

THE SIERRA

The transformation of underutilized land into vibrant, community-oriented housing for the homeless is a defining architectural and social movement of our time, as envisioned by Kadre Architects in their mission to transform underutilized spaces into inclusive communities. At the forefront of this transformation stands Nerin Kadribegovic, the founder of Kadre Architects and a former partner at Lehrer Architects.

Nerin Kadribegovic experienced displacement as a teenager during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. Having lived in a small hotel room for over a year with his family, he developed a deep understanding of housing insecurity, which was later reinforced by witnessing homelessness in Los Angeles. Experiences with individuals struggling with homelessness profoundly influenced his perspective, driving him to explore architecture as a tool for social change, recognizing that design has the power to reshape the social fabric.

Nerin Kadribegovic began to redefine spaces as platforms for inclusion and community building. One of the earliest major endeavors of Nerin during his activities at Lehrer Architects in this realm was Alexandria Tiny Homes Village, an experimental project, which later paved the way for The Sierra—a bold initiative repurposing an abandoned motel into a thriving community for people transitioning out of homelessness.



THE ARCHITECTURAL APPROACH TO DIGNIFIED HOUSING

The Sierra exemplifies an innovative adaptive reuse project, taking an abandoned motel and transforming it into a village-like community. Instead of demolition and new construction—both of which are resource-intensive and costly—the existing motel structure was repurposed, aligning with principles of sustainability and urban resilience.

The Sierra is located at the Sierra Highway in Lancaster, California. The project was completed in 2023. Situated on a 4-acre site, it consists of 38 transitional housing units, providing a transformative living environment for individuals transitioning out of homelessness.

A key aspect of The Sierra's success lies in its partnership model. Kadre Architects worked closely with Hope the Mission, an organization dedicated to providing transitional housing, as well as various social service providers, engineers, and contractors to create a holistic living environment rather than just a shelter.

Architecturally, The Sierra embraces low-barrier, dignified design, with a focus on both built and landscaped environments. Each unit is fully equipped, offering privacy and personal space while still being integrated into a larger community framework. The landscape concept plays a crucial role, incorporating green spaces, shaded walkways, and communal gardens to create a more inviting and restorative environment. The communal spaces—including shared kitchens, gathering areas, and landscaped outdoor zones—foster social interaction and a sense of belonging, which is often lacking in traditional emergency shelters.

FROM VACANT LAND TO SPACES OF BELONGING

A defining characteristic of The Sierra is the use of colorful pavements and housing facades. Early in the design process, it became evident that the site lacked a sewer system, necessitating significant and costly infrastructure upgrades that reallocated project resources. To address these constraints, the design team employed cost-effective yet high-impact strategies, such as the strategic use of color and graphics, to create sustainable and visually appealing solutions for heat mitigation, spatial limitations, and the integration of green spaces. These approaches also



played a crucial role in unifying two architecturally distinct properties—a traditional clay tile roof building and a series of unremarkable roadside structures—into a cohesive campus. To alleviate the sense of confinement in the existing rooms, the architects doubled the living space by introducing solar porches along the facades of the buildings. These porches not only provide a dynamic interplay of light and shadow throughout the day but also reimagine the campus’s visual identity, blending seamlessly into the surrounding desert landscape. Furthermore, the colors were carefully chosen to evoke emotional responses—warm tones such as reds, oranges, and yellows encourage energy and optimism, while blues and greens provide a calming effect. This approach supports residents to feel a greater sense of identity, ownership, and emotional well-being within their living spaces.

“The spirit of the place is so important to our psyches; we took it as our mission to not only provide housing but to instill dignity through vibrant colors, playful structures, meditative landscapes and pathways that meander throughout the site. We hope that the resulting recuperative feeling will serve future residents well in their journey out of homelessness” (Kadre Architects).

THE EXPERIENCE BEHIND THE SIERRA: ALEXAN- DRIA TINY HOMES VILLAGE

Before The Sierra, Alexandria Tiny Homes Village served as a first exploration into small-scale, community-driven transitional housing. Located on what was once vacant land, this project demonstrated how unused urban spaces can be reactivated for social good.

Unlike The Sierra, which repurposed an existing structure, Alexandria Village was designed from scratch, following a modular, tiny home approach. Each unit is compact yet self-sufficient, providing residents with autonomy while still integrating shared amenities.

One of the most striking aspects of Alexandria Village is its vibrant use of color. In contrast to the sterile, institutional aesthetics of many shelters, Alexandria’s bright hues serve a psychological and symbolic purpose: Warm tones (reds, oranges, and yellows) encourage energy and optimism, cool tones (blues and greens) evoke calm and stability, contrasting colors help residents distinguish their own homes, fostering a sense of identity and ownership.

By incorporating thoughtful design elements, Alexandria Village aimed to restore dignity and agency to its residents. The integration of communal green spaces, natural light, and carefully selected colors also

reflects key elements of trauma-informed design, fostering an environment that supports emotional healing and social reintegration. This commitment to color psychology and human-centered design carried over into The Sierra, where similar principles are applied, albeit in the more rigid framework of an adaptive reuse project.



PROJECT INFORMATION



Office name	Kadre Architects
Client / Developer	Hope the Mission
Year of completion	2023
Persons / Organizations involved	Nerin Kadribegovic, Ashle Fauvre, Kevin Wronske (Kadre Architects), Terremoto (Landscape Architect), MEP Engineer, Barbara L. Hall and Associates Engineers, Dan Weinreber (KGM Lighting)
Location	Sierra Highway, Lancaster, California US
Design and construction period	Approx. 21 months - May 2022–March 2024
Total initial budget	Approx. 8M USD
Total site area	16'187.4 m²
Ground floor area	1'368.7 m²
Number of floors	1
Total floor area	13'537.9 m²
Number of living units	38 apartments
Typ	Transitional Housing for families experiencing homelessness
Award	AIA LA Merit Award, Dezeen Awards shortlist

