

Communication from Public

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Comments for Public Posting: Skid Row Now and 2040 Coalition Response to City of Los Angeles' Department of City Planning Council File Number: 22-0617-S3: Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan / IX1 Use District Modifications / Community Facilities / Skid Row Neighborhood dated September 19, 2023 Our Skid Row Now and 2040 Coalition began in the summer of 2017 and over these five years we have worked with the Department of City Planning's DTLA 2040 team in productive ways on the Downtown Community Plan, along with extensive outreach throughout our Skid Row neighborhood - residents, workers and other stakeholders. We are grateful for the department's work with us to date along with City Council and the Mayor to achieve plan adoption, including the recent report Council File Number: 22-0617-S3: Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan / IX1 Use District Modifications / Community Facilities / Skid Row Neighborhood. Based in our Containment and Community policy paper as a framework and the Department's recent report, we advocate for City Council to: * Retain the IX1 Zone with current boundaries and at 80% affordable housing, and clearly define affordable housing levels to remove moderate income units and prioritize deeply low income, extremely low income, very low income and lower income residents. * Retain the Community Benefits Program as currently adopted in the community plan, and described in this report. * Define representative members of the oversight committee for the Community Benefit Trust Fund so 30% of membership includes residents or workers with lived experienced of being unhoused. * Ensure funds from the Community Benefit Trust Fund are used within a 1-mile radius of Downtown Los Angeles development, not a 1.5-mile radius, with a priority benefit to Skid Row. * As the adopted community plan moves through the City Attorney's review and subsequent implementation, we also continue to advocate for City Council to: * Establish a Skid Row district council for self-representation by residents (housed and unhoused) and workers within the historical Skid Row boundaries. * Implement elements of DTLA 2040 that foster a healthy and sustainable Skid Row neighborhood. We look forward to the upcoming review of the Department's recent report to the Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee agenda, and the related public comment period.

Containment *and* Community: The History of Skid Row and its Role in the Downtown Community Plan

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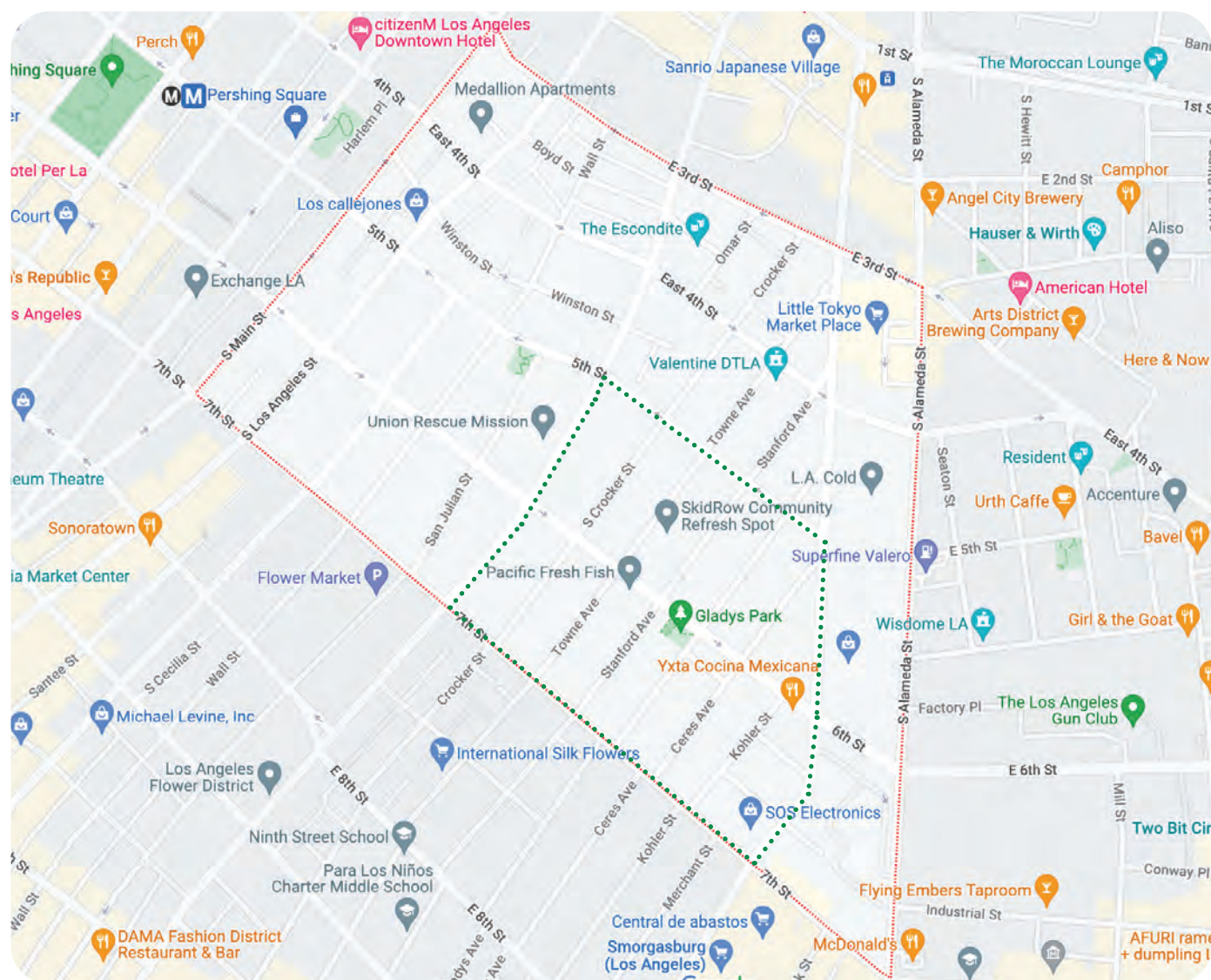
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Abstract

By looking historically at Skid Row as a laboratory for community-driven, equitable solutions to the housing crisis, “Containment *and* Community” advocates for the expansion of the Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan Update’s (DTLA 2040) IX1 Zone (an affordable* housing only zone) to match the historical neighborhood boundaries of Skid Row (3rd to 7th Streets, Main to Alameda Streets). It seeks to clarify inaccuracies about these long-established boundaries, and to explain the significance of Skid Row as a neighborhood comprised of social networks, cultural assets, and housing that spans income levels. It uses the City of L.A.’s “Blue Book” community plan of 1976 and its often misinterpreted “Containment Plan” as

an historical touchstone. Importantly, this paper debunks common myths about the impacts of centering affordable housing in Skid Row. It also advocates for self-representation of Skid Row by residents (housed and unhoused) and workers as a means to ensure that the implementation of the community plan fosters the health and sustainability of those who live and work in Skid Row, and preserves the housing and social and cultural fabric of the Skid Row neighborhood.

