



NEW GENESIS APARTMENTS

Los Angeles, CA



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AT A GLANCE

Address

456 S. Main St. / Los Angeles, CA 90013
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Managing Organization

Skid Row Housing Trust

Mike Alvidrez, Chief Executive Officer, skidrow.org

Architect

Killefer Flammang Architects

Wade Killefer, FAIA, Principal, kfalosangeles.com

Interior Designer

Collaborative House

Suzanne Furst & Robert Nieto, www.collaborativehouse.com

Clients

Mixed population: 75% of units for those experiencing homelessness who have chronic medical health conditions; 25% of units for low-income households. Artists are invited for a portion of these units.

Facility Type and Capacity

Permanent supportive housing. 106 units (98 studios, 8 one-bedroom apartments).

Approximate Square Footage

56,525

Admission

30-60% annual median income

Year of Construction / Renovation and Approximate Cost

2012/\$36,000,000

Number of Floors

7

Site

Urban

On-site Services and Amenities

Multiple exterior community spaces, community kitchen and lounge, courtyard gardens, case management, offices, medical consultations, laundry.

CONTEXT & APPROACH

In 2015, Skid Row Housing Trust celebrated their 25th anniversary of assisting persons toward stable lives who have experienced homelessness and prolonged extreme poverty as well as physical and mental health, disability and addictions. To explore their architectural evolution is to observe the result of years of learning that led to their current projects that stand apart in their innovation and urban beauty. Engaged as they have been in large-city complicated problems of a needy population exploding in size, politics, regulations and funding challenges, they have learned and adapted as they progressed. Their recent collection of building projects shows a bold new direction that seeks to integrate their formerly homeless residents with both their apartment neighbors and the broader fabric of the city, and without apology.

Architecturally speaking, Skid Row Housing Trust's New Genesis Apartments on Main Street in Los Angeles walks the line of respect for its neighborhood while forging ahead in its visual vocabulary, conceived by project designers Killefer Flammang Architects and Collaborative House who provided interior design expertise. The neighborhood fabric of historic signage, SROs, restaurants and retail exerted an influence on the new project, shaping as the New Genesis's inclusion

of a storefront restaurant and ice cream shop and a front facade articulation that nods to the current street massing. A further look at features and details, though, actualizes a new and fresh perspective for attending to residents and staffs' needs that raises anew the question of how residents should be viewed by the public. For behind the innovative architecture lies a fundamental philosophy: let's not see homeless persons as a separate subset of the population but simply people that have experienced an adverse environmental condition for a period of time.

Interviews with Skid Row Housing Trust staff including Chief Executive Officer Mike Alvidrez and Corporate Relations and Events Manager Brad Robinson as well as architects Wade Killefer and interior designer Suzanne Furst revealed a group united in their commitment to understanding the situation of homelessness and navigating an exit from this crisis, responding to resident needs, and producing a project for long term success. The key points that follow emerged from their comments, as well as several New Genesis Apartment residents that were interviewed.

PRIMARY GOAL

Promoting a sense of home

Resident focus groups through the years have assisted Skid Row Housing Trust in unraveling the meaning of home, which in turn has helped shape priorities for its new housing projects, explained Mike Alvidrez. A knowledge of resident history of experiences has proven useful here, and led the organization to realize they needed to create places to live that did not replicate the feeling of courthouses, mental services facilities, and similarly awful-feeling places that may have led to residents' avoidance of clinical support to begin with.

When residents talked about home in the focus groups, fundamental ideas emerged like safety, the place where people engage the rest of the universe, a sanctuary, and where people entertain and connect with family and friends. Consequently, the architecture needed to set the stage for these things to occur.

The realization from this exercise was that architecture and interior design is a language "that can either say 'we don't care about you or how you feel about the experience of being in this place,' or something more positive. This language tellingly reveals itself in how we

talk about building projects too," notes Alvidrez. "We're developers and we tend to create developments with units. But I'll bet that when you've worked all day and you're tired and you're ready to go home, you don't say I think it's time to go to my housing unit. No one says that."

