bestor's Blackbirds, a cluster of 18 small-lot houses in Echo Park, can't be called affordable at upwards of $750,000 each — yet 500 people visited the first open house.

Based in rowhouse-rich Philadelphia, Interface Studio Architects innovates on missing-middle typologies. The firm's portfolio includes an L-shaped three-flat, rotated duplexes (which are subsidized housing), a half-block of attached homes with space for a corner store, and net-zero-energy townhouses. Brian Phillips, a principal of Interface, says it's no coincidence that the firm works in cities like Philly, Chicago and Boston, where these types are already well established.

"One of the reasons why we've done a lot of that work is because our home turf is so well tuned to it," Phillips

says. “I think there’s two reasons for that tuning: One is buyer expectation — in other words, people in Philadelphia don’t expect to be in a single-family home or a high-rise, necessarily.

“The other thing,” Phillips continues, “is the excruciating affordability of Philadelphia. Even though the market is strong, you can still acquire land at a reasonable price. There’s just not all that pressure to build high density all the time.” (Even so, Interface’s market-rate houses sell for well above the median home price in Philadelphia.)

Architects touch only a fraction of new housing projects, of course, at the high end of the market. Builders and contractors are creating their own missing-middle housing — and much of it wouldn’t please either a traditionalist like Parolek or a modernist like Phillips.

In the outer reaches of Houston and Phoenix, says Mallach, you can see affordable new townhouses and garden apartments going up. The catch is that they’re far from urban centers, out where land is inexpensive and demand from affluent customers is weak. Zoning is loose (in Houston, famously, it’s nonexistent) and regulations are light. These developments meet a need, but they’re cookie-cutter and don’t come anywhere near a New Urbanist vision. “They’re very much developments,” Mallach notes, rather than planned communities.

Missing-middle infill is going into cities, too — again, not always in a form that designers will warm to. Back in 2008, Newark, New Jersey, convened an expert panel to address its scourge of “Bayonne boxes,” multi-unit houses crammed onto narrow lots, often with parking pads at the front and mere inches between houses. Many locals reviled these — including then-Mayor Cory Booker — and the National Endowment for the Arts agreed, giving the city a $25,000 grant to research alternatives. The city adopted new urban design standards to rein in some of the houses’ more egregious flaws. Yet, officials recognized that for all their ugliness, Bayonne boxes play an important role. They provide affordable housing, mainly for immigrants, and allow extended families to live together in adjacent units. Yes, they’re often built on the cheap, but that’s one reason why they’re affordable.

Williams and Mallach speculate that the middle is perhaps less “missing” than at risk, at least in some places. Mallach cites a recent Washington Post article that compares the prevalence of housing types in different metropolitan areas. Townhouses up through 19-unit buildings form a decent chunk of many cities’ housing stock (admittedly, more so in Philadelphia and Baltimore than in Detroit or Seattle). In Chicago, two- to four-unit buildings still make up 27 percent of the city’s housing supply, nothing to sniff at. Preserving older midsized housing may be just as important as building more of it.

“It really is an urgent issue to preserve the affordability of the existing, non-missing middle,” Williams says. “The middle’s not totally missing. But what we do have is that middle tier [getting] acquired and repositioned, or [replaced with] a denser, larger building.”

CORRECTING THE BIG DEVELOPMENT TREND

There is new missing-middle housing in the U.S. that meets high architectural and urbanist standards, and at a reasonable price. Two endeavors proceeding at vastly different scales in different cities show real progress.

At one end of the scale is Daybreak, a 4,000-acre planned development in South Jordan, Utah, about 20 miles from Salt Lake City. The environmental ambitions behind Daybreak are high, and come from an unlikely source: the global mining conglomerate Rio Tinto, which operates the massive Bingham Canyon copper mine and owns the land on which Daybreak sits. In a gesture of stewardship 15 years ago, the company hired the famous planner Peter Calthorpe to design a pedestrian-friendly “complete community” with schools, shops and office buildings as well as homes, all of them sustainable.

Daybreak now has close to 15,000 residents, and for a mega-suburb owned by a mining company (with some land that has undergone remediation), it has a legitimate claim to being green. All the homes are Energy Star-certified, and the public buildings meet LEED standards. The town has avoided becoming a dormitory suburb thanks to the inclusion of significant office and retail space. In 2011, a light rail began running between Daybreak and downtown Salt Lake. A recent academic study found that 88 percent of children walk to school at least once a week. The community is popular with homebuyers; its website boasts that one out of every six homes sold in the Salt Lake Valley is in Daybreak.

Daybreak contains a range of missing-middle types: townhouses, stacked condos, duplexes and detached houses in a “cottage court” arrangement. Stephen James, the town’s manager of planning and community design, estimates that roughly 25 percent of current construction is townhouses, and another, smaller segment is made up of the other niche types. (The town won’t be completely finished until about 2035.)

“When we started here, there were no townhouses at all in South Jordan,” James says. “We couldn’t just come in and do whatever we wanted. We had to think through … how to enable this over time.” James credits the town plan with providing a framework — he compares it to a car chassis — so they could begin with “the loose stuff” and work inward, building a denser center as the comfort level rose. Home appraisers were wary at first, because they’d never encountered so many housing types in a single community, but strong sales soon changed that, according to James.

Attached townhomes and condos are visible from the porch of a single family home in the Daybreak planned community in South Jordan, Utah. (Photo by Rio Tinto Kennecott)

Townhouse clusters of 25 units an acre "aren't even a problem [to build and sell] now," James says, and a project that's on the boards will have 60 units an acre. "We'll continue to build intensity around the town center so we get that walkable, energetic character."

At first, Daybreak's creators assumed the cottages and townhouses would draw a combination of empty nesters and entry-level buyers. Few of the former turned up, but the latter did in droves. Most of Daybreak's homes, regardless of type, are well-turned exercises in traditional styles like Dutch Colonial and Arts and Crafts bungalow. But there's a smattering of modernist homes too. Condos and townhouses range from the high 100s to the high 200s — not a steal, but also not bad for a metropolitan area where the median home price is $254,000.

Daybreak shows what a single, powerful landowner can accomplish with custom-made zoning and an unusual degree of control over details (although Rio Tinto's subsidiary Kennecott Land reports to the South Jordan planning commission, the company, not the city, oversees design review).

Meanwhile, across the country, one man has spent years promoting underrepresented housing types in his city, and it's paying off.

Five years ago, Andrew Frey was working in real estate law in Miami when he became interested in not just what local developers were building (high-rises and rambling subdivisions) but what they weren't. South Beach and Little Havana are great neighborhoods, he thought, so why isn't anybody creating more like them? His theory: "Maybe we aren't getting the missing middle because people can't picture it." He established a nonprofit called the Townhouse Center and started to do research. He also co-taught a course in the architecture school at Florida International University (FIU) in which master's students design a new, small urban typology for Miami.