* “Affordable” housing as addressed here and in DTLA 2040 includes: Moderate incomes at 80-120% of Average Median Income (AMI); Low incomes at 50-80% AMI; Very-low income at 30-50% of AMI; Extremely-low income at 15-30%; and Deeply-low Income of 0-15%. I use “low-income” hereafter as an umbrella that includes the span from low to deeply-low income. Los Angeles County AMI in 2022 is \$91,100. See California Department of Housing and Community Development, Revised State Income Limits 2022, at <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/docs/grants-and-funding/inc2k22.pdf>.



..... Boundaries of the Proposed IX1 Zone

— Boundaries of Historical Skid Row

Introduction

The City of Los Angeles is now determining the fate of affordable housing for deeply-low to moderate-income people in downtown. The central question is whether the Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan (DTLA 2040) will deliver what voters and politicians have repeatedly expressed as priorities: low-income housing and equitable access to it. Will all strata of people be represented by the Community Plan, and gain access to housing as a human right, or only those whose property ownership grants them such rights?¹

In deliberations around the DTLA 2040 plan, history has persistently been deployed erroneously to the detriment of addressing today's housing crises. Continuing to do so runs risks of dismantling the existing social infrastructure and low-income housing of Skid Row and diminishing the potential to preserve and create more affordable housing in Skid Row. This advocacy paper, entitled “Containment *and* Community,” represents the history of Skid Row's formation as a *neighborhood* with:

- Affordable housing that serves deeply-low to moderate-income people;
- Grassroot support, services, and advocacy;
- Communal opportunities for recovery from addiction and other health challenges;
- Resilience;
- Community, culture, and the arts.

The long history of Skid Row as a multiracial and working people's neighborhood, where networks of grassroots services, culture, and the arts have flourished and affordable housing preserved and enhanced, offers both context and justification for the Skid Row community's stake to place. For these reasons, the DTLA 2040 plan should not allow the dismantling of the neighborhood or dispersion of low-income or unhoused people. Quite the opposite. **The plan should maximize rather than diminish neighborhood potential to serve deeply-low to low-income women, children, and families as well as the predominantly Black and other community members of Skid Row.** Over the last fifty years, low-income housing for families

in downtown has been replaced by or converted to serve single-person occupancies, breaking up multi-person households, excluding women and children, and forcing isolation. The DTLA 2040 plan should ensure we **do not repeat the lessons of urban renewal, which demolished low-income and multifamily housing and multiracial neighborhoods, and dismantled public investment in both.** Moreover, the plan needs to **resist further gentrification and displacement in and immediately around the historically defined neighborhood boundaries of Skid Row (3rd to 7th Streets, Main to Alameda Streets).** **The current DTLA 2040 plan has selected a portion of the Skid Row neighborhood to serve as the IX1 zone; this should be retained and expanded to represent all of Skid Row.**

The DTLA 2040 Community Plan has the potential to serve as a model for the rest of the city by embracing and innovating strategies including:

- IX1 zoning for 100% affordable and supportive housing within the industrial portion of Skid Row;
- Expanding IX1 to include historical boundaries of Skid Row, to preserve the neighborhood and its low-income housing;
- Enhancing services within Skid Row that provide for the health and sustainability of existing communities, including:
 - providing for the safety and well-being of women, who have regularly been subjected to removal and violence;
 - diversifying low-income housing options to support women, children, and family units;
 - adding green common spaces and parks; and
 - limiting incompatible uses such as alcohol and cannabis sales and smoke shops within Skid Row and in a buffer zone around it;
- Enabling Skid Row community representation by residents, workers, and people with lived experiences in Skid Row;
- Ensuring that implementation plans and modes of accountability include Skid Row community representation.

Myths and Misnomers Regarding Skid Row History

Comments submitted prior to and during the August 26, 2021, and September 23, 2021, City Planning Commission meetings regarding the Draft DTLA 2040 plan, position statements by other organizations, and complaints filed in *LA Alliance for Human Rights v. City and County of Los Angeles* in 2020-21 repeat several myths about Skid Row and are the reason for this paper.² One repeated misnomer that this paper seeks to correct pertains to the 1976 “Containment Plan.” Commentators frequently use the Containment Plan as the reason for the large unhoused population, failing to acknowledge that the **Containment Plan actually saved the low-income housing in Skid Row**. Blaming the 1976 plan also misses the main point that homelessness is caused by a lack of housing, and when there is a gap between income and rent.

Another repeated myth regards the threat of “ghettoization” if the IX1 zone is passed, which requires 100% affordable housing in a portion of Skid Row. The word ghetto is freighted with multiple meanings and histories, mostly negative. It has been used in the context of IX1 as a scare tactic aimed to stigmatize, dehumanize, and displace Black people and those who are living in poverty, instead of addressing structural changes needed in housing, welfare, health services, and employment opportunities, especially in the face of a century of racial segregation. Moreover, the term ghetto denies the agency, power, and cultural vitality of the Skid Row community. As used to critique the IX1, it also suggests that the rich are needed to uplift the poor, a faulty progressive ideology from the turn of the 20th century, disproven by social scientists.³ Finally, such comments do not take into consideration the *existing diversity of Skid Row* in regards to income levels and demographics.

The IX1 zone has potential to further diversify Skid Row. Studies prove that gentrification homogenizes central cities that were once populated by different races of working people.⁴ Greater diversity derives from affordability. Based on the 2022 LA County Average Median Income of \$91,100, if new housing in the IX1 zone is “affordable,” then it will be for individuals with incomes of \$109,320 and lower—a diversity that

includes all but the “rich.”⁵ A diversity of housing stock, to accommodate low-income women, children, and family units, should be included in the implementation plans for IX1, to ensure greater inclusivity.⁶

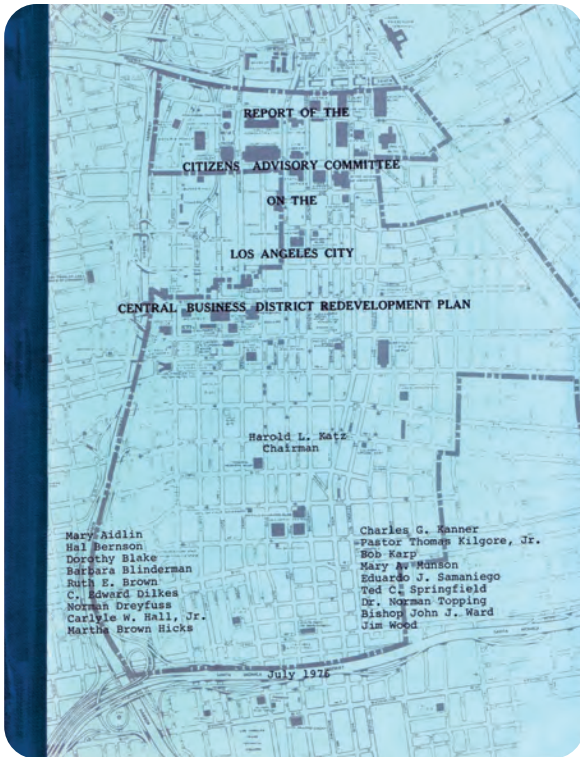
History shows us that de-concentrating poverty by inducing displacement and dispersion does not solve the problems of poverty. Rather, it divorces people from their communities and means of survival. Moreover, efforts since the 1990s in other cities with a strong central business district to de-concentrate poverty through the inclusion of mixed-income, market-rate and above market-rate (aka, luxury) housing have served instead to gentrify, displace, and dismantle low-income housing, and move poor and unhoused people to other areas without solving the root problems. (As is the case in New York, Chicago, and Boston, among others.)⁷ This seems obvious, yet persistent commentaries that demand the dispersal of Skid Row residents ignore these basic historical facts.