FEATURES

Fearless high design

Like the New Genesis project, Skid Row Housing Trust's other recent projects (Star Apartments, The Six, and the New Pershing Apartments to name a few) show a collective departure from older viewpoints imposed on supportive housing. Explains Mike Alvidrez, negative associations of permanent supportive housing with affordable housing in the past compelled developers to make their buildings blend in with the neighborhood, taking great efforts to visually 'keep its head down' and be conventional. As a result, affordable housing had a 'look' that said 'don't notice us'. The idea was to not be high profile in the hopes of avoiding a not-in-my-back-yard issue. Through time, it became clear this has not worked. Instead, Skid Row Housing Trust has taken an alternative approach of working with visionary designers that conceive solutions severed and freed from the notion of blending in. Alvidrez explains that Skid Row Housing Trust's "loud and proud" design approach has become their strong suit. In the Los Angeles context, experimentation is perhaps not just forgiven, but expected. And coming along for the ride of high design is the means to help shape the image of its residents for the better, as persons deserving of not just humane housing, but audaciously beautiful places to live. The idea of design as a prescription makes sense here, as those who live in this housing have the most to arguably gain from the healing effects this architecture provides.

Helping ensure success through a coordinated entry system

The fabric of supportive housing in Los Angeles recognizes the great diversity of people who are in housing crisis, which includes families, single adults, those with mental issues, victims of domestic violence, veterans, the elderly, HIV sufferers, and persons with multiple chronic conditions. The resident application system identifies these hurdles and paints a picture of the applicant's current challenges and situation, then matches them in a database with the most appropriate housing type for their needs. It is this pre-screening that helps ensure residents' success at New Genesis Apartments, reducing evictions and minimizing disruptions that might arise between residents.

Permanent residence with [subtle] clinical support

The housing first/permanent supportive housing model (providing supportive shelter first, then assisting residents with perception and behavioral issues afterward) recognizes that housing alone is not sufficient, and for long term resident success to occur, on-site services are necessary including case management, group therapy and on-demand medical services. Underlying this decision is the realization that human beings in crisis

TODAY
I AM CAPABLE
OF HANDLING
ANYTHING THAT
HAPPENS

I HAVE
HIGH
SELF-ESTEEM

I AM
SUPPORTED
BY THE
UNIVERSE

I AM
WORTHY OF
TRUE LOVE

I AM
CONFIDENT
AND
STRONG

I AM ATTRACTING
GREAT THINGS
INTO MY LIFE

I AM



can walk a razor thin line of holding it together or falling apart. What architecture can do is provide a foundation of stability that increases these persons' immunity to sliding back into former ways of thinking and acting. Put another way, the housing first model has as its goal the long-term reintegration of formerly outcast people back into the fabric of life. For Alvidrez, the results are clear to see: "When persons that don't have basic hygiene amenities get housing, they walk taller, they dress like everyone else. They say hi to you. Homeless people don't say hi to you."

The role of social support structures

While clinical support services like case management and medical services are a critical part of the success of Skid Row Housing Trust residents, the larger goal of the apartment experience is to communicate and prompt normalcy. Reintegration of these individuals can only occur if stigma is diffused and a sense of community coaxes residents back into positive participation with their neighbors and the larger world. The social support must function just as the clinical support does and this idea has influenced key design decisions in the New Genesis Apartments. For example, the case manager and therapy staff members' offices are not stationed right at the gated entrance, but located in offices adjacent to it alongside the building's street-level storefronts with significant transparency to the focal atrium. This removes the 'sentry' look and feel of the entrance sequence while still maintaining a needed security presence through a gate buzzer. The priority of open sight lines is obvious here—between staff offices and the atrium, the community gathering room, and the

open corridor balconies above. The effect is subtle but effective in evoking a sense of security and presence, but also 'normal'.

Skid Row Housing Trust ultimately sees the housing function as a stage set for positive human social connection, made real through various means. Alvidrez explains that "it's not about where you live, it's social connections based on my dominoes partner or that person I see in the mindful meditation class. Social relationships are what people value the most". Steve Hatter, a New Genesis resident explained that the atrium configuration and weather-protected surrounding balconies offers residents an attractive alternative to remaining in their apartments: "My neighbor spends most of his time outside of his apartment just looking around at all the people. Sometimes he'll come down here to the atrium and sit. It's a productive way for him to spend his time rather than vegging out in front of the TV. He gets some interaction with people." Resident Barbara McBride similarly enjoys the corridor balconies, using them for a walking exercise regimen even when the weather is inclement. These examples suggest that the New Genesis architecture presents perceptually safe opportunities to engage with others.

