



REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Western Design

Density Meets Lifestyle in Southern California

BY ALEKS ISTANBULLU

Minimalism and modernism are the hallmarks of a new breed of multifamily development taking shape in the Los Angeles region.



The goal for the Biscuit Company Lofts was to show off the building for what it is and limit the embellishments.

California has a history, both mythic and real, of being more open and less predetermined than other places. The availability of the land, the benign climate, and the continual influx of entrepreneurial émigrés from around the globe have provided the perfect conditions for millions of people to realize the American dream of a home. Especially in southern California, the evolution of the housing stock is typically that of a single-family house with a yard, growing more spacious every year and sitting farther away from the region's multiple business districts. Today, the quintessential California dream is being challenged by issues of sprawl, sustainability, and affordability, which are forcing a reconsideration of density that, in turn, is creating interest in a new range of multifamily housing.

The question facing developers and their architects is how to get people who are accustomed to the very real benefits of single-family detached homes—with multiple-car garages on large landscaped lots—interested in condominiums, townhouses, or lofts in urban neighborhoods. While most homeowners would happily relinquish their time spent commuting, and many would appreciate easy access to the social and cultural assets of the metropolis, few are willing to give up space, light, or the indoor/outdoor lifestyle. These tradeoffs are common with the traditional apartment,

which is the most familiar multifamily model in the local market. Not only does the old apartment prototype lack the volume and square footage per unit that translate into light and space, but also elevators, outside stairwells, and corridors add costs to the developer pro forma. Even the luxury high-rise model that has been successful in a number of locations on Los Angeles's Westside and along the coast may offer light and views, but it still is a variation on the basic apartment form.

In their introduction to the 2005 exhibit, "Whatever Happened to L.A.?", held at the SciArc Gallery in Los Angeles, curators Jeffrey Inaba and Peter Zeller note, "... L.A.'s urban condition has been informed by experimentation at all scales, but especially at the scale of the residence." Though the authors are referring to the area's single-family homes, there has been a parallel exploration in the design of multifamily housing over the last 15 years. Providing an early example is a series of developer lofts in Santa Monica and Venice—small infill projects that employed the idea of the adaptive use of industrial lofts as a model for new, ground-up buildings.

These experimental projects merge Miesian minimalism with the developer's goal of maximized return in order to create large expanses of uninter-



rupted space devoid of detail—or, in other words, to create the maximum effect with the minimum of means. The buildings ruthlessly maximize the zoning envelope while stretching the building code allowances to the limit. By using the townhouse model and providing plans for the users to build the bedrooms and bathrooms themselves, the developer can eliminate hallways and vertical circulation systems from the diagram.

Another multifamily model builds on a series of Corbusian ideas from the early 20th century. In plans for the "Ville Contemporaine" and the "Ville Radieuse," which anticipate present-day urban densities, Le Corbusier refers to small house agglomerations stacked into multistory structures and calls them "maisonettes." Two current projects in West Hollywood apply the minimalist developer approach to the maisonette concept to create buildable, marketable multifamily residences—one on a corner infill site with ten stacked maisonettes, and the other a 20-unit mixed-use project on a busy commercial street. Both projects maximize the buildable envelope and minimize common

circulation spaces while providing houses in the sky that have windows on at least three, if not four, sides and vary in height from one to three stories.

Although the development prototypes are new, developers express high confidence in the projects as they compare their offerings to the alternatives in the market. "Los Angeles has an attitude about how to live that is centered on the idea of house and garden, but at average freeway speeds of only 28 miles per hour, you can't get home," comments Richard Kilstock, principal of the Kilstock Organization of Los Angeles and New York. "Now, people want to live and work close to an environment akin to what they know. In response, we are creating homes in West Hollywood that use space in an intelligent way—expansively, with lots of windows and high ceilings. In our HiLine Lofts, 2,200 square feet (204 sq m) of museum-quality space will cost far less at \$1.2 to 1.3 million than a fixer-upper in the Hollywood Hills."

