

Homeless housing developer aims to bring back the bungalow court

A South LA project might be LA's first new bungalow court in 70 years

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The planned complex would include four Spanish-style duplexes arranged on a single lot. *Renderings courtesy RNLA*

As Los Angeles's affordable housing crisis worsens, and the number of homeless residents climbs, architects and city planners are on the hunt for new design solutions to produce new homes in a quick, cost-effective way.

But one nonprofit organization aims to bring back a very old housing concept: the bungalow court.

"It's a good way to house people," says John Perfitt, director of Restore Neighborhoods LA, which earlier this year won a \$500,000 grant from Los Angeles County for its Bungalow Gardens proposal in South Los Angeles.

The complex would likely be LA's first new bungalow court in more than seven decades, according to research conducted by Los Angeles planning consultant Mark Vallianatos.

Perfitt calls the familiar design style of the bungalow court—at one time the most common form of multifamily housing in Southern California—a “functional” but “elegant” form of architecture.

“We’ve been cognizant about designing a project that people can welcome into their neighborhood,” says project manager Jason Neville. “This is our opportunity to put our money where our mouth is in terms of building something of high quality.”

Built mainly between the turn-of-the-century and the 1930s, Los Angeles’s bungalow courts generally consist of a cluster of individual cottages arranged around a courtyard or a strip of shared open space.

The complexes still dot the city’s urban landscape, and have made numerous appearances in films and television shows. But courts have been impractical to build since Los Angeles officials adopted minimum parking requirements for new developments in the 1930s. They were eventually phased out in favor of larger complexes that could be built atop garages, as Vallianatos points out.

RNLA’s project, planned between two existing court-style complexes in the Vermont Knolls neighborhood, is set to include eight units—four studios and four one-bedrooms—spread between four buildings surrounded by shared space. It’s a classic bungalow court layout, with a Spanish-style design that Perfitt says was inspired by the work of early modern architect Irving Gill.



The project would be sandwiched between two existing court-type complexes.

Building this type of project is now possible because of LA’s Transit Oriented Communities program, established after voters signed off on affordable housing ballot measure JJJ in 2016.

Projects like Bungalow Gardens, which are accessible to major train or bus stops and contain affordable housing, are eligible for certain incentives—including more allowable density

and fewer required parking spaces. Because all of the units in RNLA's court will be affordable, the project isn't required to have parking at all.

That frees up room on the narrow lot for multiple structures and common space. It also means the developer can build more units than what would otherwise have been required.

Perfitt says that under the TOC rules, the Bungalow Gardens project could have been more dense than what plans now call for.

"We probably could have done more there," he says. "Next time, [the bungalows] will probably be two stories."

With partial grant funding from the county secured, RNLA is now opening the project up to investors from the general public in order to raise additional funds needed to complete the project. The nonprofit recently launched a campaign for the project on real estate crowdfunding website Small Change.

Anyone can invest in the project, but Neville says the purpose of this strategy is giving neighbors the chance to claim a financial stake in its success.

Tenants of the complex will be selected through the county's Coordinated Entry System, which connects homeless residents with available housing. Rents will be subsidized through housing vouchers provided by the county.

Because nearby residents often blanch at the prospect of homeless housing in their neighborhoods, Neville says that getting members of the community involved in the development process could be a key step in building neighborhood support for such projects.

Designing structures that fit into the neighborhood is another part of that.

"We want to migrate people toward welcoming affordable housing in their neighborhoods," Neville says. "Contextual design is a part of that."