The following sections outline:

- 1) the formation of the historical boundaries of Skid Row through the “containment plan” of 1976, which preserved low-income housing and limited market-rate development;
- 2) how “containment” served to concentrate poverty due to disinvestment elsewhere; and
- 3) the ways that, in the face of the simultaneous pressures of gentrification and escalating concentration of poverty in Skid Row, a resilient community has formed, whose members advocate and organize for their rights (and not just the rights of property owners) to housing, services, and neighborhood amenities as well as a say in how policies about them are determined.

1.

“Containing” and Defining Skid Row: Silver Book/Blue Book, 1972-1990



“Blue Book” and “Silver Book.” Courtesy Los Angeles City Archive.

In 1972, city planners declared most of downtown Los Angeles an urban renewal area. In the city’s update to the Downtown Community Plan and as part of the twenty-year forecast for the General Plan, they offered a rosy view of a rebuilt central city complete with skyscrapers to connect with those planned for Bunker Hill, a manmade lake, a multilevel public transit system with People Mover, and space for a “consortium of Universities,” not to mention plenty of parking.⁸ It was promoted in the *Preliminary General Development Plan: Los Angeles 1972/1990*, known by its gleaming cover as the “Silver Book.”⁹

Yet even as the City Planning Commission and City Council voted to support the plan, criticism abounded. First, it was the only General Plan to date to be authored by a private planning firm, paid for by downtown business interests. Second, as the impact of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA)’s** powers grew to garner tax-increment funding and use it where and how they wished, as on Bunker Hill, divergent political interests raised concerns. How could practically all of downtown be determined as blighted, taken through eminent domain, and be sold off to the highest bidder for “redevelopment”? Would the case of Bunker Hill be repeated, where low-income people had been displaced but not rehoused, and where rentals were now “beyond the reach of even moderate-income people,” and the poor pushed into already crowded areas of Westlake, Echo Park, and Pico Union? And who would have a say in how and how much of the CRA’s tax-increment financing would be delegated, and where? Furthermore, as Jim Bonar of the Community Design Center decried, “to talk about citizen participation in the plan is not very honest. Property is adequately represented but residents are not.”¹⁰ Others pointed towards the impact of new high-density skyscrapers that

** Established in 1948 and deriving its authority from the California Redevelopment Law of 1945 as well as federal housing and slum clearance legislation of the 1930s and 1940s, the Community Redevelopment Agency’s core mission was to mitigate urban blight and reverse cycles of urban disinvestment as the tax base as well as many businesses and people moved to the suburbs in the postwar years. It became one of the largest forces in the development of Los Angeles and the primary force shaping the face of modern downtown L.A., from Bunker Hill to Skid Row to Staples Center. It was disbanded in 2012.

would also push land prices sky high, and result in the razing of residential hotels, with “low- and moderate-income people now living downtown ... left without anything.”¹¹ Such mounting criticism and the threat of lawsuits galvanized newly elected Mayor Tom Bradley to step in to the fray, blocking the plans, urging the City Council’s December 19, 1975 moratorium on the Central Business District Redevelopment Project, and engaging a citizens’ advisory group to study the matter further.¹²

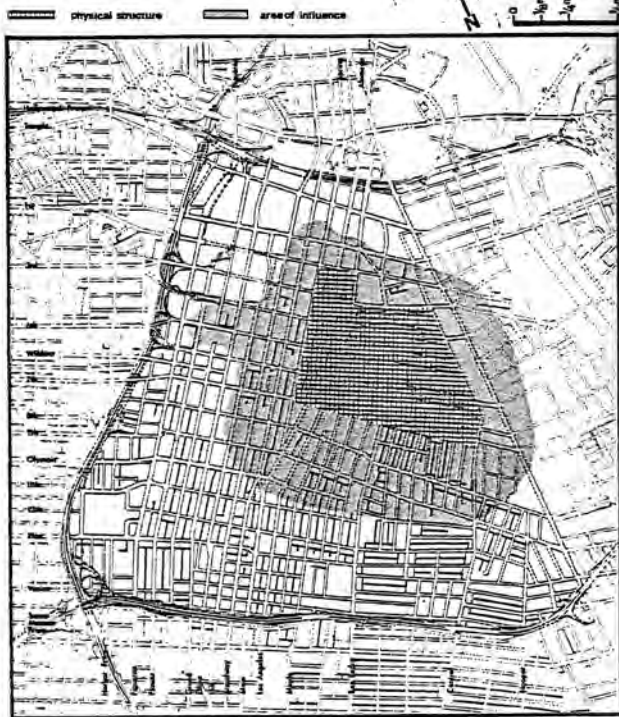
In 1975 Mayor Bradley appointed a Citizens Advisory Committee to the Central Business District Plan comprised of eighteen people—one selected by each of the fifteen City Councilmembers and three chosen by Bradley himself. In attendance at the public hearings of the Citizens Advisory Committee commenced were Catherine Morris and Jeff Dietrich of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, one of the earliest community-engaged service providers in Skid Row. They recognized the opportunity to insert community voice into the proceedings. Also in attendance were Chuck Elsessor of Legal Aid Foundation and Jim Bonar and Gary Squier of the Community Design Center, who represented nonprofit public interest groups then working with low-income communities around Downtown Los Angeles. With the Catholic Worker serving as “clients” of the Community Design Center, they collectively determined to compose a community response for the Citizens Advisory Committee’s consideration.