Next, Frey approached an architect experienced in missing-middle housing and asked him to design a prototype for Miami. The architect he chose was Phillips, who created a concept called "High Res Miami" in 2013. It was exciting — a three-story modern townhouse that could adapt to various uses and configurations — and unbuildable, Frey soon realized. Fitting the structure and the required parking spaces onto a 50-foot lot was physically impossible. Frey talked to the planning department about an exemption and got nowhere.

Then, "I tried to think like Robert Moses," Frey recalls. He rallied a broad coalition of supporters — neighborhood merchants, architects and developers, the Miami Coalition for the Homeless — and swayed a city commissioner. After wrangling between the commissioner and the city's planning department, with the city attorney stepping in at one point, the planners wrote the small-lot exemption into a larger parking ordinance.

Last October, the ordinance passed, and now Miami has a parking exemption for buildings of 10,000 square feet and less, as long as they are located in transit-served areas and not within 500 feet of single-family zoning.

Frey recently started his own development firm, Tecela. The day I talked to him, he had just closed on the purchase of his first lot, where he plans to build a 9,000-square-foot, three-story, eight-unit apartment project, designed by Jason Chandler, chair of the architecture school at FIU. It wouldn't be possible without the new ordinance. There are still other regulatory hurdles, he says, and permitted densities are too low for his liking. The new units will cost about 10 percent more than the neighborhood's median price per square foot, he says.

"The playing field will always be slightly tilted in favor of big development," Frey says. "That's never going to go away." But tweaking that imbalance is doable, as his efforts make clear. Before the parking exemption, families that owned small parcels in Little Havana couldn't utilize their land. Now, Frey maintains, they can participate in urban revi-

talization rather than doing the only thing they could before, which was sell up and move out.

Frey makes a "double bottom line" argument. The missing middle can distribute ownership in the city, he says, allowing more people to buy small lots and small units, and sometimes to buy an extra unit and rent it out to build wealth — much like the Czech owners of two-flats in 19th-century Chicago. His own project in Little Havana is split into two townhouses. If he decides to sell one to a resident-landlord, he'll be distributing ownership more broadly — and for him, having the option to sell part of the project is a cushion against risk. In other words, it's a win-win that's not achievable with larger construction.

Could restoring the missing middle be a strategy for controlling gentrification? It seems Pollyannaish to think so; at this point, the supply is still so hampered by outdated policies. But the idea of the missing middle is catching on, notably in cities where the cost of entry to homeownership has become impossibly high (like Portland). I look around my neighborhood and see homes that remain attainable for teachers and social workers. Maybe Frey is on to something.

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(Photo by Cheryl Senter)

Affordable Housing's Forever Solution

Are community land trusts the answer for cities seeking neighborhood stability?

JAKE BLUMGART | AUGUST 10, 2015

When Evelyn Correa first moved to Boston, she refused to walk around her neighborhood alone. Arriving in the city in 1987, she moved in with her husband and his parents in the Upham's Corner section of North Dorchester, then a blighted area in a floundering city. Their new home was at the heart of Boston's urban crisis, a chain of neighborhoods in Dorchester and Roxbury that had been redlined into instability and crisis decades earlier.

Today, Correa's home and her neighborhood are wholly different, in large part due to the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). During the 1980s, this energetic neighborhood organization convinced the city that it could steward and revitalize its surroundings and did so using a then unheard of method: a community land trust. Through their land trust, Dudley Neighbors Incorporated, DSNI took possession of most of the dozens of vacant lots that pocked the area, either by purchasing them from private owners using foundation money or obtaining them for almost nothing from the city. DSNI then removed the properties from the private market, leasing them out to developers under Dudley Neighbors, with the caveat that properties remain permanently affordable. Correa's house belongs to her, but the land beneath it belongs to Dudley Neighbors, which will ensure that if she ever sells, it will be to someone of a similar income.

"My dream was always to own my own home, but with the housing situation in Boston, everything was always so expensive," says Correa, who works for the school district, and became president of Dudley Neighbors in 2014. " … I just love having my little house. I hope to hand it down to my kids."

Dudley Neighbors is the largest big city housing land trust, by number of housing units, in the United States. The group owns over half the acreage in a 62-acre corner once rife with neglect; today vacant lots can be counted on one hand. Two hundred and twenty-five permanently affordable homeownership and rental housing units now sit where weeds once grew tall and trash piled high. The most notoriously blighted parcels in the area were transferred to the land trust and have been transformed into a beautiful park. A large greenhouse and an urban farm also sit on its land.

Correa's neighborhood is not the only part of Boston to transform over the last few decades. The city as a whole is

a far more prosperous place than it was in 1987. One of the big city winners of the postindustrial economy, Boston has experienced record growth in recent years, sending rents skyrocketing across the city, even in working-class enclaves like Dorchester and Roxbury. A report released earlier this year found that 38 percent of Boston homeowners spend over a third of their income on housing, while the average rent is $1,857 per month. By contrast, Correa, who owns a three-bedroom home in the land trust, makes $940 in mortgage payments every month.

Many struggling renters can only fantasize about the stability of Correa's situation. The policies that once made it feasible to live without fear of a rent spike are suffering a slow yet inevitable death with the number of rent-controlled or public units dwindling nationwide. More market-friendly affordable housing subsidy programs such as Section 8 and low-income housing tax credits remain politically palatable, but their affordability restrictions don't come with the same guarantee of forever. Building owners can opt out of the Section 8 program, while tax credits expire after 30 years. In both cases, private partners usually decide to continue providing affordable housing, but the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development finds they are substantially less likely to do so in neighborhoods where they can make more from renting or selling market-rate housing. Permanently affordable pockets like the units guaranteed by Dudley Neighbors are urban unicorns so rare that outside of public policy circles, they remain virtually unknown decades after their introduction to U.S. cities.

"It is one of the few models out there that creates affordable homeownership opportunities that serve family after family after family," says Emily Thaden, research and policy manager for the National Community Land Trust Network. "Federal funding sources for affordable housing are significantly diminishing and very little funding is out there for the creation of affordable homeownership opportunities. With that shrinking pie of federal funding it's crucial that we are efficiently utilizing public funds. The CLT model takes a onetime public investment and ensures it will be preserved so low-income families can continue to reside in that property."

A Bulwark Against Gentrification

There are numerous variations on the community land trust model, but in the basic framework a nonprofit obtains land, removes it from the market and allows it to be used based on the needs of the neighborhood residents. Typically, the organizations are led by a mix of community members, residents of the land trust, and sometimes, political representatives.