While the open interior corridors and sightlines support resident connections, it is the New Genesis Apartments community gathering room that is most central to normalizing resident connections. This space is colorful, texturally diverse, and enjoys broad sightlines to the atrium. The natural light penetration here is a notably attractive feature—and a key goal for the design

team early on. Suzanne Furst, interior designer of the community gathering room took care to use plants that complement the light as well as modular furnishings in highly durable fabrics so that the room could be flexibly rearranged to suit various activities. Skid Row Housing Trust Program Manager Stephen Butler remarked that the open space facilitates interaction and importantly, the sense of resident community has evolved without staff support. Asked if having a space to get away from your apartment has a calming effect on one's state of mind, Butler described that having a place to get away from others through use of the atrium, community room, or nearby exterior 'away' spaces was important for promoting a sense of tranquility. The empowerment of personal choice—how much or little to engage, what to look at, where to sit are simple, but powerful tools here.

Actualizing a sense of optimism

A visual reading of the New Genesis architectural features reveals an optimism about its residents that has the effect of freeing up the design approach and its possibilities. Mike Alvidrez explains that "our buildings are inspirational and aspirational. This is an investment in one of the most basic necessities." This stance also embraces the idea that people are positively suggestible by their surroundings. There is also the added benefit that residents take better care of their surroundings and may be more motivated to maintain their stability. Notes Alvidrez, "if you're living in a dumpy place—so what—what am I losing if I get kicked out of here? If it's nice, it's important and worth preserving. You're more willing to do the work to stay there."

Integration with the neighborhood community

In a nod to the surrounding historic neighborhood long associated with art and music, Skid Row Housing Trust reserved a series of its top floor loft apartments for artists, which both brought vibrant community members to the New Genesis community and integrated a diversity of neighbors alongside the low income and formerly homeless tenants. Notably, apartments for formerly homeless persons are not isolated within the apartment complex, but dispersed such that a resident would not necessarily recognize a neighbor as 'low income' or 'formerly homeless'. This decision seems an important one for normalizing life and relationships.

Skid Row Housing Trust's realization that its residents need re-integration with the community manifests itself in its architecture, but simultaneously reaches out in broader ways. While its architecture becomes a platform and setting for recovery, the neighborhood's embrace of art and music is also brought to life through creative programs. Programs spearheaded by Skid Row Housing Trust Corporate Relations and Events Manager Brad Robinson engage residents in programs and initiatives that boost their self-esteem and ease their day to day living. For example, the nearby Star Apartments hosts a program that teaches residents to create ceramic art mosaic objects that are then advertised and sold to others.. Another program the Trust has facilitated is a partnership with the high-end artisans of the Heath Ceramics Company. Heath customers can purchase new

dishware for reduced cost in exchange for donating their existing dishes to Skid Row Housing Trust residents, who often are in need of kitchenware. The storefront lobby of the nearby Skid Row Housing Trust Pershing Apartments served as the point of receipt of these dishes by residents in a series of party events. It is these win-win opportunities that enliven residents' lives and demonstrate positive ways to interact with broader society.

The aspirational architecture and interior spaces of the New Genesis Apartments accommodates another aspect of neighborhood integration that is important, but not entirely obvious—by incorporating outside service providers such as the storefront restaurant tenants and clinical support services on-site, the challenge became how to attract these service providers to come here? Mike Alvidrez observes that providing attractive places to work near a green, vegetation-filled atrium, plenty of natural light and a vibrancy of colors and textures, the architecture itself helped create the desire to engage in this location. People want to be a part of something that is growing, progressing—and architecture is a physical manifestation of this progress that moves people toward this important end. In a positive cycle, bringing good staff and neighborhood people into contact with residents only helps the community engagement effort more.

