



Architectural Strategies for the Democratization of Design in Affordable Housing

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Abstract

This article examines the prevailing tendency to equate affordable housing with cost minimization at the expense of quality—an approach that exacerbates social inequality by denying low- and middle-income families access to well-designed living environments. The paper contests this paradigm by framing high-quality design as a universal right rather than a privilege reserved for elite projects. Drawing on the philosophical positions of architects such as Charles Correa, Álvaro Siza, Alejandro Aravena, and Peter Zumthor, this argument posits that housing which is both dignified and also human-centered strengthens communities and improves the quality of life, even under fairly stringent fiscal constraints. Practical strategies to gain this balance appear in Bogotá (Colombia) and Miami (USA) case analyses: layouts efficiently arrange space, methods inventively prefabricate, designers integrate communal and natural spaces, and designers design with cultural sensitivity. These examples evidence that economic efficiency with architectural dignity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, economic efficiency and architectural dignity reinforce one another. The study advances a conceptual framework for architects as well as policymakers who seek to mobilize architecture as an instrument of social equity toward urban transformation by positioning affordable housing as a principal arena for the democratization of design. Architects, urban planners, policymakers, as well as developers committed to affordable housing that balances economic efficiency with high design quality will find this article relevant, thereby contributing to social justice and sustainable urban development.

Keywords: Affordable Housing, Democratization of Design, Architecture as Social Equity, Incremental Housing, Spatial Dignity.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world faces an intensifying affordable-housing crisis that exceeds a mere shortage of square meters and reaches into foundational questions of quality of life and social equity (Birch et al., 2025). Globally, rising urban land values, supply-chain frictions in construction materials, restrictive zoning regimes, and an informal labor market compound the difficulty, rendering dignified housing unattainable for a substantial share of the population. The problem is especially acute in large urban agglomerations. In Miami (USA), for instance, rapid development and immigration have driven sharp increases in housing costs, such that more than 75% of low- and middle-income (LMI) households bear excessive financial burdens, spending over 30% of their income on housing (Elliott et al., 2017). The crisis concerns not only the paucity of units but also a pervasive decline in quality that directly influences the well-being and social mobility of millions.

Historically, within budget-constrained construction, the term affordable has ossified into a synonym for low-quality. This paradigm rests on the fundamental fallacy that architecture is a matter of taste or aesthetics, and that the benefits of good design should be reserved for those who can afford them. Such an approach has produced mass housing for low-income populations that is frequently characterized as cheaply built, banal, and even dispiriting (Wright, 2014). Projects devolve into meeting minimal functional requirements and area standards while ignoring the human, cultural, and emotional dimensions of domestic space. The outcome is not merely inferior buildings, but spaces that can foster social isolation, stigmatization, and long-term degradation of quality of life, thereby entrenching cycles of poverty.

This article advances the argument that architecture can—and should—operate as a powerful instrument of social equity. High-quality design in affordable housing is not a

Citation: Leonardo Rico Florez, "Architectural Strategies for the Democratization of Design in Affordable Housing", Universal Library of Arts and Humanities, 2025; 2(4): 76-82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulahu.2025.0204013>.

luxury, but a fundamental right necessary for a dignified and humane living environment. The aim is to move beyond a discourse of costs and square footage and to systematize architectural strategies that enable high-quality design under constrained budgets. By analyzing the theoretical foundations articulated by leading architects and drawing on practical examples from diverse urban contexts, this paper aims to demonstrate that architectural dignity and economic efficiency are not mutually antagonistic objectives. Rather, thoughtful design constitutes a keystone of long-term social and economic value, strengthening communities and enhancing urban resilience. Thus, affordable housing is reframed not as a problem to be solved at the lowest cost, but as an opportunity to democratize architectural excellence and advance social justice.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The investigation of architectural strategies for democratizing design in affordable housing rests on a combined analysis of theoretical, empirical, and contextual sources. Theoretical grounding derives from the philosophical writings and practices of Charles Correa, Álvaro Siza, Alejandro Aravena, and Peter Zumthor—whose approaches to spatial organization, materials, and the social dimension of architecture furnish conceptual benchmarks for rethinking the role of design under budgetary constraints (Correa, 2024; Caldeira & Mann, 2024; Vergis, n.d.; Vandenbulcke, 2011). These sources scaffold an analytical frame in which affordable housing emerges not as a domain of compromise but of innovation and social responsibility.