Creating a nonprofit is the easy part. Land acquisition is where it gets tricky. In most cases, trusts must rely on massive subsidies or, like DSNI, being in a neighborhood before anyone else wants to be. In Dudley Square, the trust was able to convince the city to sell them 15 acres of blighted land for less than $500 because, well, no one else knew what to do with it. Once land is secured, the unique aspect of the model comes into play: The trust begins to sell or rent houses with permanent affordability established through 99-year leases.

In addition to guaranteeing that the property will remain affordable in perpetuity, the 99-year ground lease allows the trust to intervene if there is a mortgage default or deferred maintenance. Nested in these long-term leases are other provisions to ensure permanent affordability, often including a preemptive purchase option that gives the land trust first dibs on the house if it goes up for sale. In that scenario, the home's price is determined by an affordability formula set below the market rate. Homeowners are allowed to recoup a set amount of value — say, 2 percent for every year they owned the house — in addition to the cost of any improvements they've made. Because the trust owns the land, its members can provide oversight to the deals, reviewing the mortgages of those who are buying homes on the land and providing a defense against predatory lending as well as foreclosure. A study by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy found that by the close of 2010, homeowners who owned inside a community land trust were 10 times less likely to go into foreclosure than homeowners who weren't part of a land trust.

One thing to remember is that just like no two communities are identical, no two trusts are exactly the same. In Seattle, for instance, the Homestead Community Land Trust does not have the single community focus of Dudley Neighbors and instead, owns units scattered across the city. There are even instances where an organization only keeps its right to repurchase buildings at an affordable price, but doesn't hold on to the land itself.

But while the world of land trusts is a diverse one, it remains small, with less than 300 trusts nationwide. Despite widespread interest in the model, its spread remains slow due in large part to the difficulties of obtaining the necessary levels of funding, staffing and political support to bring a land trust to scale. It is especially challenging in the gentrifying cities that need permanent affordable housing the most.

A glimpse at the membership rolls of the National Community Land Trust Network demonstrates this unfortunate paradox. There are around 25,000 affordable rental units and 13,000 to 15,000 affordable homeownership units among its member organizations. The largest of them, Champlain Housing Trust, centered in Burlington, Vermont, hosts the largest number of trust units in the United States, with 1,800 rental units and 520 homeownership units. But Burlington is a city of only 42,000, and the land trust stretches over three counties with a population a bit over 200,000 (a third the

size of a Boston or Seattle). Land trust-protected units in major economic centers are few. There is no foreseeable way to bring into land trusts the tens of thousands of units that would be needed to seriously assuage the housing crisis in hot-market cities as the price of land — and housing — continue to skyrocket and more working- and middle-class people are forced farther into the distant suburbs.

"Community land trusts are still a pretty niche solution, and scalability is a serious challenge," says Ethan Handelman, the National Housing Conference's vice president for policy and advocacy. "Too often with affordable housing the pressure to create it only comes when the property values have already risen. We need to take a longer-term view and buy low. One of the things we should be doing in areas of distress — Philly, Detroit, parts of Florida — we should be buying stuff cheap now and putting it in long-term trust."

Dudley Square neighbors relax on their porches. (Photo by Cheryl Senter)

Bringing Trusts to Scale

The earliest community land trusts were created in the aftermath of the great civil rights victories of the 1960s. The first was established outside Albany, Georgia, in 1969 by movement leaders who hoped to secure ownership of agricultural land for poor African-American farmers. Until the 1980s community land trusts were based in rural areas and housing remained a secondary concern. The first urban effort began in 1981, in a Cincinnati neighborhood where community leaders feared that rising housing prices would push out their constituents.

"When the model made that leap from the country to the city, the highest concern [became] affordable housing," says John Davis of Burlington Associates, a consulting firm that helps form and maintain community land trusts. "The community that lived there while times were bad could gain control over the land, so that when times were good vulnerable people were not forced aside. This is a model that proved itself to be remarkably effective in preserving the affordability of housing during times when the market was hot … a bulwark against gentrification."

The 1980s proved a seminal decade as the number of land trusts exploded from 12 to 120. Some thrived, like Dudley Neighbors Incorporated, but many urban land trusts didn't make it to the end of the next decade, and a few even failed spectacularly. Philadelphia's Manos Unidas managed to obtain properties, but secured only a few badly damaged units. The mostly volunteer staff didn't have the sophistication to maintain the trust and the organization fell apart. The people in the houses, meanwhile, were poorly informed about the technicalities and didn't realize that, with the land trust defunct, they now had to pay taxes on the land and the house. Several of their properties nearly went into foreclosure, and were only saved after excruciating political and community effort. The North Camden Community Land Trust, across the river from Philadelphia, collapsed in 2007 because local banks would not allow it to refinance its loans after the Great Recession.

But the new century has mostly been kinder to the community land trust model. After a period of stagnation in the 1990s, a 2011 survey found 242 community land trusts. Today there are more than 280. Interest is growing.

"Community land trusts seem to come up with a very pleasant glow around [them] at almost every housing conference or ideas forum that I attend," says Lawrence Vale, professor of urban design and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors.

Almost three decades after its founding, Dudley Neighbors Incorporated is one of the most frequently cited examples of a successful community land trust. But it was created before the current wave of gentrification in select American cities, in an entirely different historical moment in Boston, when the main threat facing Roxbury and Dorchester was not

displacement but divestment. In some ways, the Dudley experience is instructive, yet in others, it illustrates the challenge of bringing a trust to scale in 2015.

"A lot of communities say we need a land trust like Dudley Street, but they don't have the resources to buy the land and do it properly," says Rick Jacobus, an affordable housing expert who has worked with a variety of community land trusts for years. "Even in that period of divestment they had real investment. You see a lot of very small organizations get created but they don't really have the resources they need to succeed. Then they are underutilizing the assets they do have because they are under-resourced and understaffed."

Building a Neighborhood

In the early 1980s, Dudley Square and Upham's Corner, redlined long ago, were horribly scarred by blight. Several chop shops were operated out of the neighborhoods. Abandoned cars dotted the back streets; in 1986 a Boston Globe reporter counted 12 on stubby Monadnock Street alone. Rats were said to outnumber humans three to one. The neighborhoods were a part of Boston's arson belt, stretching across the city's predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods, where landlords tried to extract some return on their increasingly dubious investments with a matchbook and gasoline. In 1980, "the per capita income of the Dudley Square residents was one of the lowest in the nation, on a par with the poorest counties in Mississippi, or Indian Reservations of the West," read a Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) report.

"When I first came here there was a lot of trash and vacant lots," says Correa, who became involved with DSNI because her children attended the organization's charter school. "All of a sudden you would see the fire — you would see a home going up in flames and they would be like, oh, that was an insurance job." The plague of garbage became the rallying cry of the organization that would become Dudley Street Neighbors Incorporated. In 1986, the first meeting of the group's "Don't Dump on Us" campaign drew over 100 residents and prompted a visit from Mayor Ray Flynn (who arrived midway through after being alerted that a large group of voters were organized and angry).