Summary

The visual confidence of the New Genesis Apartments illustrates a clear advocacy for design equity. Its architecture sets the stage for resident re-engagement with others and serves as a worthy setting for the vibrant programs that Skid Row Housing Trust facilitates. The question may be 'Can architecture play a supporting role in life recovery?' Skid Row Housing Trust health outcomes statistics show that residents achieve a more medically stable status after their move to the New Genesis Apartments. Those numbers, however, do not necessarily capture the full, intangible aspects of living in a beautiful place. "You sort of know it's working because every time I come here I feel good", noted Mike Alvidrez.

FACILITY TOUR

Attendance to Human Needs

Use this key on the following pages of the facility tour to learn how the design of the building and its spaces contributes to the well-being of its residents.



Dignity and Self Esteem



Empowerment and Personal Control



Security, Privacy and Personal Space



Stress Management



Sense of Community



Beauty and Meaning



Exterior

The New Genesis Apartments presents a neutral color palette punctuated by areas of saturated color for interest.

Its massing supports the surrounding historical Main Street precedents.

The saturated New Genesis color mirrors the buildings across the street such as the historic Roslyn SRO building.

The storefront tenants are a restaurant and ice cream shop.





Central atrium

Architect Wade Killefer identified the significant natural light presence as 'rule number one' for important reasons. Post traumatic stress disorder is a pervasive condition for persons who are homeless, which leads some to die 15 years earlier than persons without this condition, Mike Alvidrez explains. Light is an antidote for the depression that can greatly plague residents.





View of street from atrium

The goal was to create places to live that did not replicate the feeling of courthouses, mental services facilities, and similarly awful-feeling places that may have led to residents' avoidance of clinical support to begin with. Open corridors prompt residents to venture outside their private apartments to engage others.



Atrium and solar panels

Solar thermal and PV systems populate the roof. The project is USGBC LEED for Homes- certified LEED Platinum.



Community kitchen and lounge

The community gathering room is flanked by natural light access on both sides.

Sightlines to the central atrium, color and textural interest give this space a visual prominence that prompts lingering.



Photography: Mary E. Nichols.



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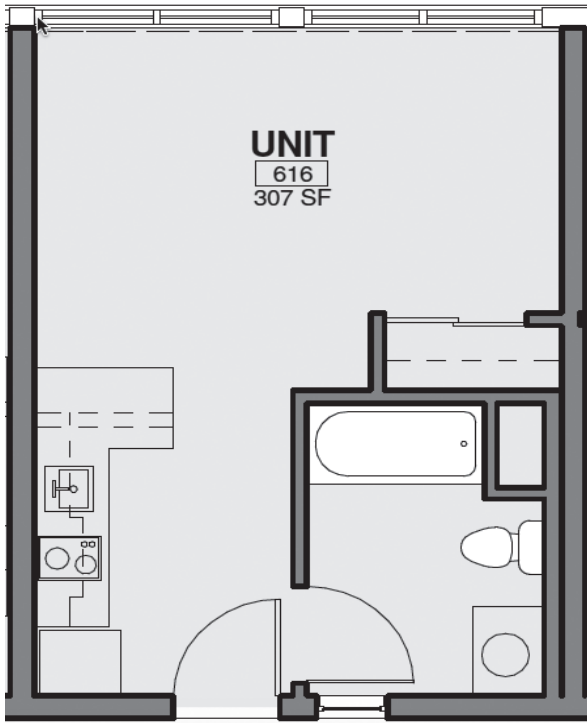




Community lounge exterior breakout spaces

'Away spaces' flanking the community gathering room let residents decide on the degree of their engagement with others and promote various sizes of conversation groupings.





Apartment for formerly homeless resident

Collaborative House designer Suzanne Furst had the apartment furnishings custom made from solid maple wood for durability.