Methodologically, the study integrates a systematic literature review, comparative case analysis, and critical interpretation of philosophical and aesthetic concepts. The review encompassed publications on affordable housing, urban strategies, and the social effects of architecture, including research on the affordability crisis in Miami and Bogotá (Elliott et al., 2017; Silva, 2016; Birch et al., 2025), works on prefabrication and innovative construction technologies (Liu & Abidin, 2024; Salahldeen et al., 2025), and studies of social integration and spatial segregation (Kostenwein & Ruiz Carvajal, 2024). This synthesis enabled the identification of persistent trends and critical gaps that delineate a field for further interventions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the core of the democratization of design lies the recognition that architecture has a profound impact on its inhabitants, both human, cultural, and emotional. The quality of the built environment is not a mere aesthetic caprice, but a critical determinant of mental and physical health, social interaction, and overall well-being (Adeyemi et al., 2024). Especially under conditions of high density and tight budgets typical of affordable housing, skillful organization of interiors, views, communal areas, open spaces, and even façades assumes primacy. Environments that induce stress, foster isolation, and sever connections to nature can

aggravate social problems. Conversely, settings calibrated to the human scale, which encourage serendipitous encounters and offer a sense of safety and belonging, catalyze strong and resilient communities. Accordingly, the right to quality design is integral to the right to a dignified life.

The philosophical and practical approaches of several eminent twentieth- and twenty-first-century architects provide a theoretical substratum for understanding how design excellence can be achieved in the context of social and affordable housing. Their work demonstrates that budgetary limits can spur innovation rather than excuse mediocrity.

Indian architect Charles Correa categorically rejected the universalist International Style, insisting that architecture be deeply rooted in local cultural context, climate, and social customs (Correa, 2024). His philosophy focused on creating humane spaces that serve people and foster community interaction. Two elements of his approach are especially salient for affordable housing.

First is the concept of open-to-sky spaces. Drawing on principles of traditional Indian architecture, Correa employed courtyards, verandas, and terraces to create naturally ventilated and daylight areas that function as both climatic buffers and focal points of social life (Torus, 2012). This approach reduces operating costs while enriching everyday experience by creating thresholds between the private and the public.

Second is the strategy of incremental (phased) housing, most vividly realized in the Belapur Incremental Housing project (1983). Rather than delivering a finished but minimal dwelling, the project offered residents a core house on their own plot, which they could expand as their family size and finances evolved (Correa, 2024). This model acknowledges the dynamism of household life and empowers residents to shape their environment, transforming them from passive recipients into active participants in the construction process.

Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza consistently affirmed that all housing is social, placing a profound social responsibility on the architect to shape the city (Caldeira & Mann, 2024). His work demonstrates how architectural intervention can mediate between the individual, the group, and society as a whole.

The SAAL Bouça social-housing project in Porto (1977–2007) is a canonical instance of his approach (Montenegro et al., 2025). Siza drew inspiration from the typologies of urban shantytowns—hidden backyards and alleys where informal public life unfolded. He did not merely replicate them but transformed the type into dignified, visible, and functional communal spaces. The complex comprises four-story buildings with stacked maisonettes, arranged in linear rows that frame a central square and semi-public gardens. Initially conceived for the middle class before the revolution, the project was successfully adapted for workers

under the post-revolution SAAL program, demonstrating the universality and flexibility of its urban principles. Siza's work illustrates that architecture can do more than shelter; it can reimagine urban typologies, conferring dignity and visibility on formerly marginalized ways of life.

Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena and his office Elemental advanced the concept of incremental housing with the half a good house model. Confronted with severely limited public budgets that could fund only tiny, poor-quality houses on the periphery, ELEMENTAL proposed a radical solution: deploy the subsidy to build the half of the house a family could not self-provide—the structure, roof, kitchen, and bathroom (Vergis, n.d.). The other half is a space within the same frame for residents to complete over time.