Soon enough, the city was removing cars and assisting in the cleaning of vacant lots and within several years, it had essentially gifted DSNI the lots that were in public control with the hope that the nonprofit would be able to develop them. A series of community meetings established a neighborhood vision for the blighted land, one distinctly different than a Boston Redevelopment Authority proposal that suggested hotels, high-rise offices and luxury housing. DSNI's neighborhood plan was fleshed out by architects and a planning firm hired to add technical details to the community's call for playgrounds, parks, a small business-oriented main street and 500 new homes. "We are not naive for taking this on. We live here, and if we don't look out for us, who will?" said Che Madyun, then-president of DSNI, in an interview with the Boston Globe.

But privately owned lots were an even bigger part of Dudley Square's problem and here DSNI's land trust experience diverges dramatically from the norm. The community group pushed the Flynn administration to grant it the power of eminent domain over privately held vacant land in the neighborhood — and after some wrangling, the Mayor acceded to the demand. No other land trust in the nation enjoys such powers.

"There's a common perception that 'well, we'll never get eminent domain so [community land trusts] are not really as relevant to our situation,'" says Harry Smith, DSNI's director of sustainable economic development. "It obviously helped but one of the things people don't realize is that we never really used the actual power of eminent domain. We used it more as a stick, so if there were absentee owners who weren't coming to the table and weren't engaging we could send them a letter and say we are going to exercise the power of eminent domain. That would get their attention."

Almost three decades after the land trust was created, the number of vacant lots within Dudley Triangle can be counted on one hand and litter is no longer a problem.

The retail mixture is nothing fancy: bodegas, nail salons, barber shops and pizza joints, with a few unique neighborhood locales like the Ideal Sub Shop, which sells submarine sandwiches with a Cape Verdean twist. While the land trust includes fewer than half the 500 affordable housing units promised in the late 1980s, neighbors are happy with the mix of residential, commercial and open space development and say the trust has opted to build a community, instead of solely housing.

The evidence of this broader goal is everywhere along Brook Street, just off the neighborhood's main drag. A former chop shop has been replaced with a 10,000-acre greenhouse. Dennis Street Park, once the epicenter of the area's devastating vacancy crisis, is now a beautiful green space with a working fountain, shady trees and a nicely outfitted playground. The area was originally envisioned for housing, but the community voted for the park instead and DSNI listened to its constituents. The houses built on land trust property have spacious yards with room for flowers in the front and recreation in the back. "When developers see this, they say we could have built a lot more units here, but people wanted raised bed gardens and large yards," says Smith, gesturing at a flower bed. "They wanted to see housing but also other amenities."

A house and flower shop in the Dudley Street neighborhood. (Photo by Cheryl Senter)

Since 1988, there have only been four foreclosures among the 95 homeownership units and 77 co-op units owned by the land trust. "Pretty much all the neighbors who are in the land trust homes are the same neighbors from when I moved here," says Correa, who became a DSNI board member in 2002 and, five years ago, bought a house on the land trust. "We watch out for each other, when we get packages, when we go on vacation, just simple little things, they go a long way. It's really good to have the stability of having the same neighbors all the time."

Now DSNI wants to begin expanding beyond the triangle, and especially around the Upham's Corner regional rail stop. But the city is not as eager to give away its vacant land these days, and neither are private owners. "What used to be privately owned parcels you could pick up for very little," says Smith. "Now it's been discovered developers are buying them for a lot more than what we can. We are trying to scramble to try and create as much capacity as possible to withstand some of the market pressures."

Indeed, neighboring Somerville is facing intense development pressures and community groups have expressed interest in a land trust. But the area has already experienced dramatic increases in housing costs and resultant displacement. "This would have been a great idea to get started a few years or a few decades ago, I'm afraid," says Vale, the MIT housing professor, in reference to Somerville. Meanwhile, the nascent Chinatown Community Land Trust just lost a bidding war with a local developer over one of its first attempts at acquisition. It has yet to obtain any land.

In Seattle, it took Homestead Community Land Trust 10 years to bring its first house into its portfolio and 22 years after its founding, the trust has not been able to obtain land on the cheap from the city. Though the trust was founded in 1992 to preserve affordable housing in the Central District, once Seattle's premiere African-American neighborhood, today only six of their 191 homes are located in the neighborhood because of the high cost of land there.

"One of the most significant challenges of our work has been getting access to city levy funds," says Kathleen Hosfeld, executive director of the Homestead Community Land Trust, who notes that the trust serves teachers, healthcare workers and nonprofit employees, all of whom earn less than 80 percent of Seattle's relatively high area median income.

Without access to the enormous reserve of vacant land that Dudley Neighbors revitalized, and with limited access to city funds — Seattle's affordable housing levy is mostly targeted toward renters, and Homestead only offers homeownership units — the organization's acquisition strategies have been scattered over a wider geographic area. Before the recession, they helped those eligible for down payment assistance acquire a home, and then remained in control of the land beneath it. After the crash, they partnered with other community development nonprofits and created a program to rehab buildings or obtain foreclosed properties and land. The result is a housing stock concentrated in already affordable areas of the city, mostly Rainier Valley and West Seattle, with other holdings scattered throughout the rest of the city.

"We don't have confirmed pipeline projects, but we have four different parcels under discussion," says Hosfeld.

"The deals that are in the [works] right now are off-market land deals where we are working with other organizations — a church that has land, a nonprofit that has land — that share a mission commitment to creating permanently affordable homeownership."

Though Mayor Ed Murray has made affordable housing a priority and mentions community land trusts several times in his administration's sweeping affordable housing agenda, Homestead does not work directly with the Mayor's office as DSNI and its land trust did in Boston.

"I'd be surprised if [Mayor Ed Murray] even knew we existed by name," says Hosfeld.

Collective Autonomy

The success of a community land trust hinges on both the ability to establish and maintain a strong community group that maintains persistent involvement from members and a democratic structure to ensure collective decision-making. But money, and a lot of it, is needed to buy land and recruit talent to develop that vision in a successful and productive fashion. It is arguable that the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative prospered not only because of help from the city but because Boston is home to an unusually robust philanthropic community. Dudley Street won significant investment from the Ford Foundation but also from a variety of local institutions.

The answer could involve a greater role for local government, a prospect that makes some housing advocates wary. Over the past decade, municipalities have begun expressing greater interest in community land trusts as a means of stabilizing population or housing stock. In cities from Chicago to Flagstaff, local governments themselves have been initiating their own land trusts. (In both of those cities, land trusts were established in 2006.) This greater municipal buy-in has the potential to attract necessary resources to these efforts but also carries risks of its own. Community land trusts frequently have local political representation on their boards, but not in control of them. And as the histories of the nation's housing authorities have shown, direct local government control can carry a serious risk of opacity, corruption and patronage.