Each contributed a section to a document they entitled *Skid Row: Recommendations to Citizens Advisory Committee on the Central Business District Plan*. They enlisted Temple University professor and sociologist Leonard Blumberg to also contribute a chapter, which offered a “conceptual analysis of Skid Row” (Part 1 of the report) employing current social scientific theory and survey methodology. In turn, his analyses were applied to Skid Row in recommendations for “Social Programs” (Part 2) drawn up by the Catholic Worker to ameliorate conditions for habitation, and shift people from the streets to housing. Part 3 recommended services for “inebriates.” Part 4, on “Physical Containment” by the Community Design Center, drew upon recommended service models and what Blumberg had discovered when studying Philadelphia’s Skid Row, and that verified what Los Angeles business leaders and politicians could see firsthand:

when separated from centralized services and housing, Skid Row alcoholics tended to scatter to neighborhoods throughout the city. “Physical Containment” charted the existing low-income housing and aimed to protect and improve it, while increasing access of unhoused people to shelter and services within a concentrated area that would still enable redevelopment to proceed elsewhere. It created a zone where market-rate housing was not permitted; rather, the construction of new low-income housing was allowable from the west side of San Pedro Street to the east side of Main Street. The area from the east side of San Pedro to Alameda was zoned industrial, allowing the renovation of existing hotels but not the construction of new housing.¹³

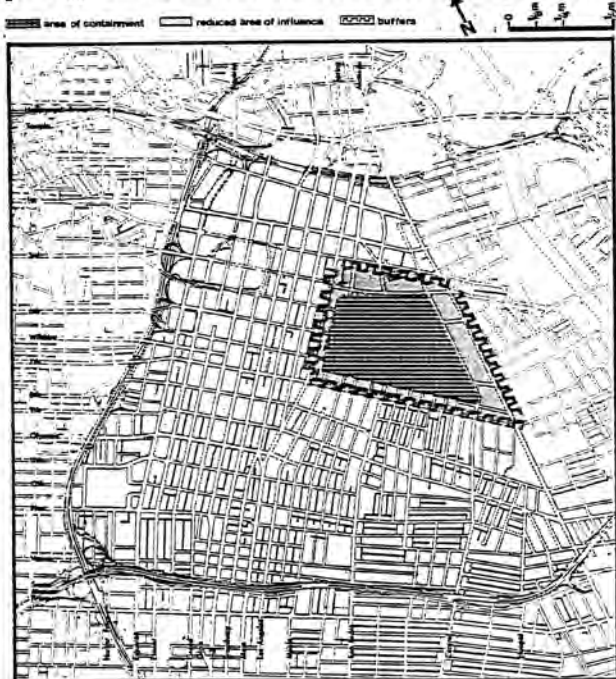
The Citizens Advisory Committee adopted the recommendations of these community advocates wholesale, including their four-part Skid Row: Recommendations, in the submitted *Report of the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Los Angeles City Central Business District Redevelopment Plan* (“Blue Book”). Disparaging the high-rise office buildings (of the “Arco Towers variety”) and luxury apartments (of the “Bunker Hill type”), the Committee identified as highest priority a “comprehensive solution to the skidrow [sic] problem” and “of equal importance is a carefully timed residential construction and rehabilitation program.”¹⁴ In short, the Blue Book saved and augmented the housing and services in Skid Row, creating what today remains the greatest density of low-income housing and networks of social services in the City, as well as fifty years of community expertise, resiliency, and support regarding human issues associated with poverty.

skid row tomorrow with social programs and no containment policy



Reduction of Skid Row's population density through social programs will not by itself be sufficient to diminish the physical size of the Row or its area of influence. Without a physical containment strategy, the Skid Row of tomorrow may influence the same area as it does today.

skid row tomorrow with social programs and containment policy



A policy of containment utilizing inducements to encourage Skid Row men to stay in the immediate area and buffers between Skid Row and other land uses will result in a smaller Row and a reduced area of influence.

Blue Book - maps representing the "containment plan," 1976.

Central to the Blue Book is what became known controversially as the "containment" plan, which drew boundaries around Skid Row, from Third to Seventh Streets and from the east side of Main Street to the west side of Alameda, to demarcate the areas where the greatest amount of low-income housing and services were concentrated.¹⁵ Containment, as a descriptive, helped convince downtown business interests and politicians of the need to address the low-income fallout of urban renewal. Citizens of all stripes were alarmed by the creation of "satellite" Skid Rows and the "scatterization" of poor and unhoused people. It was the logical result of prior decades that included:



Bunker Hill, 1956. Courtesy Los Angeles Public Library.

- the destruction of housing on Bunker Hill, where former mansions, apartment buildings, and tenements housed a diverse group of the elderly and poor (including Latinos and Filipinos recently displaced from other neighborhoods, Native Americans who had arrived through urban relocation programs, and a robust gay and lesbian population);
- the demolition of thousands of units of low-income housing in the Skid Row area in the 1950s due to beefed up enforcement of building codes;¹⁶ and
- cutting the housing stock in half from the mid 1960s (15,000 units) to the early 1970s (7,500 units) as part of continued "anti-blight" campaigns and a "rehabilitation program" that condemned some buildings and led owners of others to demolish instead of invest in repairs, all within the "containment" area itself.¹⁷

Even the CRA had begun to take stock of this. By 1969, the CRA's own commissioned studies cast doubt upon the efficacy of "razing blight" and erasing Skid Row. As reported by sociologist Dr. Ronald C. Vander Kooi in his CRA survey of Central City East, the concentration of services and "social setting where men can find 'membership and companionship' when they would find it nowhere else" pointed towards the necessity to preserve and promote community development in Skid Row.¹⁸ Vander Kooi's study served as an important precedent to Blumberg's report in providing social scientific data charting the housing and supporting similar goals as expressed by community advocates represented in the Blue Book.

The Blue Book, with Blumberg's report, suggested "skid row is not going to go away by praying over it or wishing it away, or even by physically destroying it; there must be a comprehensive program.... There must be firm commitments on the part of City, County, and CRA." With its adoption, the City recognized that the population of Skid Row could not simply be "disappeared" or dispersed, and instead affirmed an intention to use the funding mechanisms of the Community Redevelopment Agency to invest in the Skid Row community.

Negative Connotations of "Containment"

The significance of the containment plan in terms of saving Skid Row's housing and anchoring the people to community has been diminished by the dehumanizing connotations of the word, unfulfilled promises, and the unintended consequences of, among other things, the "cooperation between the police and welfare and private social service agencies" that it called for.¹⁹ From the perspective of capital forces and economic interests that aimed to increase returns on investment through development, containment was a solution—not to poverty itself, which was not their concern, but to fears of falling property value. From this perspective, containment removed the impoverished—the "social problem"—from public view beyond Skid Row, to enable investment in what surrounded it. Missions were moved east into the demarcated area, so services would be adjacent to those in need.

Historically, "containment," like "ghetto," is a freighted term. It describes prior efforts in the face of perceived threat, from domestic containment beginning in the 1930s and 1940s (to contain female sexuality and maintain traditional gender roles) to Cold War military-political ideologies (to contain the communist threat) and their atomic aftermath (to contain nuclear waste). It describes aggressive political responses to what is perceived as uncontrollable, contagious, and toxic—environmental metaphors for material threats, employed to justify limitations on deeper social consideration of human rights.²⁰ The policing of the boundaries of the containment plan describes such an aggressive political response, as part of efforts to contain threats to the homogeneity and suburbanized views of how a city should look and behave.