"West Hollywood has very little modern housing stock," says Nick Hertz, principal of Urban Moment, Inc., a development company based in Los Angeles. "What's available are small, Mediterranean-style, stucco, single-family homes in need of renovation on not-so-great streets. What we offer are contemporary townhomes with 1,300 to 2,000 square feet (121 to 186 sq m) of space, an upstairs and a downstairs, and outdoor space on a quiet tree-lined street near a major artery."

The developers believe that this lifestyle offering will appeal to young professionals, older couples moving to the city from suburban homes, and second-home buyers who increasingly are investing in top-tier cities. What these sophisticated buyers share is a desire for a well-designed, well-maintained, and secure property.

Well suited to low-scale, urban nodes in municipalities that favor inventive design over rigid building codes such as those in West Hollywood and parts of Los Angeles, this prototype can be used to

create small communities of townhouses. The articulated volumes of the conjoined units—whether four, ten, 20, or more—establish a strong presence on the street that mediates between the bustling urban environment and private enclaves. Communal courtyards extend the private outdoor space and encourage a sense of neighborliness among residents.



ALEKS ISTANBULLU ARCHITECTS

The design for the five-story Bixel Street Housing building in downtown Los Angeles optimizes access to light, air, and views by placing the studios, one-bedroom flats, and two-bedroom flats on the top four floors of the building with the double-height lofts on the ground floor.

Inside the private entrances, the units are designed to take full advantage of the square footage with two-story volumes, a skylight, and windows on at least two sides, and in some configurations, on four sides. Roof decks, balconies, bay windows, and cantilevered spaces reach out to capture light and views and, at the same time, protect the privacy of the resident.

On a site near downtown Los Angeles, the same spatial concepts are used to create a new residential apartment complex of five townhouses, 16 lofts, and 59 flats, all surrounding a landscaped courtyard. To optimize access to light and views at this scale and density (115 units per acre, as opposed to the standard 60 per acre) the architecture places the studios, one-bedroom flats, and two-bedroom flats on the top four floors of the building and the double-height lofts with their expansive windows at the ground level. Two-story attached townhouses have a distinctive low profile on the street while the eight corners on the taller buildings create 32 desirable corner units.

On the industrial edge of downtown Los Angeles, “loft living” has arrived in southern California. New residents are giving up the amenities of suburban living not only for location but for a far more urban experience. “Of course, the combination of edginess and amenity has always been at the heart of the loft aesthetic. But it gets an extra couple of twists in Los Angeles. . .,” notes *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne in his April 19, 2007, review of

the city’s latest lofts. Keeping that combination in balance has been a guiding principle for Paul Solomon and his partners of Los Angeles-based Linear City, the developer of three of the city’s newest loft projects.

“We appreciated the hand we were dealt on the Biscuit Company Lofts; our goal was to show off the building for what it is and limit the embellishments,” Solomon says. “Buyers of live/work space are likely to be creative people who want well-built, individual spaces where they can assert their individual personalities. We are providing that with a mix of unit sizes, floor plans, and price points that avoid a cookie-cutter solution.” With 70 percent of the units sold as the first residents moved there in April 2007, Solomon clearly understands his market.

To capitalize on the natural assets of the 1925 landmark National Biscuit Company building, the design delineates varied floor plans and common areas with distinct shapes and details such as alcoves and high ceilings. The minimalist approach preserves the original spirit and many of the features of the building including exposed brick walls, thick hardwood floors, and industrial-scale windows, while making use of every square foot to give the residents as much space and light as possible.

Hawthorne concludes in his review, “What you’re doing is closer, it seems to me, to architectural husbandry, cross-breeding the new with the old, the commercial with the residential, to produce some loftlike hybrid.” Although he is referring specifically to Linear City’s buildings, his observation might well be applied to other new multifamily typologies as they break with the expected residential models to create a singularly southern California form. The buyers for these homes are not moving to New York City; they are opting for an urban experience within a familiar frame of reference that requires sunshine, barbecues, and room to move.

“In a city of houses, the single-family home is the base unit of urbanism,” Inaba and Zellner posit in their catalog. As the region comes to terms with the question of a sustainable future, that will have to change. And the architects and developers who can deliver a more efficient, cost-effective, and marketable alternative are leading the way. **MFT**

ALEKS ISTANBULLU is the principal of **Aleks Istanbulu Architects**, based in Santa Monica, California.