This strategy reframes social housing as a means for

households to generate capital, rather than a public expense. By enabling residents to expand the area and value of their homes to a middle-class standard, it turns them into investors in their own future. However, long-term analysis of the flagship Quinta Monroy project exposed serious issues. Studies 12–15 years later indicated that, although 92 of 93 households expanded their homes, the process was often uncontrolled (Carrasco & O'Brien, 2021). An example of how Elemental's design has dramatically changed is presented in Figure 1, which illustrates the changes in both built and open spaces, highlighting the impacts of the unplanned extensions. Houses' backyards were occupied in 30 of the 34 typology houses. Eight occupied part of the courtyards intended to serve as a common interaction space for the community, and four households facing the streets also occupied the frontal space.

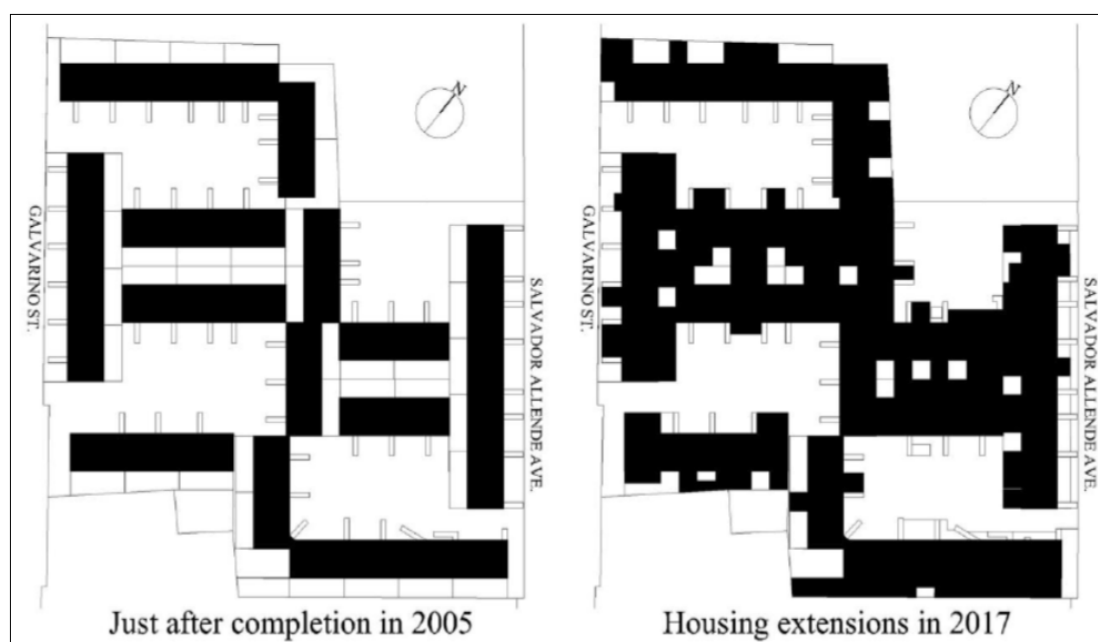


Figure 1. Types of housing extensions per story and typology (Carrasco & O'Brien, 2021)

Progressive and uncontrolled extensions led to a deterioration of living conditions, including rooms without windows, the loss of natural light and ventilation, and neighbor conflicts arising from the capture of common areas (Carrasco & O'Brien, 2021). Moreover, the settlement exhibited a lack of social cohesion. This experience lays bare an incrementality paradox: granting individual freedom to build without frameworks for collective governance and coordination can degrade the shared environment, paradoxically recreating the very informal and precarious conditions the project sought to overcome. It follows that the architect's role in such projects must extend beyond object design to include facilitation of long-term community management processes.

Swiss architect Peter Zumthor—often associated with high-budget cultural commissions—offers an unexpected yet potent instrumentarium for conceptualizing dignity in affordable housing. Zumthor focuses on crafting atmosphere, the immediate physical and emotional experience of space, achieved through scrupulous attention to materials, light,

sound, and tactility (Vandenbulcke, 2011).