Land trust experts like Jacobus fret that without a majority of community representatives on the board, these newfangled institutions will not be responsive to the interests of the neighborhoods. Instead they would prefer governments remain an outside partner, albeit a supportive one.

In Dudley Square, the future will likely include more direct municipal government support. Community land trusts were identified as a means to "mitigate the impact of gentrification" in Mayor Marty Walsh's ambitious affordable housing plan, and the DSNI itself is in talks with city officials about a steady source of acquisition funds that could allow the land trust to compete with private developers for new parcels. For-profit or nonprofit partners will likely develop the lots, as long as the final product ends up on the land trust.

For Correa, new houses can't be brought online fast enough.

"People are always asking me, so, do they have any more houses, is anyone moving out," she says.

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Connecting Real Estate Developers to Meaningful Social Change

GREGORY HELLER | OP-ED | DECEMBER 8, 2015

(Illustration by Sarah Jacoby)

In Providence, Rhode Island, the Mercantile Block houses 22 affordable, live/work artist studios, a business incubator and office space for two nonprofits in a restored historic building. In Upper Manhattan, Sugar Hill is a stunning, modern development that includes 124 units of affordable housing, a preschool and a children's museum of art and storytelling. In North Texas, Meals on Wheels of Tarrant County delivers over a million meals a year to 5,000 vulnerable individuals, while connecting people with an array of essential services, all out of their new 63,000-square-foot facility.

Across the country there is a small sub-sector of nonprofits, community developers and socially conscious private developers working to build important assets like these that focus on social impact — improving people's lives and making our communities stronger and more prosperous. I call it "impact development" — and it deserves more attention.

With today's expanding focus on impact investing, millennial developers' desire to do well and do good, and subsidies like New Markets Tax Credits becoming ever more competitive, impact development may represent one of the most significant new shifts shaping the landscape of America's cities.

There is certainly some fuzziness around what qualifies as impact development. Is it helping vulnerable people? Job creation? Space for nonprofits? Filling gaps in community goods and services? Sustainable design? Smart growth? Ultimately the answer is yes to all of these, and the most impactful projects are the ones that can holistically hit on most or all of these points. At the concept's root is a developer who is aware of how a project can effect social change and who makes meaningful efforts to realize that potential based on a community's identified needs.

Impact development represents a great opportunity, but these projects also face serious challenges in the current marketplace. In my hometown of Philadelphia, a children's museum and a theater conducted large capital campaigns, but ended up struggling to service their debt. A local charter school, burdened by the high cost of the tax-exempt bonds that financed it, needed to lay off teachers and cut services for students. One could argue that market-rate developers and operators face similar challenges all the time. But with impact development, the stakes are much higher. If the project suffers, public assets can disappear and scarce subsidies can go to waste.

Social impact projects are, by nature, hard to finance. They are higher-risk and offer lower (financial if not social) return. In low-income communities, projects often need more subsidies than is typically available. Building values may not be sufficient to obtain mortgages. Due to nonprofit tenants and uses, cash flow from operations may not support enough debt. And often sponsors lack balance sheets capable of guaranteeing deals in weak-market neighborhoods.

Currently, impact development is, in part, enabled by a number of subsidies including the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, New Markets Tax Credit, HUD 108 loans, and various other federal, state and local grants, loans, tax credits, and loan guarantees. Community development financial institutions remain an extremely important source of accessible capital for impact development projects and the groups that operate them. But CDFIs are only one piece of a multifaceted puzzle.

There are some emerging financing sources as well. Several firms are testing the boundaries of crowdsourcing equity while philanthropies are developing program-related investment (PRI) funds. There are myriad "impact investors" looking at real estate as the next frontier. These innovations are exciting but few have figured out how to harness them through new marketplaces, or successfully incorporate them into a predictable toolkit for financing social impact deals.

By many accounts one of the most successful subsidy programs is the federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC). It is a deep subsidy and most states have predictable sources for filling the gap with other grants or tax-exempt bond revenue. However demand far outpaces supply. Still LIHTC represents a model of a program that enables social impact projects, attracts significant private market interest and has relatively low risk.

Outside of affordable housing, however, the subsidies become scarcer and more catch-as-catch-can. A big problem is that the subsidies we have are not deep enough, and they are too scattered and uncoordinated. They often do not work well with each other, or require matching funds that are just as difficult to secure as the initial subsidy.

Take for example the New Markets Tax Credits program. It is an important and valuable subsidy, but it does not work well for many social impact projects. The subsidy is too shallow, and the projects often cannot support the leverage they need. Good sources of capital grants and sufficient low-interest loans are often not readily available. In fact the national philanthropic community has been moving farther away from capital grants, favoring program investments and policy work instead.

Many financing sources have incompatible requirements that are hard to juggle. I worked on one deal that had 11 different financing sources: federal, state and local grants, PRI, and some low-interest debt. It worked out in the end, but few developers have the experience, capacity and patience to manage so many different sources.

Finally, the most successful impact developments require time on the ground in communities. Great deals happen when developers and investors commit to community engagement and partnership. Through community needs assessment, they can determine demand for the social impact components. They find ways to support the community to enhance the deal's long-term impact. And they assess the project's impacts based on both quantitative and qualitative on-the-ground research.

Many developers are new to the social impact space and, while well intentioned, simply do not understand it. One developer recently told me that his approach to providing healthy food access to a very low-income community in Philadelphia was to include three white-tablecloth restaurants in his project ($40 chops are not exactly the answer to food insecurity). Still, I see it as an encouraging sign that developers who do not fully understand it are looking to enter the social impact space. With some education and resources, those who are interested and committed can build great impact developments.

Then there is the issue of how smart we are being with our existing subsidies. Should we be pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into stadiums, for example, when there are developers looking to invest in low-income areas that could potentially put those dollars to better use? It is up to all of us to make sure that, in a world of scarce public dollars, we are being smart and responsible, and making the greatest impact with the programs we have.

The aforementioned projects in Providence, Manhattan and North Texas are notable examples, but they are still too few and far between. Government and private-sector actors alike need to focus on integrating social impact into our urban developments and creating stronger and more coordinated financing mechanisms that still realize a decent return. Enabling impact development could truly change the way we rebuild our cities and communities in 21st century.

GREGORY HELLER IS THE CEO OF AMERICAN COMMUNITIES TRUST AND A MEMBER OF THE 2015 NEXT CITY VANGUARD CLASS.

The Design Solution for Homelessness

In Los Angeles, An Architectural Approach to Keeping People Off the Streets Is Gaining Notice.

LYRA KILSTON | SEPTEMBER 8, 2014

New Genesis, pictured here, was designed by Killefer, Flammang as a mixed-income, mixed-use building. (Credit: SRHT)

The glittering skyline of downtown Los Angeles is bright and close from the roof of the Star apartment building in L.A.'s Skid Row. "We can see them, and they can see us," says Mike Alvidrez, the executive director of Skid Row Housing Trust, the developer of the sleek Star, an uncommonly beautiful respite for formerly homeless Angelenos.

