

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Los Angeles Has a Housing Crisis. Can Design Help?

As Angelenos grapple with ways to address affordable housing, density and homelessness, a new architecture competition looks to low-rise solutions.



By Michael Kimmelman

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Can California's biggest city — and possibly America's least affordable one — redesign its way out of the housing crisis?

That's the question a city-sponsored architecture competition called "Low-Rise: Housing Ideas for Los Angeles" poses. Winners were announced the other day.

The city's housing problem has been decades in the making. Half a century ago, Los Angeles was a booming metropolis zoned for up to 10 million people. It pioneered low-rise density, with fourplexes, bungalow courts like Horatio West Court, Irving Gill's modernist masterpiece, and dingbats: those campy, stuccoed walk-ups on stilts, bearing make-believe names like Casa Bella and Camelot.

But the trajectory of housing in Los Angeles during the later years of the last century paralleled that of many other American cities where density came to be equated with urban decline and white residents resorted to redlining and other racially restrictive practices to keep out Black people and immigrants. Slow-growth policies, in Los Angeles's case fueled especially by fears of Manhattanization, slammed on the brakes for multifamily housing construction. Single-family zoning became the norm. Leaning into its freeway system and an environmentally oblivious mythology of the desert as an endless terrain for exurban expansion, Los Angeles, by 2010, had shrunk its zoning envelope to 4.3 million people.



Brooklyn-based Vonn Weisenberger placed first in the Corners category for "California Branch Housing." Vonn Weisenberger

Today, the region has the fewest homes per capita of any metro area in the country, and the second-lowest rental vacancy rate of any major metropolis. More than 75 percent of residential land in the city, representing more than 400,000 parcels, is zoned for single-family houses, according to Christopher Hawthorne, the city's chief design officer.

And with droughts, wildfires and climate change, the preponderance of single family neighborhoods, promoting sprawl and cars, is exacerbating not only the housing crunch but the region's ecological insecurity. Meanwhile, neighbors like Culver City and Santa Monica — creating jobs without building new homes for the influx of workers — are increasing the housing pressures in Los Angeles.

More than half of Angelenos today are renters, and almost half of renters spend at least half their income on housing. That's far beyond the federal definition of unaffordable housing (devoting over one-third of household income to housing). And it correlates with a rise in homelessness.

Local authorities have lately poured billions into a public transit system and pushed, with promising but limited results because of zoning restrictions, a Transit Oriented Communities Affordable Housing Incentive Program, which encourages construction of multifamily dwellings near transit stations. In his latest city budget, the Los Angeles Mayor Eric M. Garcetti promised \$1 billion to fight homelessness. And the city has acquired some 20 motels and other properties to convert into subsidized housing.

Naturally, residents living in single-family homes don't want to give up their backyards and picket fences. And many harbor vestigial, often groundless fears about jeopardizing the value of their properties. At the same time, the killings of African Americans by police and the nationwide protests that followed have highlighted a history of racism and real estate.

And with the pandemic, many single-family-home owners suddenly grasped the realities of housing insecurity and the limitations of zoning rules that foreclose walking to a neighborhood pharmacy or inhabiting the sort of flexible, multiuse, multifamily developments that facilitate live-work lifestyles and an alternative to commuting.

So where's the middle ground?



The winning proposal in the Fourplex category, "Hidden Gardens: A Balance Between Inside and Outside," by Omgivning and Studio-MLA. Omgivning and Studio-MLA

In 2017 California legislators took a step in the right direction, streamlining the approval process for the construction of accessory dwelling units — ADUs or granny flats, as they're also called: garage apartments, backyard cottages and studios added to existing houses. ADUs are less expensive to build and to rent than most other housing types, so they're an obvious and relatively simple way to increase housing stock. They have come to account for more than 20 percent of new housing in Los Angeles. To accelerate their production, Hawthorne recently commissioned a number of preapproved ADU designs, providing Angelenos with a means to avoid bureaucratic limbo when negotiating with the city's Department of Building and Safety.

But ADUs alone can't bridge the city's housing gulf.

So in tandem with Mayor Garcetti's Office of Budget and Innovation, Hawthorne, a former architecture critic for The Los Angeles Times, came up with "Low-Rise," a project harking back to the Case Study House Program that Arts & Architecture Magazine organized after World War II to devise new paradigms for residential design in Los Angeles.