A key principle is respect for the natural laws of matter. Rather than imposing a preconceived form, Zumthor allows a material's intrinsic properties—its texture, weight, scent—to direct architectural decisions. The result is buildings with a sense of authenticity, integrity, and calm. Applied to affordable housing, this implies that dignity does not hinge on material cost but on the care, intentionality, and craft (know-how) invested in their use. Simple, local, and inexpensive materials—such as unfinished timber, brick, or concrete—used honestly and with attention to detail can yield profoundly humane and spirited spaces. By reframing the design problem, the emphasis shifts from cost reduction to a normative-empirical agenda concerned with developing and evaluating strategies for the intentional use of readily available materials to produce and maintain dignified, humane environments; this formulation invites systematic investigation of aesthetic, ethical, and operational outcomes.

From the theoretical analysis, three practical strategies for democratizing design in affordable housing emerge.

First—spatial efficiency and flexibility. Under area constraints, every square meter must be utilized effectively. Multifunctional rooms, minimization of dead circulation (e.g., corridors), and modular design with standardized apartment layouts reduce design and construction costs without obliging monotony. Creative recombination of standard modules can produce visually dynamic façades and interiors.

Second—material innovation and prefabrication. Material selection is pivotal. Instead of expensive finishes, more accessible yet durable and aesthetically capable alternatives—such as corrugated metal or local traditional materials—can be used. Prefabrication is a key technology: factory production of components (panels, modules)

followed by on-site assembly shortens schedules, reduces waste, improves quality via factory control, and lessens weather dependencies (Liu & Abidin, 2024). Studies show prefabrication can reduce construction costs by up to 20–32% and accelerate delivery by 30–50% (Salahldeen et al., 2025).

Third—the integration of communal spaces and nature. Affordable-housing design must transcend the unit envelope. High-quality communal spaces—such as shared gardens, play areas, lounges, and coworking rooms—are crucial, particularly in high-density settings, where they serve as the focal points of social interaction, neighborly ties, and enhanced psychological and emotional well-being. Integrating nature—through vertical greening, access to parks, or courtyards like Correa’s—is integral to creating healthy, humane living environments. All three strategies are illustrated in Figure 2.