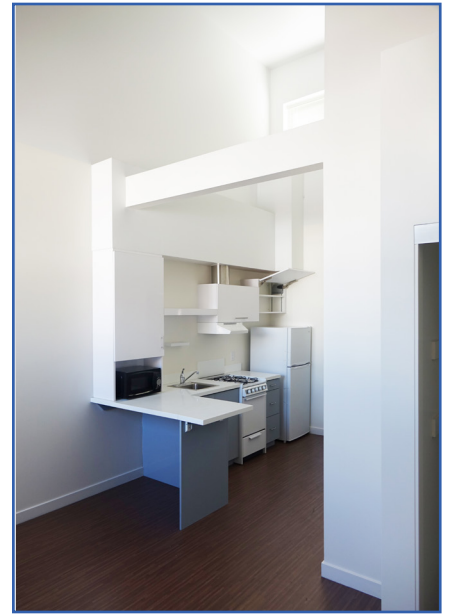
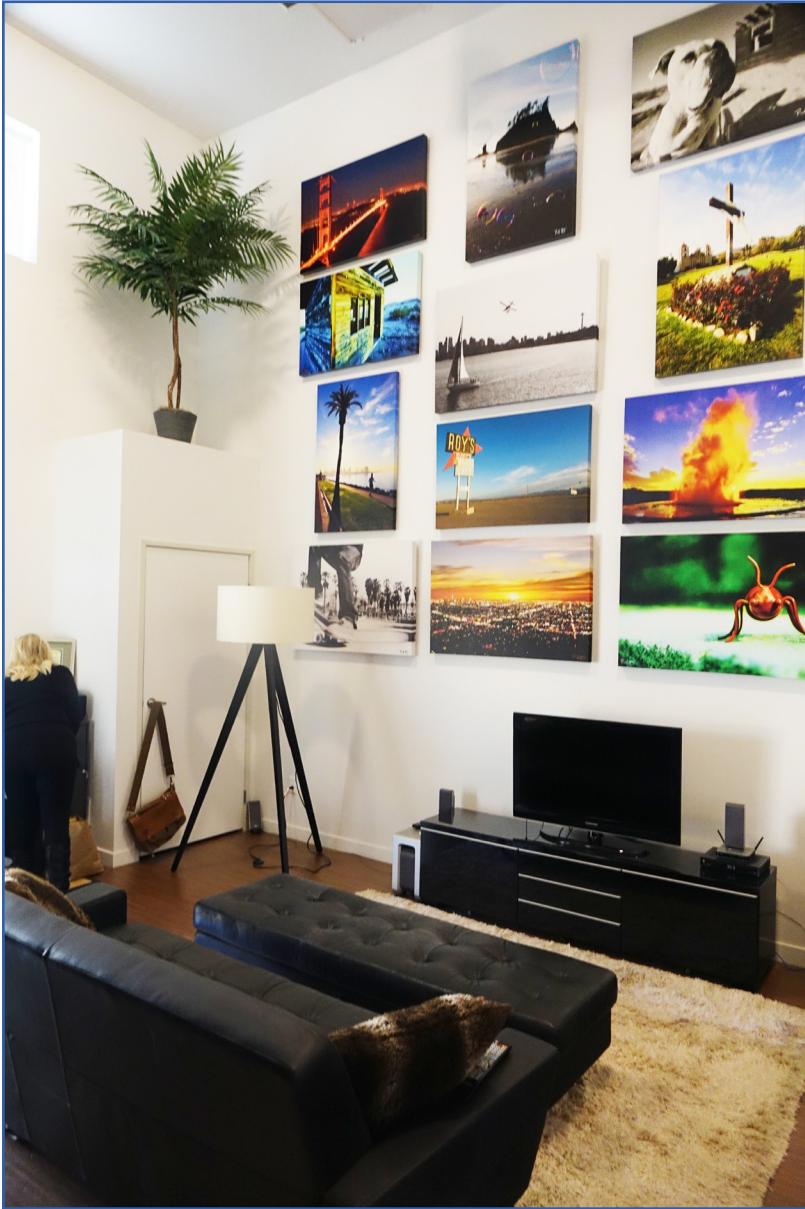


Photography: Mary E. Nichols.

