

HOME

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With new takes on light and space, town homes are offering a twist on the traditional condo.

Time to step up

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The façade of the new town house complex has 27 windows of differing sizes, all placed in a seemingly random pattern across the 80-foot-long front wall. The glass panes have been pushed out 6 inches, and the backs of their frames have been painted a variety of hues, so as the sun rises, the four-story stucco building glows with soft, shifting color. The effect is akin to that of a giant wall of flat-panel TVs, and according to Santa Monica architects Hadrian Predock and John Frane, the façade pays homage to the world of movies.

"The building is in Hollywood after all," Predock said.

But the compelling face of 1322 Detroit St. also represents something much larger: a city in transition. As the region grows more dense, architects and developers continue to look for ways to create new types of living arrangements — in this case, a clever complex that uses the city's town home ordinance to squeeze 15 residences onto a 14,000-square-foot lot.

Dubbed Habitat 15 and scheduled for completion later this summer, the complex is meant to appeal to young professionals who are eager to step up from apartment living but cannot afford most traditional

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LET THE SUNSHINE IN: Architect Hadrian Predock, at top, walks by the window of a nearly completed town home at Habitat 15. Abundant skylights and windows in the town house complex are meant to flood the multistory units with light.

Town homes go for 'house' touches

[Complex, from Page E1] single-family houses on the Westside. The idea behind the compact urban dwellings is to create homes that are truly unique and that feel more like individual houses than cookie-cutter condos stacked atop one another.

Design elements such as the irregular window placement are not merely some artistic statement. Their positioning on all the exterior walls, as well as on the roof in the form of skylights, is driven less by the aesthetic demands for symmetry and more by the need to draw light inside the homes, some of which are two stories tall, some of which are three. Lucky for the architects, the final result is functional and idiosyncratically arresting.

In designing the living spaces, Predock and Frane were given considerable freedom by developer Richard Loring, president of the Habitat Group.

"Other than having to have at least two bedrooms and two bathrooms," Frane said, "he gave us few guidelines as to how to achieve this."

The architects ultimately built two separate elongated blocks with a multi-level courtyard in between. They had some fun with the complex's entry tunnel, which starts as a square and becomes semicircular as you walk in. As the shape shifts, the circumference shrinks. This narrowing effect pulls you to the building's inner courtyard.

Intent on privacy for each unit, Predock and Frane avoided the pitfall of many apartment complexes, which often place the pool in the center space.

"They are noisy, and often end up making residents feel like they're living in each other's apartments," Predock said.

Instead, the courtyard at Habitat 15 is crisscrossed by large, elegant steel stairways and spanned by two



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICARDO DEBARBARA Los Angeles Times

steel bridges.

The building has one elevator, on the western row of units, so residents of the eastern structure cross the center bridge, which is three stories high, to reach home.

The architects didn't want owners opening their front doors and having neighbors looking in from across the courtyard. So they placed 40-foot-high steel poles, 25 of them in all, in a straight line along the courtyard — a construction they call a pergola, on which vines will grow to form a green wall.

The placement of this green wall closer to one of the two buildings gives some residents more light as well as a view, albeit one of the vines.

"Those in the other block face the street and already have access to light and views from there," Predock said.

Most of the town houses have a loft-like, open bedroom, usually on a

floor separate from the main living area. A second bedroom, more private and smaller, could be an office, a guest room or home for a roommate, Predock said.

Three-story units have skylights strategically placed to allow the sun's rays to reach all levels. This layering of light is particularly critical to the homes in the buildings' middle section, which don't get as much daylight from side windows as in units at the buildings' corners.

The town houses are an average of 17 feet wide and 40 feet deep, but a sense of spaciousness is afforded by the height of their ceilings: 10 feet high on the first floor, as high as 20 feet in other areas. Skylights and the multi-story design also help.

"Psychologically, there is more sense of space when you're going up and down between levels," Frane said.

In keeping with the aspirations of



FEATURES: Hadrian Predock, left, stands by one of two bridges that span the courtyard connecting the two wings of Habitat 15. Above, window panes are pushed out 6 inches and the backs of their frames are painted a variety of colors that glow in the sunlight.

urban buyers, kitchens have custom cabinetry (dark gray laminate with exposed plywood edges), floors are peccan plank and the appliances include Sub-Zero refrigerators.

Despite the design ingenuity and attention to detail, as in many in-fill projects there's only so much that can be done with the surroundings — here, a less than spectacular section of Detroit Street. To appreciate the views of the Hollywood Hills in one town home, one must stoop to see over the apartment building to the north.

A neighbor to the south is even closer, and the newly constructed, pseudo-Spanish apartments across the street probably will not earn points with buyers of modern architecture. Hiding their presence will require window treatments.

But Loring, whose projects include the Lorcan O'Hertly-designed complex next to the landmark Schindler

House in West Hollywood, said he thought the Detroit Street complex "raises the bar" for design in the area while filling a long-overlooked niche in the market.

The recession, however, could pressure developers to scale back on such housing. Loring said buyers used to be willing to pay a 30% premium for architecturally savvy homes. But these days, he said, that premium has dropped to the single digits.

When the town houses on Detroit go on sale this summer, their prices will range from \$300,000 to \$500,000. Loring said he expected them to sell in three to four months. Whether that prediction proves correct may provide some hint as to how many more ambitious designs may — or may not — be headed our way in the years to come.

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