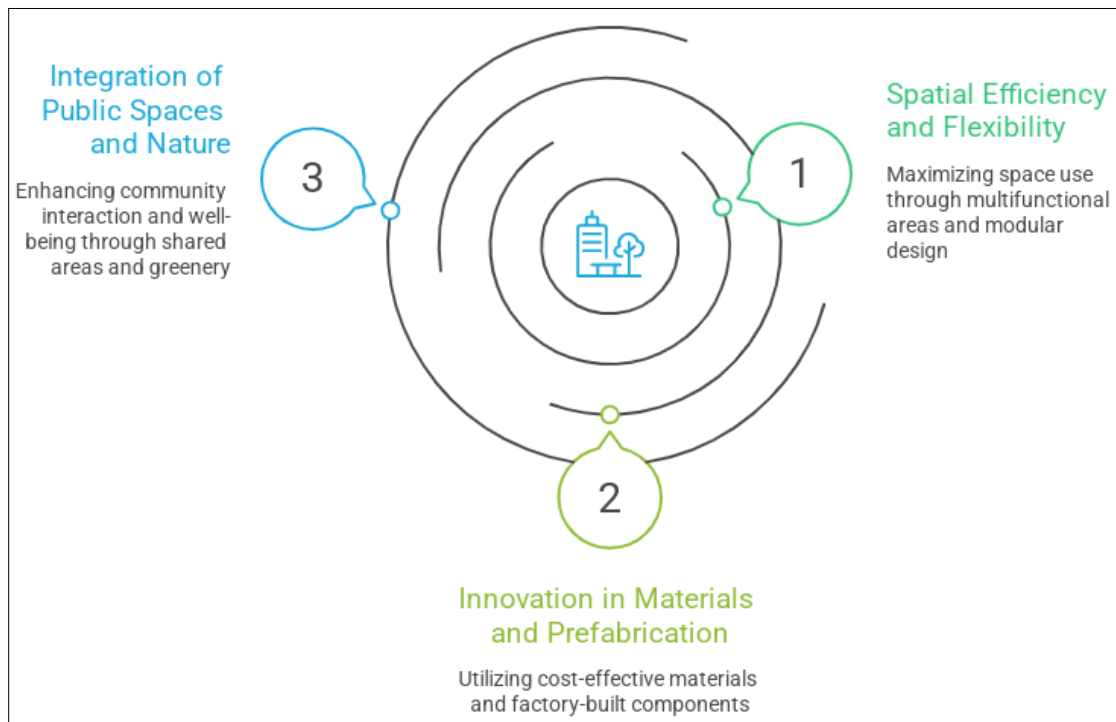


Figure 2. Key Strategies for Affordable Housing Design

A survey of concrete projects across differing socio-economic contexts shows how the theoretical principles of design democratization are operationalized in practice, adapting to local challenges and opportunities.

Bogotá’s housing landscape is historically characterized by state-led incremental programs (e.g., Ciudad Bachué) and severe spatial segregation, which pushes low-income families to the periphery, far from jobs and quality infrastructure (Silva, 2016). The result is considerable temporal and financial costs associated with daily commuting, which compound vulnerability (Amézquita & Héndez, n.d.).

Contemporary strategies in Bogotá attempt to overcome this segregation. A central approach is transit-oriented development (TOD), which involves siting affordable housing

near bus rapid transit (BRT) stations, such as TransMilenio (Nagy, n.d.). This reduces transportation costs for residents and promotes a more compact and functional city (Amézquita & Héndez, n.d.). Implementation hurdles persist, including the fact that roughly 40% of the city’s population resides in gated communities, which creates barriers to the formation of inclusive and safe public spaces (Kostenwein & Ruiz Carvajal, 2024).

An architectural approach to democratizing design in this context is evident in the work of El Equipo Mazzanti, led by Giancarlo Mazzanti. Rather than focusing solely on dwelling units, Mazzanti’s team creates high-quality, emblematic civic and social facilities in the most vulnerable areas. Projects such as the España Library in Medellín or the Cubierta Cazucá canopy on Bogotá’s outskirts—which transformed a simple

basketball court into a vibrant community hub—illustrate an alternative strategy (Emblin, 2015). By investing in top-tier design for social infrastructure, these projects confer dignity and identity on entire communities, bolster social cohesion, and install beacons of hope that alter how residents and the city at large perceive these districts.

Miami presents another example: an acute affordability crisis driven by the surge in high-end real estate and gentrification, which displaces low- and middle-income residents (Elliott et al., 2017). Policy responses have concentrated on incentivizing developers, modifying zoning (e.g., reducing parking requirements), and expanding public-private partnerships. Within this context, several affordable housing projects stand out for centering high-quality design as a lever for social and cultural development.

Courtside Apartments, located in historic Overtown and developed by Housing Trust Group and CFE Architects, is positioned as a community anchor and a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization (Kimura, 2025). Instead of a bare minimum of amenities, the complex offers high-quality shared spaces—such as a media room, fitness center, and basketball court—typically associated with market-rate housing. In doing so, it directly challenges the stigma associated with affordable housing and demonstrates that dignity and quality of life need not be correlated with income level.

Shanti School demonstrates how a civic educational building can function as a neighborhood beacon, combining affordability and high design through thoughtful modular planning, the use of simple local materials, and flexible multifunctional spaces that simultaneously serve instructional, communal, and climatic needs; robust community engagement in design and phased implementation ensures adaptability to local priorities and resources, reducing capital costs while increasing longevity and social salience.

Another emblematic project, Wynwood Works, is a 12-story, green-certified, mixed-use development in the Wynwood

arts district designed by MCG Architecture (Kalinowski, 2025). Its cardinal strategy is deep contextual integration. To counteract gentrification that threatens to displace the creative community responsible for the district's identity, the project includes live-work lofts for artists, communal spaces featuring murals produced in partnership with local arts organizations, and affordable retail spaces for small businesses. Wynwood Works exemplifies how design can be instrumentalized to preserve cultural identity, sustain local economies, and ensure social inclusivity.

