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A Dignified Domain

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Single-room occupancy hotels present all the opportunities and challenges of creating good dwellings and outgoings, within the charged context of for-profit buildings that are located in difficult urban settings.

SROs raise the question of placemaking within the limitations of a single room: For the people who live there, this one room is their entire house, their domain. SROs also have great potential as catalysts, as energizers in creating connections, neighborhoods and good outgoings.

For me, working on SROs has been a process of exploration and struggle. The central challenge is to bring a domestic quality to a building type that is inherently institutional, to design a single-room residence that has the qualities of a one-bedroom home. Though we've made progress, the challenges of private-sector economics, ADA requirements and the fact that building codes in most cities do not address this building type have created serious obstacles to achieving a dignified domain.

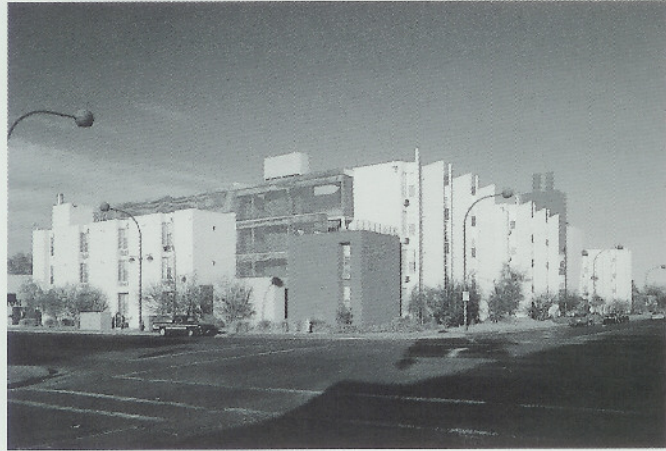
The SRO we recently designed in Las Vegas, Campaigne Place, is typical: the rooms are only ten feet wide with a

toilet and shower behind a curtain, a closet, a sink and a refrigerator under the counter with a little cooktop. The building has budget-driven, double-loaded corridors (probably the last thing any of us would ever want to create if we didn't have to) and a single entrance point that must be carefully controlled.

Within this context, small details, however modest they would be for others, can mean a great deal to the dignity of the single room. In the main living area there is one architectural gesture: a butt-joined glass window that provides a protected opening for the desert light. The L-shaped windows help alleviate the shoebox feeling that is inherent in anything that is rectangular, repetitive and ten feet wide. We felt so strongly about this idea that we built full-scale mock-ups of the room to demonstrate it; in future projects we hope to convince developers that something like a small bookshelf above the door is necessary to further

Campaigne Place, Las Vegas. Typical residential room.

Photograph by Brighton Noing.



humanize or allow participation in the habitation of these small rooms.

Our greatest accomplishments here have to do with achieving good outgoings. The small lobby has the front desk and a generous two-story waiting area, a little smoking deck or patio off to the side, a laundry room, a small gymnasium, a little Internet corner and even a little protected desert garden.

I learned with the first three SROS we designed that there are benefits to messy circulation as opposed to clinically correct (in an architectural sense) circulation, so it is quite intentional here that one walks through the lobby and past the Internet corner, to wash clothes adjacent to the gym: It's a way of engendering the serendipity of social relationships.

From an urban design standpoint, the corners of the building are held to two stories so they will be at a better pedestrian scale. Decks were added to allow views out to the street, helping create a sense of security. At one point a long, internal corridor actually pokes outside, turns a corner, and leads into a second building; this not only gives people walking along the hallway an unexpected connection to the outside, but also reduced our costs in terms of fire codes.

Fortunately, we had not only a good client in The Tom Hom Group but also enlightened advocates in the Las Vegas planning staff and elected politicians, who enabled these accomplishments. They realized that low-income housing can nurture good outgoings, which in turn can begin to reinvigorate an entire neighborhood.

Campaign Place, Las Vegas.

Left: Street view.

Right: Lobby.

Photographs by Brighton Noing.