Apartment for formerly homeless resident: as envisioned by interior designer

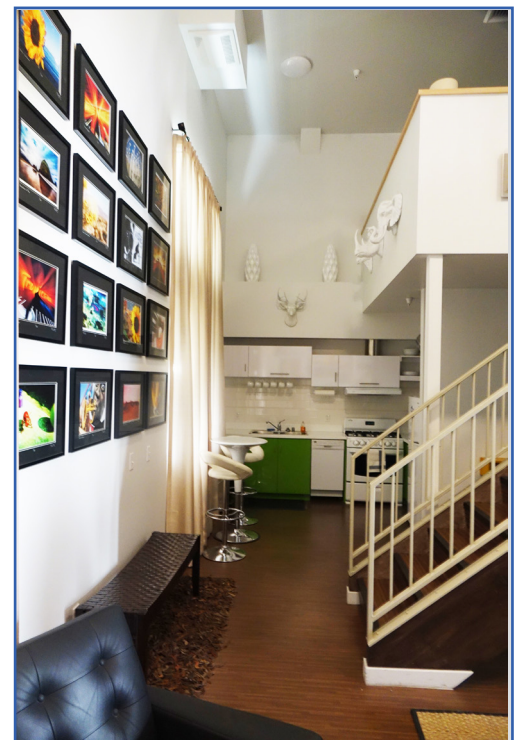
Here, Collaborative House interior designer Suzanne Furst demonstrates the possibilities of the studio apartment's design. Careful planning of the apartments by Killefer Flammang and Furst led to strategic electrical outlet placement and use of durable floor finishes.



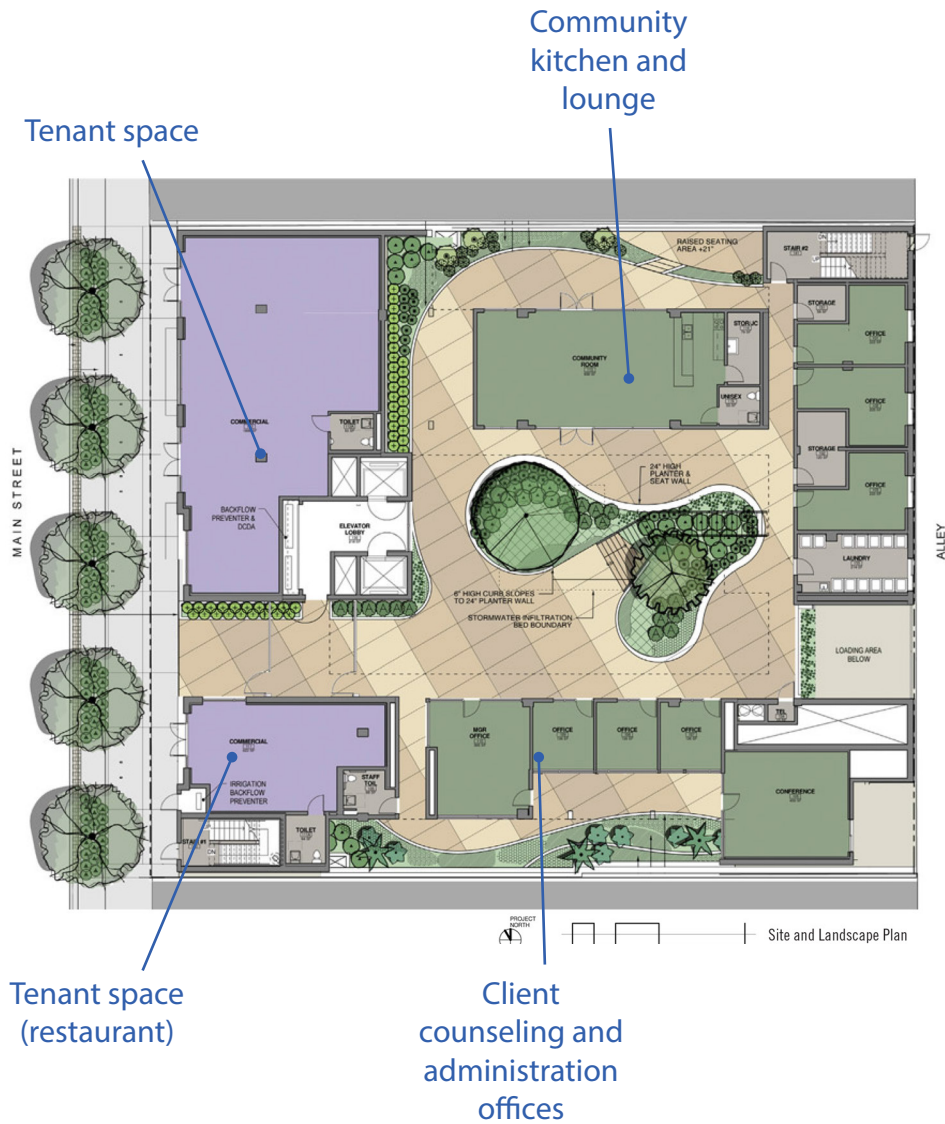


Apartment for artist (low income)

New Genesis Apartments is a mixed use facility that seeks to remove the stigma of supportive housing. The apartment mix includes low income artist lofts on the top floor. These residences feature an extended ceiling height and an internal staircase to an upstairs bedroom.