This ideology of urban-suburban development was built over decades of banking and real estate practices that fortified white supremacy. These include racially restrictive covenants on deeds to property that prohibited non-white and Jewish people from owning or renting. This was widely used from the turn of the 20th century to the 1960s, even after the Supreme Court declared racial covenants unenforceable in 1948. Additionally, and with impacts that reverberate today, exclusionary New Deal banking and credit systems, including the racially regressive practices of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the GI Bill, and the Home Ownership Loan Corporation (HOLC), offered credit and secured mortgages for new construction in homogenous, suburban developments—prioritizing white middle classes, and generating deep segregation in housing from 1934 through the 1968 Fair Housing Act. In particular, the racial geography mapped by the HOLC designated older and multi-residential housing in neighborhoods with diverse populations as a poor credit risk, drawing red lines around those areas. These redlined maps from the late 1930s and early 1940s had significant impacts in the decades that followed, deepening segregation and disinvestment in the city center and other multiracial neighborhoods in LA. In combination with other discriminatory real estate practices, Black residents in particular were restricted to areas of downtown, around Fifth Street and Central Avenue; along Central Avenue south of downtown; and west of Alameda Street through Southeast LA. Even after federal

practices of redlining fell out of use with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the lines of racial segregation already drawn and the racial discrimination persisted, creating conditions, among other things, for new forms of racism, like predatory loans, blockbusting (realtors purposely bringing Black buyers into white neighborhoods to buy low from those who fled and sell high to Blacks with limited housing options), and other exploitative practices.²¹ De-industrialization, combined with white flight (taking the tax base with it), economically crippled Black South Central and Southeast LA by the 1960s and 1970s, drawing more people into downtown, where industry lingered longer.

The concentration of poverty in Skid Row, particularly in the area of the containment plan, was a direct result of these structural issues related to systemic racism, segregation, and shifts in industrial labor. The neighborhood surely did **not** fit with white, middle-class suburban ideologies of homogeneity and order. Nor did it fit with the visions of progress and prosperity held by city elite busily seeking to realize their expectations for perpetual economic gain, or what scholars describe as the Los Angeles “growth machine.”²²

Yet containment was a purposeful plan enacted in real time and space that was crafted in part by the primary constituents and social providers of Skid Row. They made the deal with the CRA. And they did it as a way to save what they saw as *their neighborhood*. All of these decades later, this containment plan is what preserved the housing, community, and services, setting Los Angeles’ Skid Row off from others, like the Bowery in New York.

Despite all of the problematic implications of “containment,” there is no disputing that the plan saved low-income housing. The Blue Book enabled land use and planning guidelines deployed in the decades that followed to upgrade, stabilize, and create additional low-income housing, using CRA tax increment financing and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal grants; it provided and centralized essential social services for its population.

With it, the CRA created SRO Housing Corporation in 1983, which purchased over 1700 SRO units and developed two parks, buying up clusters of housing to purposefully foster a sense

of community among the residents.²³ In 1989, Skid Row Housing Trust was formed as well, to expedite the process and with the aim of securing the housing on the western edge of Skid Row, along Main and Los Angeles Streets, among others. This in turn enabled those living and working within the containment zone to mobilize and organize for their own survival, particularly as vulnerable populations were pushed out of other neighborhoods and were increasingly left with no place else to go, as was the case for those who saw industrial jobs vanish in other parts of the City, especially South Los Angeles, beginning in the 1980s.

However, containment also seeded the ground for greater economic returns on investment later, as it kept property values within its boundaries lower than what surrounded, making it ripe for later development and displacement of low-income residents, as we continue to see today, and as the DTLA 2040 Community Plan risks expediting. Alice Callaghan, the founder and first director of Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT), who initially raised money from church and temple congregations to purchase and restore hotels before forming SRHT, named what was at stake. She figured that if the nonprofits could buy up all of the hotels and hold onto them in perpetuity, then it didn’t matter what developers came in.



Alice Callaghan. Courtesy
Los Angeles Poverty Department.

“As long as you own the housing,” she said, “the neighborhood is not at risk.” Unfortunately, the nonprofits did not succeed in “buying up” all the hotels, and, especially after the expiration of a five-year moratorium on SRO demolition ended in 1994, economic development pressures edged in along Main, Los Angeles, and Spring Streets, and large residential hotels like the Alexandria and Cecil Hotels, used as SROs and for Section 8, were also lost to private ownership.²⁴

2.

What Went Wrong: Concentrating and Deconcentrating Poverty, 1980s-2010s

Concentrating Poverty in the Era of “New” Homelessness

In the intervening decades since 1976, the Blue Book has been inadequate to the rise of “new homelessness.” Even as the first SRO Housing Corporation hotel opened in 1986, the crisis of homelessness was upon us. The growth in the population and demographic shifts in Skid Row that resulted from combined impacts of deindustrialization, privatization of health care, and catastrophic disinvestment in urban, and especially multiracial, neighborhoods and in social services throughout the city (and country) in the late 1970s and 1980s are widely documented.²⁵

According to eyewitnesses including Nancy Mintie, founder of Inner City Law Center, and Tanya Tull, founder of Para Los Niños, homelessness in Skid Row exploded in the early 1980s, and included more women, children, and people of color, especially new immigrants and African Americans. As Tull describes, “the unacceptable became acceptable” as families who once were just poor

now were on the streets. Until that time, General Relief payments had kept pace with housing costs, allowing people to stay housed.



Tanya Tull at Para Los Niños, 1986. Courtesy Tanya Tull and Los Angeles Poverty Department.

More people needed income support—poverty rates grew to 13% as industrial and low-skilled jobs continued to dry up and unemployment skyrocketed; mental health care systems were dismantled without replacement; and LA County rents rose over 50% between 1980 and 1990.



Urban Campground, Sep. 24, 1987: The encampment as seen from the 4th Street bridge the day before it shut down. Ken Lubas / Los Angeles Times

Yet at this same time County welfare was capped, at the same rate where it is today, \$221 a month. On top of that, the role of welfare workers devolved to a concern for the bottom line, with a multitude of obstacles put in place to ensure that welfare rolls did not rise and were slashed instead.²⁶

In this era of deindustrialization, economic crisis, and drastic reductions in social services in the 1980s and 1990s, Los Angeles also became “the world’s largest retail market for cocaine” and the epicenter of the U.S. crack economy.”²⁷ The rise in militarized clampdowns on drugs and gangs that followed, part of the Reagan-Bush “War on Drugs,” zero tolerance policing, and mandatory minimum sentencing, disproportionately affected Black and Latino men. Scholars describe the skyrocketing rates of imprisonment as the “de facto urban social policy for the residents of impoverished communities.” The growing number of prisons and “penal management system” replaced the social welfare system as a mechanism of social control in lieu of workable urban policies to address industrial decline, deregulated wage-labor markets, and public health.²⁸

Policing was used to control the growth of encampments in Skid Row as numbers of unhoused people grew, kicked off by efforts to remove the visibility of the homeless during the 1984 Olympics. In 1987 City Attorney James Hahn refused to prosecute individuals arrested for camping in Skid Row if housing was unavailable. As a result, Mayor Bradley created an “urban campground” on property owned by Metro at the Los Angeles River on Fourth Street and Santa Fe Avenue, run by the Salvation Army. People living along Skid Row streets were given the choice of jail or moving to the “urban campground.”²⁹ At the end of three months, the campground was closed and its four hundred inhabitants given three-day hotel vouchers (strikingly like today’s Project Roomkey) and dispersed throughout the County. This did little to deconcentrate or dissolve Skid Row. What it did instead was to chip away at the progressive, community-building vision previously adopted by the city for Skid Row in the Blue Book plan.