He was referring to the clear line of sight between the building and its neighbors but also to the striking building's own visibility. The 10-month-old Star Apartments — home to 100 individuals struggling to rebound from lives on the street — is visually arresting, a bright white set of staggered towers hovering over an open terrace.

Until now, Skid Row's mostly low-rise buildings didn't even appear in the skyline — out of sight, out of mind. Now, Alvidrez hopes, perhaps the homeless will be seen.

A few blocks' distance shouldn't render a place invisible, but for generations in Los Angeles it has. Skid Row has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the nation. Demographers estimate there are 5,000 to 11,000 destitute individuals living in a 50-block radius just south of the crowded bars and hip restaurants of downtown, pushing shopping carts down trash-strewn streets and when it gets dark, passing out on the ground. Most Angelenos have no reason to visit the area or consider the people living there.

The Trust has a plan to change that. Unlike all the plans that came before, it relies on something that this culture capital already knows how to do well — aesthetics. Its portfolio of edgy, striking buildings has raised the design profile

of Los Angeles and reframed the conversation about how to build affordable housing in a place where income inequality ranks among the highest in the nation.

In the book The Architecture of Happiness, Alain de Botton notes that beautiful architecture has none of the "unambiguous advantages of a vaccine or a bowl of rice." Alvidrez's organization seeks to complicate that notion. At the heart of the non-profit's work is the question, posed to me by more than one staff member: "How can the homeless be viewed as equal if their housing is not?"

The model has found its apex, so far, in the stunning, modern Star Apartments, which opened last November. The Star includes a medical clinic, onsite counselors, a wellness center, and 15,000 square feet of community space, all designed by the internationally renowned architect Michael Maltzan — the same Michael Maltzan behind numerous high-profile civic projects, including the redevelopment of Governors Island in New York, the master plan for the Minneapolis riverfront and the $105 million One Santa Fe development in downtown L.A.

In a conversation last spring, he described his work with Skid Row Housing Trust as "part of thinking about how to continually evolve the model forward of housing in the city."

"What I've come to believe," he said of the Trust's buildings, "is that such projects can represent how to be a real participant in the overall future of a city, and certainly of Los Angeles."

The Trust has chosen to work with small, creative architecture firms like Maltzan's company, instead of large developers with cookie-cutter plans. They've partnered with nimble practitioners counted among L.A.'s vanguard, including Killefer Flammang Architects, Koning Eizenberg Architecture, and Brooks + Scarpa. The association has proven mutually beneficial — a daring architect is more likely to experiment to find inventive design solutions, while non-profit clients are, as Maltzan put it, "constitutionally wired for innovation."

Many of the Trust's buildings are the most striking on their block. Some are LEED certified or have used cutting-edge construction methods. Several have received regional or national awards for historic preservation, beautification and architectural excellence. In recent months, the organization's office has been inundated by tour requests from architecture students.

"Trauma-informed care" is a medical approach that takes into account someone's past when providing services. The Trust describes what it does as "trauma-informed design." Most of the non-profit's tenants have cycled through institution after institution: temporary housing, overcrowded clinics, shelters, addiction recovery centers, prison — places typically designed via budget-driven utilitarianism. They're also systems that didn't work; people fell through the cracks and ended up on the streets. Familiar elements like dark corridors, stark fluorescent lighting or worn, anonymous spaces augur the same failures.

"How do we design buildings that create the best environment for people to live in and recover from the effects of homelessness and other disabilities?" asks Alvidrez. "We are always trying to mitigate some of the ill effects of homelessness by bringing in good design, ample light and generous landscaping."

It is this approach that brought a tomato-red staircase and vertical garden to the Rainbow Apartments, Maltzan's first building for the Trust. At another development, Charles Cobb Apartments, the designers opted to avoid a dark stairwell by adding a thick glass floor on the top story. The Trust couldn't find a local fabricator so the glass was imported from Germany. It wasn't the cheapest solution, but now light filters through every floor of the building.

"I Feel Like a Person Again"

Le'Vonna Lacy has lived in one of the Trust's buildings since 2011. I met her on a May afternoon on the rooftop garden of the Charles Cobb Apartments, where the Trust's community relations manager, Daniel Rizik-Baer, was giving a tour. Lacy joined us as we admired fruit and vegetables growing in large planters under the hot L.A. sun.

Beneath a shady canopy near a small blooming fruit tree, Lacy sat down and told her story — how she had first come to Skid Row as a teenager and somehow never left. Finding stable housing with onsite medical and mental health services enabled her to discover and manage her bipolar disorder and diabetes. Now in her mid-30s, she works as what the Trust calls an ambassador, helping others on the street navigate their way into housing, and guiding them toward the services they need. She has a girlfriend too, and beamed when talking about the simple, domestic pleasure of having her visit. As we left the roof, Lacy gestured toward the planters and view of the downtown skyline, and made sure we'd seen the courtyard and community kitchen. Her pride was evident. This was her home — her garden, her courtyard and her stunning view.

"I feel like a person again," Lacy said.

It's not hard to see what Lacy likes about the Trust's models.

At the Star, Maltzan's airy spaces play host to classes, film screenings, group exercise and art activities led by outside professionals coordinated by the Trust. A running track circles the building's vast second-story terrace, where dwarf fruit trees are planted along the wall and lines of vegetable planters offer thriving artichokes, brussels sprouts and

raspberries. In the works is a sports court that will offer basketball or pickleball — a cross between tennis and badminton popular with older people.