Floor Plan: First Floor



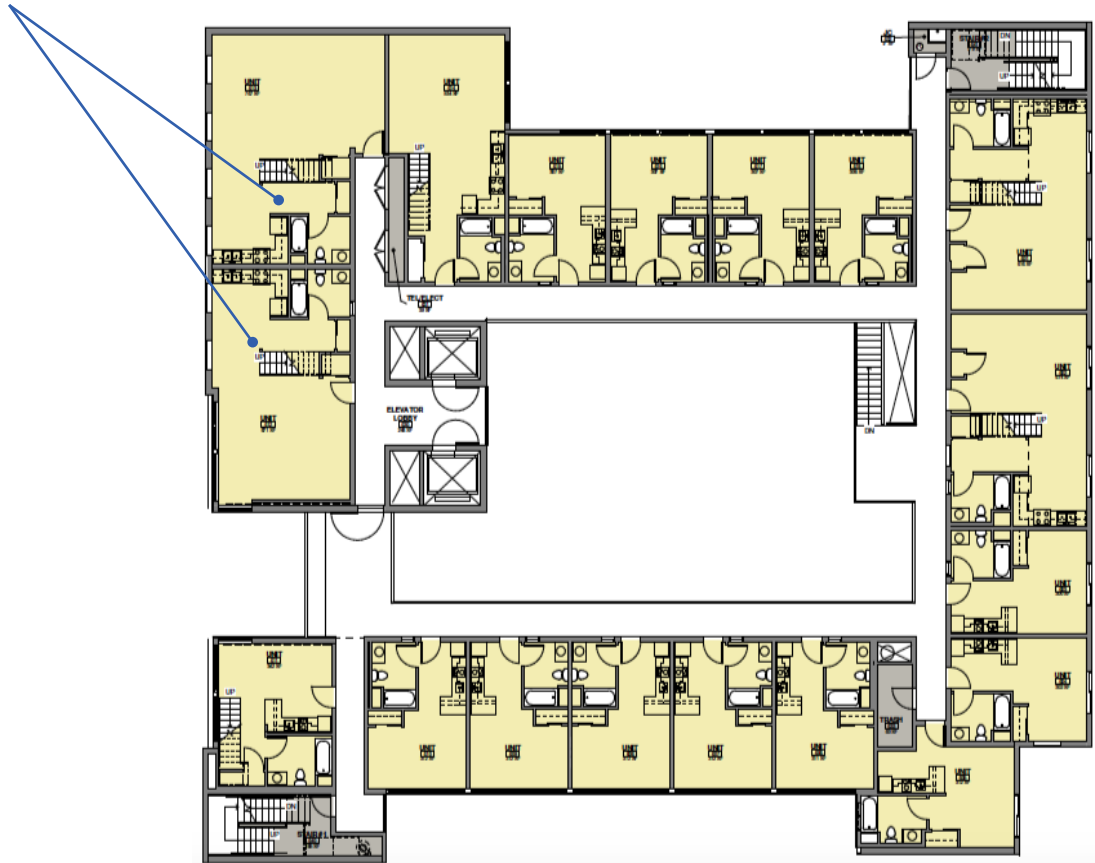
Floor Plan: Second through Fifth Floors

Open air high visibility balconies bring light and promote sense of security



Floor Plan: Sixth Floor

Artist's Lofts



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank these individuals for their contributions to this case study:

Skid Row Housing Trust

Mike Alvidrez, Chief Executive Officer

Brad Robinson, Corporate Relations and Events Manager/Philanthropy and Communications

Residents of New Genesis Apartments

[anonymous resident]

Barbara McBride

Steve Hatter

Collaborative House

Suzanne Furst, interior designer

Robert Nieto, interior designer

Select image photography: Mary E. Nichols

Killefer Flammang Architects

Wade Killefer, Principial

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