Even before the missions relocated to the “containment zone” (Los Angeles Mission in 1992, Union Rescue Mission in 1994, and Midnight Mission in 2003), they came to shoulder the heaviest burdens as less governmental aid was

available to individuals and more was directed to shelters, becoming, as homeless advocates put it, “one of the few growth industries for housing poor people, along with prisons.”³⁰ The missions and shelter system grew increasingly in size and political power, garnering public funding, and becoming more like a large corporation, less connected to the populations they served, and less representative of them. The “mega-shelters” also partnered with the criminal justice system to form a coalition notable for its omission of public interest lawyers, grassroots organizations, and community activists, and offering the same choices to living in the streets in the 1990s and 2000s as in the previous decade, which was to enter a shelter for “rehabilitation” or go to jail.³¹ Soon, police became the “primary government agents tasked with addressing homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, and unemployment,” with more funding going to policing in the mid 2000s as part of the City’s Safer Cities Initiative than into addressing homelessness, and making Skid Row the “most highly policed community” in the United States. In just two years (2006-2008), 19,000 arrests were carried out and 24,000 tickets issued to people in Skid Row, many leading to warrants and incarceration, criminalizing them most often for so-called “quality of life” complaints (like jaywalking, panhandling, public urination, littering, etc.).³² **Policing has regularly been employed within the boundaries of the 1976 “containment plan” to criminalize impoverished people. The solution, though, is not to disperse the people or to disparage the neighborhood as an “open-air prison” but rather to provide support, shelter, bathrooms, washing stations, garbage cans, and trash removal—and not just in Skid Row.**³³

Other essential components of the 1976 plan remained unfulfilled. Importantly, the Blue Book had stressed that “it is essential to provide satellite centers of the same comprehensiveness in such areas as Venice and Westlake on a smaller scale.” This did not occur. Skid Row increasingly became the lone center for the provision of a majority of services, so much so that other neighborhoods and cities came to drop off patients, unhoused people, and formerly incarcerated individuals in Skid Row rather than serve those displaced people in their own communities.³⁴ Even after Los Angeles County allocated funding in 2006 for services and shelters away from downtown

to ease the burden in downtown, NIMBYism prevented their construction—the recurring issue over the decades.³⁵ For sure, other parts of the City and County need to offer services within the communities where poor and unhoused people currently reside, especially since experienced outreach workers (and Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority) report on a core fact: if you move unhoused people from their communities, they will come back.³⁶ **Given this, more centers of service provision and low-income housing need to be established. All need to grow to meet the need—in Skid Row and in other communities too.**

Yet, as efforts to decentralize unhoused people away from Skid Row have increased over the recent past, to little avail, centralized systems for finding them care and housing have grown in complexity. This has had an impact on care within community, as, since at least 2010, the medicalization of mental health care and additional requirements imposed through the Affordable Health Care Act have necessitated increased levels of professionalization and certification for addiction treatment, locating supportive housing, and finding shelter.³⁷ The result is a loss of on-the-ground knowledge about the provision of services. **By focusing attention in Skid Row as its own district and service provision area, more effective means of transitioning people into permanent housing within the neighborhood would be facilitated.**

Deconcentrating Poverty and the Rise of Gentrification

The passage of the City of Los Angeles 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO), in tandem with state Downtown Rebound subsidies, were game changers for downtown, generating a speculative boom that has continued, even beyond the hiccup in downtown development during the recession of 2008 that pushed more people into homelessness. The ARO made it cheaper and easier for developers to convert “older, economically distressed, or historically significant buildings to apartments, live/work units or visitor-serving facilities.” Commercial structures long emptied of either their upper-story tenants or of any uses at all were converted to market-rate loft housing. ARO also lifted parking and density requirements,

which meant that longstanding tenements and residential hotels also converted to become large luxury condominium units.³⁸

Since its passage, 12,000 new housing units have been added to the downtown central business district. Due to an average size of 750 square feet and a 450-square-foot minimum requirement for conversion to new residences, which are bigger and cost more than a studio apartment, the ARO has not accommodated “affordable, permanent supportive and micro-unit[s]”—a missed opportunity to use the ARO to create housing for the poor and unhoused.³⁹ Meanwhile, 100 SRO units were lost between 1995 and 1999, and more than nine times as many (982) were lost in just three years following.⁴⁰ Initially, the ARO only added housing to Downtown. Soon, though, as the “Old Bank District” commanded market rates and more people flocked to Downtown, development pressures heightened, especially at the borders but also within Skid Row, expediting the crisis of available low- and deeply-low-income housing.

A better plan would be to use ARO (and its tax benefits) specifically for low-income housing. In addition, the community plans should ensure accountability so that no affordable housing is lost as a result of adaptive reuse. For instance, ten structures comprise what the City of LA Office of Historic Resources SurveyLA calls the “Fifth Street Single-Room Occupancy Hotel Historic District.” They are primarily multi-family dwellings constructed between 1906 and 1922, with three office buildings in the mix. To maintain consistency of use, this historic district can be preserved for continuous use by low-income residents, without risk that the ARO will be used for converting these structures to market-rate and non-residential uses.⁴¹

In the late 1990s and early 2000s as national and global shifts in the securitization of financing fostered huge growth in real estate values, especially in housing markets, and ARO was spurring market-rate development around the boundaries of Skid Row,⁴² CRA tax-credit financing within the downtown redevelopment area paused. In 2000, the CRA hit the ceiling of \$750 million in expenditures imposed as the result of anti-CRA lawsuits by former San Fernando Valley Councilman Ernani Bernardi in 1975, which made their way through the courts through the late 1990s without being lifted.⁴³ In response, the City

Council fast tracked two new redevelopment plans by the CRA for the Industrial District and Central City, approved in 2002 as a means to pump funds into new visions for downtown's "urban renaissance."⁴⁴ This time, instead of Skid Row's "containment," the plan, with support from Central City Association and the newly formed Central City East Association (both of which represent business and property interests) explicitly focused on supporting market-rate development for the first time since the 1976 redevelopment plan within the boundaries of Skid Row. It allowed market-rate construction from the west side of San Pedro Street to Main Street and maintained the ban on new housing of any kind in the industrial zone east of the east side of San Pedro Street.