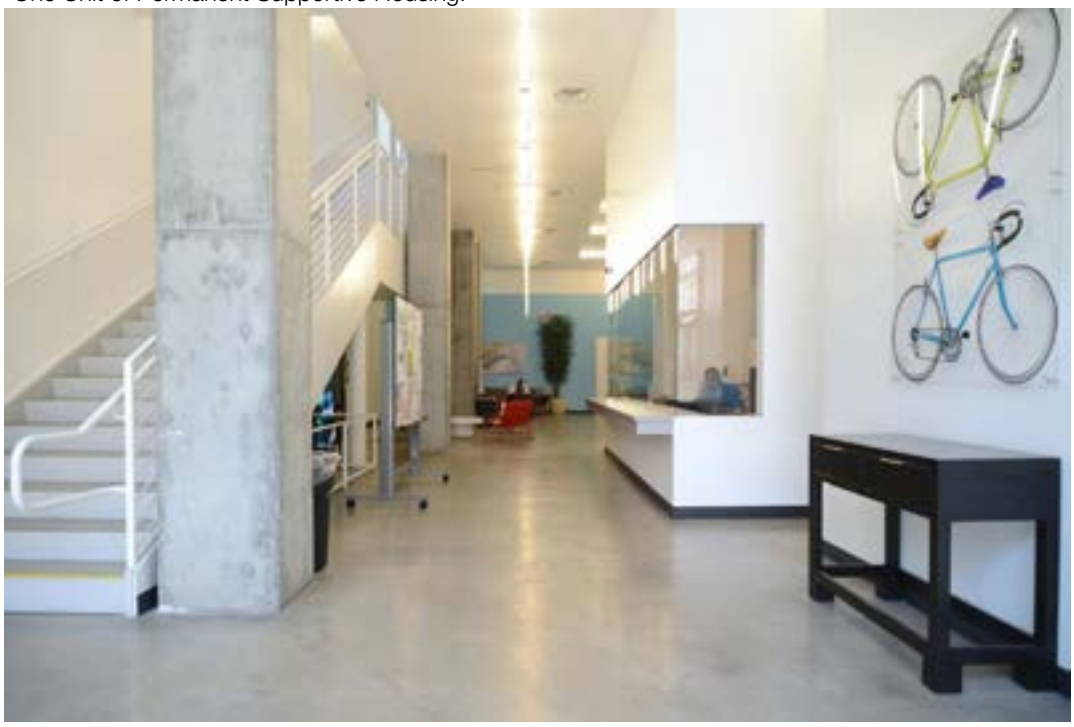
"The Star is really pushing the typology of permanent supportive housing," Theresa Hwang, the Trust's community architect told me. "Projects like these are creating an opportunity to expand the definition of design and the role of the architect."

Design questions aside, the kind of long-term, holistic care provided within the Trust's buildings is increasingly becoming the answer to the question of how to help the chronically homeless. It's central to President Obama's "Opening Doors" plan launched in 2010 and strategies in cities across the country.

It's also the most cost-effective solution. Alvidrez showed me some extraordinary charts that tracked the financial effects of supportive housing. Without access to medical care, most homeless people rely on local hospital emergency rooms. Some visited the ER an average of 10 times in six months. Likewise, without the stability of housing and support, crime is more likely, resulting in a cycle of costly court hearings and incarcerations. As of 2009, services for one person with multiple disorders living on the streets of Los Angeles amounted to $60,456 per year. By contrast, the average cost for the Trust to house and serve one supportive-housing tenant, as they measured it in 2011, is only $13,000 per year.

Today, more than 90 percent of the Trust's tenants stay for at least a year, a much longer duration than the typical experience of multiple evictions under the "no tolerance" policies common in other subsidized housing developments. That means more than 1,600 people now have safe long-term homes. Letting residents make a decision to seek help, Alvidrez explains, "gives people a sense of being able to guide their own destiny."

He relayed a story about a doctor working with formerly homeless individuals who had made a Powerpoint slide to explain that no amount of intensive medical care could really make a permanent change if the patient was homeless and not receiving regular care. The slide showed a prescription pad with the doctor's signature on it that simply reads: "One Unit of Permanent Supportive Housing."



Common areas are an important element of all Skid Row Housing Trust buildings, including the Star pictured here.

From the Ground Up

The name "skid row" originated in mid-19th-century Pacific Northwest logging camps and comes from "skid roads," or paths made in the woods to skid or drag cut timber. The term became slang for where workers were sent when they were fired or no longer needed — as though they too had been felled. Because of the saloons and brothels that were often clustered around logging camps, the name "skid road" and then "skid row" evolved to mean any similarly derelict area.

For more than a century, L.A.'s Skid Row has attracted the poor and the transient, starting soon after the terminus of the cross-country railway was built in the 1870s. The neighborhood around the train station quickly developed a slew of cheap single-room occupancy hotels (SROs), bars and brothels to serve the mostly male, itinerant laborer population radiating from the train station. Over the decades, the area absorbed various waves of migrants arriving in the West to

seek work, a pattern that peaked during the Depression, and again during World War II. After the Vietnam War, many veterans who had passed through Los Angeles before they were shipped out ended up returning to the familiar streets of Skid Row, where services were already concentrated. According to the L.A. Chamber of Commerce, it was during this post-Vietnam phase that the demographic of Skid Row changed from "predominantly elderly, white and alcohol-dependent to predominantly young, nonwhite, and drug-dependent."

Parallel to this new influx of homeless veterans, the housing stock of Skid Row was being severely reduced due to a 1960 Property Rehabilitation Program enforcing earthquake and fire safety codes. Over the next decade, a huge number of the area's SRO hotels were unable to afford the mandated rehabilitation or upgrades. The result was the eventual demolition of half the area's 15,000 housing units by the early 1970s.

In 1976, to address the growing crisis of homelessness, the city passed a redevelopment plan for downtown that supported the concentration of services and housing for the homeless in Skid Row, while encouraging light industry to move in on its fringes. Now known as the policy of containment (or as some call it, "unofficial ghettoization"), the initiative protected the neighborhood from complete destruction but was driven, in part, by a desire to divide the area from the parts of downtown trying to attract affluent residents and new business. The containment essentially succeeded in quarantining Skid Row from the rest of downtown, creating a sense of two separate political entities. All this was happening at a time when crack use was on the rise and California was shuttering mental health facilities, putting even more people on the street, many of them ill.

In 1989, the Trust was founded in response to Skid Row's increasingly dire conditions. At first, the Trust focused on quickly purchasing and rehabilitating the SRO hotels that had been closed in the 1960s. The organization upgraded several hotels and moved hundreds of residents in over its first few years, but began to recognize that housing alone was not enough. About half of the tenants who moved into the renovated apartments ended up returning to the streets. The Trust's next step was hiring case managers to help residents navigate the thicket of outside social services. This improved the situation, however, by the end of the 1990s it was apparent that a supportive-housing model, offering a network of onsite services, was the way forward.

The organization also came to realize that a different kind of housing experience called for a different kind of architecture — a tall order that would signify a fresh start as well as safety, support, permanence, independence, community and hope. It was time to think about building from the ground up.

By then, the Trust had established a system in which their residents, property management, and social services and maintenance staff met with an architect or landscape planner to discuss potential designs early in the planning stages. In these "design engagement sessions," residents and staff were able to hear the architect's proposals, participate in hands-on activities and voice opinions about the design. The ability to start with a blank slate, architecturally, enabled the Trust to fully utilize years of resident and staff feedback.

Maltzan had made a name for himself with the geometrically striking Inner-City Arts building in 1995 on the edge of Skid Row and was at work on the temporary home of the Museum of Modern Art in Queens, New York when the Trust approached him. He agreed to design his first Trust project, Rainbow Apartments, for a reduced fee. Completed in 2006, the 89-unit building features five stories of efficiency apartments built around a central courtyard. There is a communal garden and kitchen, airy open walkways, a vertical wall garden, and a playful rhythm of asymmetrical windows and bright accents, including the bright-red staircase that has become a social hub for the residents.