"Low-Rise" entrants were tasked with cooking up, not pie-in-the-sky utopias, but pragmatic, communitarian schemes for duplexes, fourplexes and mixed-use, multilot corner developments that could, hypothetically, and ever so modestly, densify the city's single-family neighborhoods.

Unlike with the plans for ADUs, none of the "Low-Rise" proposals can actually be built under the city's current single-family zoning laws — and the forces arrayed against changing those laws remain formidable. Two years ago Los Angeles City Council members voted 12-0 to oppose SB 50, a state upzoning bill, in a purely ceremonial move reflecting the influence of an anti-development coalition like the ones that have emerged in other cities with runaway housing costs. In Los Angeles's case, the coalition unites NIMBY homeowners from the wealthy Westside who fret that development could deflate property values with housing-insecure renters in underserved neighborhoods who fear it will lead to displacement.

I can't think of a greater obstacle to solving homelessness and the affordable housing crisis in America today than this coalition.

"Low-Rise" doesn't envisage swaying NIMBYs who can't be swayed, but instead it aims to show Angelenos, who have legitimate concerns about their place in the city's future, visions of what communities designed for them could look like.

The competition staged listening sessions with residents. Entrants — there were nearly 400 of them — were required to hear what the residents said. Jurors included affordable housing developers, architects, tenants and city officials.

In essence, they were looking to resuscitate a legacy of low-rise multifamily architecture. As Carolina A. Miranda, the Los Angeles Times arts and urban design columnist (who grew up during the 70s in one such condo complex in the city) summarized the logic behind "Low-Rise": "We've been doing density all along. Now we simply need to do it better."

Winners produced various examples of what better can look like. A proposal by a Brooklyn-based architect, Vonn Weisenberger, pictured a suite of gabled, green-roof buildings with prefab cores and modular apartments sharing a shaded courtyard. The design mixes vernacular allusions to the old bungalow court and to Cliff May's classic ranch houses. The plan includes a ground-floor community room or commercial space, facing onto the street, so residents in the neighborhood could, say, walk to a corner grocery store to pick up milk instead of having to drive somewhere.



"The Family Table," by Studio TAAP, based in Austin, Texas, placed second in the Corners category. Studio TAAP

Another plan, by Studio TAAP, a young team from Austin, Texas, imagines a corner development featuring shared kitchens to keep construction costs down and to cater to multigenerational households who suffered during the pandemic from the mismatch between their desired living conditions and an anachronistic housing stock conceived to serve increasingly outdated notions of nuclear families.

In the "subdivision" category, Louisa Van Leer and Antonio Castillo add duplexes at the rear of single-family lots opening onto midblock alleys (Los Angeles has some 900 linear miles of them), which, as more duplexes get built, could gradually be greened.

And Omgivning and Studio-MLA, from Los Angeles, won the competition's fourplex category with a scheme called "Hidden Gardens: A Balance Between Inside and Outside." It involves two-story homes with ground-floor bedrooms and light-filled, upstairs living rooms and kitchens illuminated by clerestory windows and opening onto trellised balconies. Foot and bike paths weave through lawns and vegetable gardens. A recent study by McKinsey suggests fourplexes are the least expensive multifamily residences to build from the ground up in Los Angeles, so the best-suited to produce low-rise affordable housing in meaningful numbers.



Another view of the "Green Alley Housing" proposal by Van Leer and Castillo. Louisa Van Leer Architecture

The obvious question remains: Will pretty pictures change minds?

Who knows. The architecture in “Low-Rise” may at least jump-start a conversation. The Los Angeles mayor’s office is now working with the Department of City Planning to determine how to incorporate ideas from the competition in updates to the city’s housing and community plans.

A century ago Berkeley became the first California city to adopt single-family zoning, with the explicit goal of restricting Black and brown people from certain neighborhoods. Earlier this year Berkeley joined Sacramento as the first two cities in the state to move toward banning single-family zoning.

Los Angeles is a more complicated case. But it is also the capital of reinvention.

During the second half of the last century and the beginning of this one, Los Angeles County fell a million homes behind, relative to its population growth, after becoming a single-family mecca, thanks to federal freeway subsidies, subsidized home mortgages, some ingenious modern architecture and the mythology of the pool, the garden and the individual — in essence, a vision of paradise that ended up being primarily for white people.

But that’s the ultimate point of “Low-Rise.” The city has remade itself before.

It can do it again.



Another view of “Hidden Gardens: A Balance Between Inside and Outside” from Omgivning and Studio-MLA. Foot and bike paths weave through lawns and vegetable gardens. Omgivning and Studio-MLA

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