The first and biggest development pressure was felt along Main Street—where roughly a third of existing low-income housing was situated. Many of these were converted to market-rate housing, often enacted through exploitative tactics and illegal evictions.⁴⁵ Square foot prices in Downtown's Central City, around Skid Row, rose enormously,⁴⁶ further exacerbating displacement. With a mere fraction of CRA funds now going towards a housing trust, the nonprofits had to



The Rosslyn Hotels on Main Street, 2006.
Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

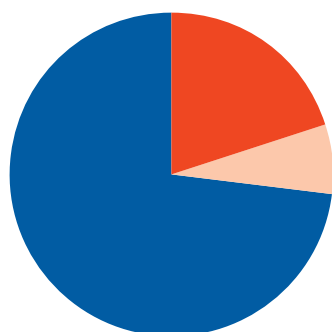
seek private investment to continue to buy SROs and build new housing. They could no longer hold the front lines against gentrification, as one after another Main and Spring Street hotels converted. Still, and despite this, since 2002 only a handful of new projects have been built in Skid Row between San Pedro and Main. Among them, The Medallion luxury apartments (343 S. Main) and Topaz Apartments (550 S. Main). These developments, and larger shifts in adaptively reused commercial spaces, have brought some market-rate housing into the area—although not enough to dominate Skid Row. While this may be said to have diversified the income levels of residents, it is surely no panacea to the problems that some critics have named as the "ghettoization" of the area.

The descriptor of "ghetto" is in any case incredibly problematic. It suggests that poverty is created by the "ghetto," which is of course false, as racial discrimination and structural inequalities in arenas including banking, lending, and real estate, helped create impoverished city centers with majority Black populations, nationwide, including LA.

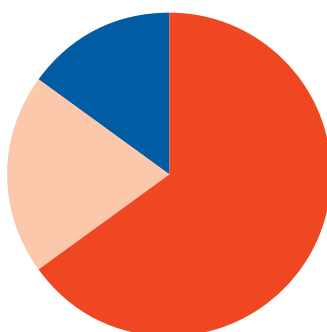
The solution is not to move wealthier people into the area as if this will solve the fundamental problems of poverty. This might lead to greater amenities for the area to serve newcomers but will not raise the income of those who are already poor or solve existing problems experienced by Skid Row residents. The market left to its own devices tends not to support the poorest people in mixed-income residential neighborhoods. However, **zoning can safeguard the current mixed income Skid Row so that existing market-rate housing is allowed to remain, as a way to enable the IX1 zone to be enlarged to represent the established Skid Row neighborhood boundaries.**

As John Malpede has written, "The issue is not that poor people are being ghettoized, but rather that the disingenuous calls for an inclusive neighborhood, are, in fact, a means of marginalizing the low-income residents of the community. If all of Skid Row or most of it is opened up for market rate housing, and if and when higher income folks become the majority (or just the loudest voice) within the neighborhood, you can bet that they will call the shots—about pretty much everything. Including criminalizing the long-time residents."

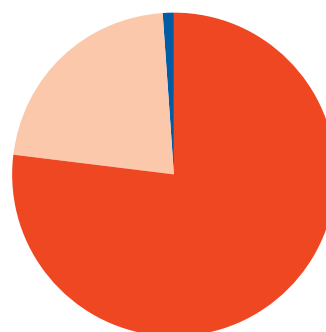
Downtown Housing
Before 1999



Housing Construction
Since 1999



Downtown Housing
Currently Under Construction



Affordable
Housing



Market Rate
Rental



Condos

Source: Downtown Center
Business Improvement District

Policy Paper “Land Use Planning in Skid Row: Strategies to Prevent Displacement and Build Affordable Housing” by Inner City Law Center, June 2018.

On the whole, the philosophy embedded in the visions for the “new” downtown, a “24-hour city” of nightlife and luxury lofts, prioritizes middle- and upper-class consumption and residences, and falsely promises solutions to concentrated poverty as if displacement or rubbing elbows with those wealthier than you will magically uplift the masses. Offering only a one-way distribution of upper-class consumers into poor neighborhoods but never poor people into higher-income neighborhoods, this has instead served gentrification and the “24-hour city” but done little to increase affordable housing or solve the problems of poverty.⁴⁷ Still, when poor people are identified as the dominant residents, as they are in Skid Row, their concentration is treated as the “problem” rather than the necessity to address poverty and affordable housing.

Changes in national housing policy and the disappearance of funding mechanisms for building low-income housing have also made it much harder to finance low-income housing projects. People like Callaghan working in nonprofit housing trusts explain that the way it used to work was that once you raised 30% of the cost of a project, the CRA and other sources would finance the balance. When Governor Jerry Brown terminated California’s redevelopment agencies in 2012, he also dissolved “the largest single source of financing for affordable housing in California.”

Without the availability of the CRAs tax increment financing, low-income housing projects became harder to budget and build. So, while Los Angeles is producing large quantities of new housing—more than other cities in California—and has built more than 88,000 units since 2010, only about 9 percent of that new housing is affordable to households earning less than the area median income.⁴⁸

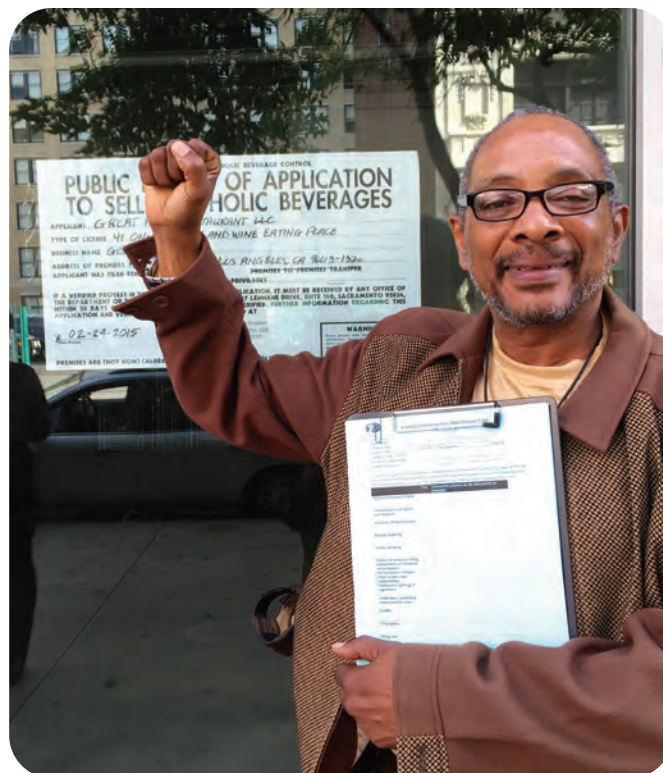
Given how little affordable housing has been built in Skid Row, or Downtown Los Angeles overall with current incentives, it is clear that the market alone cannot provide the housing that is needed.⁴⁹ A new model is needed that includes the use of publicly owned land, long-vacant structures, and empty warehouses for low-income housing, rather than using zoning to make these more lucrative for luxury and market-rate housing.