In the decade since the Rainbow was built, Maltzan has gone on to design two more significant buildings for the Trust — New Carver, and the aforementioned Star, and is currently at work on a fourth. Over its 25-year life span, the Trust has developed 26 different permanent housing complexes in total, including three that remain in progress. All 26 serve or will serve the chronically homeless.

Climbing Bright Stairs

In the lobby of the Star Apartments, I met Anthony Haynes. Tall and loping with a quick grin, he talked about enjoying a recent onsite tai chi class and an eye-opening vegetarian cooking workshop. He's lived in the Trust's buildings since 2009 and is now a peer advocate, helping new residents make the adjustment by accompanying them to appointments, encouraging them to attend therapy groups, or just checking in on them from time to time to offer an empathetic voice. The first few months of new housing can be perilous. Haynes told me, as did others that day, that many new arrivals struggle with "the walls closing in." Rizik-Baer described it as "root shock." Inside the unfamiliar privacy of four walls and a ceiling, without the distraction of the constant action on the streets, the silence can feel deafening.

Informal activity or support groups sprang up organically at the Trust's properties, but for the newer buildings, a concerted effort toward wellness resulted in the construction of socially conducive architecture like large, sunny community areas, as well as a formalized activity program to help counteract isolation, build community and contribute to

The New Carver, pictured here, was designed by Michael Maltzan to house 97 formerly homeless individuals. (Credit: SRHT/ Iwan Baann)

residents' quality of life. "We put a high emphasis on stabilization, but once that happens, then what? Watch TV all day?" asks Rizik-Baer. "Providing choice for our residents is a huge goal." (Choice being a rare luxury for this population.) As we toured the Trust's buildings, he pointed out the lists of daily activities posted in the lobbies. There was a wide variety, from AA to yoga, bingo to gardening, from women's groups to documentary film, book, and PTSD groups, as well as outings to the grocery story and city sights. With event schedules and ping-pong tables, buildings felt more like college dorms than social services facilities.

The Star was the last Trust project developed before the dismantling of California's Community Redevelopment Agency, which until that point had been the primary financing vehicle for urban redevelopment projects in the state. It was a blow to the Trust but one the non-profit handled with the same ingenuity it applies to its architecture. In 2012, the Trust opened New Genesis, a sleek, mixed-used, mixed-income building that combines housing and onsite services for the homeless with low-income and market-rate apartments. Below the apartments are two commercial storefronts, now home to an ice cream shop and a coming restaurant, whose leases generate income to support the building's social services. Zigzagging the interior is the Trust's trademark bright stairs — this time painted electric yellow. The Killefer Flammang Architects-designed building is the Trust's first experiment with a self-sustaining mixed-use model. (Another mixed-use building is due to open this fall.)

It will be interesting to watch, as time goes on, how the businesses at New Genesis (and their clientele) interact with the community living above. One thing all Trust buildings share is the ability to feel both a part of the surrounding neighborhood and like a refuge from it. Their buildings' enclosed courtyards are calm and clean, ensconced in an urban context but offering other possibilities too: the quiet to read, a chance to engage with others, a comfortable chair to relax in. The Trust's Abbey Apartments features towering bunches of lush bamboo and a high wall covered in robust green vines; even a shy cat has found a home there. The rooftop patios — an amenity often reserved for luxury apartments — offer a sense of distance and perspective. Several of the residents I met mentioned the therapeutic beauty of watching the city skyline at night from their rooftops, when street-level inequities are abstracted into quiet geometries.

When I visited the Abbey's second-story community room, Rizik-Baer took me to the corner where a tall window framed the street below. The window, like the community room, was designed to counteract isolation. "We wanted to maintain a link to the street," he says. "People still want to know what's going on down there."

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Architect Open-Sources Affordable Housing Design

JEN KINNEY | APRIL 7, 2016

Alejandro Aravena in Venice (AP Photo/Luigi Costantini)

Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, winner of this year's Pritzker Prize, has released four of his low-cost social housing designs online for free. The drawings, accompanied by a manifesto of sorts, are intended as an open-source aid to governments and developers looking to create well-designed affordable housing.

Aravena's firm, Elemental, is known for its "incremental" housing projects, in which governments fund the construction of "half a good house" and residents complete the dwelling as resources allow. The drawings for four such projects — Quinta Monroy, Lo Barnechea and Villa Verde in Chile, and Monterrey in Mexico City — are now available for download on the studio's website.

The studio also outlines the philosophy behind the incremental housing approach, and how it offers a sensible response to a global housing affordability crisis, in a text titled "ABC of Incremental Housing." Noting that a third of the 3 billion people living in cities today live below the poverty line, the text states, "Given the magnitude of the housing shortage, we won't solve this problem unless we add people's own resources and building capacity to that of governments and market."

Market-rate housing tends to respond to scarcity of means in two ways, it continues: reduce the size of the dwelling almost to the point of being unlivable, or displace poorer people to the peripheries of cities, where they are cut off from the resources and opportunities that make city living valuable.

Elemental's vision is instead to build projects dense enough and low-cost enough that they can be located in typically more expensive, better-situated sites. They aim for density without overcrowding, and design for the possibility of expansion, so that social housing can transition into middle-class dwellings.

The architect says government agencies and developers can be hesitant to experiment like this, fearful of spending money on forward-thinking design. From an Elemental statement on why the firm published the strategies online: "We hope will be able to rule out one more excuse for why markets and governments don't move in this direction to tackle the challenge of massive rapid urbanisation. [The designs] are knowledge that we have tested, that have proved to be beneficial to communities and that have been implemented accepting very pressing budget and policy constraints."

The firm notes that the designs will need to be modified to comply with local regulations and building codes, and to respond to "local realities."

Aravena announced the open-source designs on Tuesday at a press conference at the United Nations in New

York. “We [must] use peoples’ own capacity, ideas and resources to provide a better environment,” he said. “The scarcest resource in cities today is not money, but coordination. So we need to create open systems that can include people’s own capacity to add value to their living conditions and opportunities.”

Elemental, of which Aravena is the executive director, is known for its participatory design process, which engages politicians, lawyers, researchers, builders, future residents and other stakeholders in every phase of creating a housing project. The firm was also involved in the rebuilding of Constitución, a Chilean town nearly destroyed by a 2010 earthquake and tsunami. Aravena is curating the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, whose theme this year is “Reporting From the Front.” It will offer perspectives on global issues like crime, sanitation, housing shortage, traffic, waste, migration and pollution.

JEN KINNEY IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER. HER WORK HAS ALSO APPEARED IN SATELLITE MAGAZINE, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS ONLINE, AND THE ANCHORAGE PRESS. SEE HER WORK AT JAKINNEY.COM.