Do Not Disturb Occupants

Written paper

Ellen E. Donnelly
Marc L. Maxey

University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Architecture is owned. It is financed and governed. The protocols for producing architecture including zoning ordinances, deed covenants, and mortgage financing actively but invisibly dictate the architectural object. This spatial DNA of the city, while seemingly fixed, is incredibly precarious. This paper and design project proposes an alternative approach to land ownership through the manipulation of property ownership, policy loopholes, tax dodges, political coups, and collective development strategies, mobilizing the agency of architectural research as the basis for housing advocacy.

Los Angeles, a region with one of the highest-value real estate markets in the country, will serve as a case study and be the focus of this paper. Many Los Angeles municipalities and their neighborhoods have historically high ratios of rental property to owner-occupied houses. The financial protocols of the past century, specifically the 30-year mortgage, enabled Los Angeles's sprawl through widespread homeownership. This
financial instrument is responsible for many of the objects and materials of our built environment as mortgage underwriters adhered to Federal Housing Administration standards and specifications without considering lifecycle or environmental impact beyond the term of the loan. By proposing alternative methodologies for financing and owning architecture, this proposal re-imagines single neighborhoods, block by block, as repeatable micro-cities that redefine the role of citizenship, community, domesticity, and the economics of housing through material and performance in urban space. Through the implementation of a non-profit land trust hybridized with a low-profit limited liability company (L3c), longtime owners wishing to liquidate properties are financially incentivized to sell their buildings to the L3c and donate their land to the trust as a tax write off against massive capital gains. Decoupling ownership of buildings from land creates permanent affordability by removing real estate from the speculative market. The previous ideology of homeownership—a burden only justified by rising real estate prices—is replaced with a sustainable approach to building wealth through a community-led, design-driven lifestyle where best-use rather than highest-use governs development.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Ellen Donnelly is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Her research lies at the intersection of architecture and transient urbanism and deals with the spatial, cultural and temporal manifestations of large-scale events, installations and designed artifacts.

Ellen is a founding partner of Field Day, a research and design practice that explores situationally driven urbanisms that upend traditional notions of property ownership. Field Day’s project Do Not Disturb Occupants was recently exhibited at the A+D Museum as part of UCLA’s cityLab’s Los Angeles, Times 10, exhibition. Previously, as Curatorial Fellow at UCLA’s Hammer Museum, Ellen was the co-curator of Building for Better Living: A. Quincy Jones, an exhibition that explored Jones’s role as an advocate for post-war housing reform and his association with progressive housing co-operatives and developers to make modern design accessible to the middle class. In 2015, she co-curated The Secret Life of Date Palms for the UAE Pavilion at the Milan Expo, a design-research project and exhibition which examined the historic role of the date palm tree in Middle Eastern culture, and sought to highlight its material and cultural significance in a period of rapid social, cultural and economic change.

Marc Maxey is a lecturer at the University of Nebraska, College of Architecture where he teaches undergraduate design studio. Marc’s research experiments with real estate and financial instruments as a means to add greater architectural agency than possible with words and representations. Most recently, through his project A Citizen’s Guide To Real Estate Investment, he purchased over a dozen tax foreclosed properties in Detroit to protect occupants from unnecessary eviction. His research shed light on Detroit’s flawed
foreclosure process, and demonstrated a proven and scalable model to mitigate this contemporary urban crisis. Marc completed his Master of Architecture at Princeton University, where he was selected as Princeton’s 2015 Dalai Lama Fellow and was the recipient of the Alpha Rho Chi Medal. He received his Bachelor of Science in architecture from the University of Michigan in 2009.

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