The Bogotá and Miami cases support several key conclusions. First, they demonstrate compellingly that affordable must be distinguished from low-quality. Design is not an auxiliary expense but a fundamental determinant of a project's long-term social, economic, and cultural value.

Second, democratizing design fortifies communities and enhances their resilience. Whether by empowering residents to shape their environment incrementally, creating emblematic public spaces that instill pride (Mazzanti's approach), or integrating high-quality amenities and cultural elements (as seen in Miami's projects), thoughtful architecture nurtures belonging, strengthens social ties, and increases overall asset value—both tangible and intangible.

Third, the observed principles exhibit complementarity with broader philosophical constructs such as the SABI method. Rooted in the Japanese Wabi-Sabi aesthetic, SABI esteems authenticity, simplicity, asymmetry, and the beauty of natural, imperfect, and aging materials (Zargari & Hassan, 2024). This stance offers a powerful counterpoint to glossy, sterile, and often costly market aesthetics. It affirms that dignity can be found in modesty, naturalness, and the patina of time—qualities that are inherently accessible and sustainable. Resonant with Zumthor's material honesty and Correa's use of local resources, Wabi-Sabi supplies a conceptual basis for architecture that is deeply humane, beautiful, and economically efficient. Table 1 systematizes and synthesizes the principal findings.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of design democratization strategies in Bogotá and Miami

Criterion	Bogotá, Colombia	Miami, USA
Context	Spatial segregation, displacement to the periphery, and a shortage of quality public spaces.	Severe affordability crisis, gentrification, and stigmatization of social housing.
Main strategy	Investment in high-quality social infrastructure (community centers, parks) and transit-oriented design (TOD).	Creation of high-quality housing developments with market amenities and deep cultural integration to counter stigma and displacement.
Architectural example	Public projects by El Equipo Mazzanti (Cubierta Cazucá canopy).	Courtside Apartments; Shanti School; Wynwood Works.
Financing mechanism	Public-private partnerships, international grants (NGOs), and municipal budgets.	Public subsidies (surtax, Section 8), tax incentives for developers (LIHTC), and funds from Community Redevelopment Agencies (CRA).
Social outcome	Increased dignity and neighborhood identity, improved access to urban resources, and creation of community life hubs.	Reduced stigmatization, residents' access to quality amenities, and preservation of neighborhoods' cultural identity.

Accordingly, both strategies respond to analogous urban challenges. Still, through distinct politico-financial instruments, Bogotá stresses social infrastructure plus TOD like El Equipo Mazzanti's works plus the Cubierta Cazucá canopy prioritizing restoring common spaces plus urban connectivity through partnerships, grants, plus municipal budgets. In contrast, Miami stresses high-quality residential provision including market-grade amenities, supported by subsidies plus tax incentives (LIHTC, Section 8, CRA) for countering stigma plus displacement. Bogotá increases both dignity and communal identity, broadly offers accessibility, and collectively provides benefits, but without land-value controls, TOD itself can risk the driving of displacement. Through quality standards, Miami can rapidly access amenities and reduce stigma. However, Miami can also strengthen segregation, make people dependent on time-limited subsidies, as well as overlook informal community networks.

CONCLUSION

The affordable-housing problem should not be treated as a constraint imposed on architecture but as its crucible, demanding the most innovative and intentional solutions. Narrow budgets and tight spatial envelopes are not grounds for compromising quality; they are provocations to devise genuinely effective and humane design approaches. As the theories and cases analyzed indicate, architectural excellence in affordable housing is attainable. It resides not in expensive materials but in the architect's intellectual and ethical stance: the capacity to craft flexible and efficient spaces, to employ accessible resources with honesty and intention, to prioritize public goods, and to honor cultural context and human dignity.

A paradigmatic shift is overdue. Design must be reimagined not as a market commodity or a privilege for the few, but as an inclusive, universal, and inalienable right for all. Architects, urbanists, policymakers, and developers share a collective responsibility to realize just, sustainable, and beautiful cities. The democratization of design in affordable housing is not merely a professional task; it is a moral imperative and a pivotal step toward that end.

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