Without the availability of publicly administered funds, some nonprofit housing developers have sought more market-based solutions that many community-based advocates distrust. In 2011, Callaghan resigned from the board of the very Skid Row Housing Trust (SRHT) she had worked to create, when the Trust began using a model that mixed income levels and supportive housing with commercial real estate on the ground floor at their New Genesis and New Pershing Apartments (the latter being the very first property SRHT had

purchased and renovated in the 1980s and which was being redone again). In doing so, Skid Row Housing Trust followed trends in New York, San Francisco, and other parts of the country from the late 1990s. In name, the common goal is to resist “ghettoizing” tenants, and to serve the new loft dwellers and nightlife seekers, with the idea that all residents benefit from the mix. In practice, though, the model has been used to prioritize profits over people, as it has come to serve commercial interests often at odds with the support needed by formerly unhoused people, those in recovery, and those with disabilities living on those same streets or in the same developments.⁵⁰ The result, as Callaghan prognosticated a decade ago, is that “the 100% losers will be the poor and there is no example anybody can show in any such neighborhood where [development] has encroached and the neighbors continued to co-exist.”⁵¹

The SRHT’s New Genesis Apartments, a supportive housing complex, opened in 2012 with 104 units aimed to mid- and low-income, mentally ill, and formerly homeless people, including those recovering from substance abuse or taking advantage of other social services provided on site. It also included a ground floor restaurant that aimed to sell liquor on site.⁵² Not surprisingly, some, including General Jeff Page, an advocate for the homeless who at that time was a member of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, questioned the wisdom of selling alcohol downstairs and hosting recovery meetings for addicts upstairs.⁵³ Others were more blunt, like Skid Row resident KevinMichael Key. “It might make dollars but it makes no sense!” he exclaimed.⁵⁴

Key and Main Street resident Ronnie Walker appealed the Planning Commission’s decision to grant a variance for the permit and organized the neighborhood to show up and testify at the appeals hearing. They demonstrated with signs “No beer, no wine, not ever, not here.” Some of the same people had been in front of the New Genesis during its grand opening to protest the inclusion of market-rate units, which they predicted would edge out the formerly homeless and mentally ill. Community advocates won the battle over the liquor license, convincing the City Planning Commission to rescind the license. But the alignment of the nonprofit missions and SRHT with development interests rather than the Trust’s clientele has raised concerns, particularly as, in the same period, SRO Housing Corporation also



KevinMichael Key with petitions against the liquor license in front of the New Genesis Hotel, 2016. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

seemed to lose its community-building focus, becoming much more distant and less engaged in its grassroots community and residents. These outcomes cannot be divorced from the increasingly difficult funding climate for low-income housing developers, but neither can it be excused or rationalized on these grounds.

On- and off-premise alcohol sale is not the only concern. The Toy District (Third to Fifth and Los Angeles to San Pedro Streets), which in the 1970s was envisioned by the redevelopment agency “as a place for low-income transients safely away from the new high rises of the financial district a few blocks west.” In the 1980s and 1990s it became a wholesale and distribution center for toys imported from Asia. Since 2016 it has been dubbed “bong row,” after the rash of lethal fires from illegal storage of explosive materials in warehouses and shops selling smoking paraphernalia.⁵⁵ This concentration of land use is incompatible with both Little Tokyo on one side of the Toy District, and Skid Row on the other, constituting an environmental injustice. **What seems clear is that compatible use—a hallmark of land use and planning—should be employed in Skid Row and a buffer zone around it, to restrict bars, liquor**

stores, marijuana dispensaries, and smoke shops in consideration of those residents in greatest need, for whom the community of services is a lifeline, not a mere recreational pursuit.

Community demands to prioritize social need over entertainment and nightlife have also galvanized a robust movement in Skid Row for self-representation and decision-making power. In 1999, the Los Angeles City Charter was reformed to create Neighborhood Councils, “To promote more citizen participation in government and make government more responsive to local needs.”⁵⁶ Skid Row community members organized to form their own Neighborhood Council. Despite robust participation, in 2002 their efforts were foiled. Fifteen years later, in 2017, efforts for a Skid Row Neighborhood Council, to represent the interests and aspirations of the neighborhood, were foiled again, largely by the business and property owners who dominated the large Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC). More disturbing still is that the missions and large service providers sided with development-interested stakeholders in downtown. They argued that they didn’t want to be marginalized or isolated from the power brokers by being independent of DLANC. If rich and poor were to be separated into two Neighborhood Councils, they wanted to be with the rich. Aligning with monied interests presumably would put them in a stronger position of power to both advocate and reap the financial benefits that might come from advancing development. Yet in doing so, they failed to listen to community voices arguing for self-determination based on their distinct needs, demographics (majority Black), and economic and housing pressures.⁵⁷

So, while the missions are frontline to the housing crisis, as part of a larger institutionalized funding complex, their interests do not necessarily represent those of all unhoused and poor people in the neighborhood. This has spurred controversy over the decades. **Though a multitude of other community groups and individuals have stepped in to uplift community voice in lieu of council representation, as indicated in section 3 below, Skid Row still needs formal civic representation and decision making as a district council or other entity akin to a Neighborhood Council.**



Skid Row Neighborhood Council organizer General Jeff Page speaks with Terry Prescod, 2017. Exhibition, “Zillionaires Against Humanity: Sabotaging the Skid Row Neighborhood Council,” with Adrian Riskin, General Jeff, Linus Shentu, and John Malpede, Skid Row History Museum & Archive, 2018. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

3.

What Went Right: Community and Resiliency in Skid Row

As a neighborhood with a stable housed as well as unsheltered residential population, Skid Row persists today because of its history over more than a century as a multiracial low-income community. It has persisted due to many decades of:

- Advocacy by those who have fought to retain low-income housing, decriminalize poverty (including living one's life in public when there are no other options for permanent shelter), and gain access to clean water, sanitation services, parks, etc.;
- Innovative solutions to seemingly intractable social problems;
- Social and cultural networks created and sustained by community members; and
- Shared experiences in the face of adversity.⁵⁸



“Shopping Carts for The Homeless” from the LA Catholic Worker. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.

Skid Row is predominantly Black, but also racially and ethnically diverse with Latinx, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and mixed-race people as well as whites. Since everyone is poor and many are differently abled, the neighborhood can be a refuge and place of extraordinary tolerance. Community residents have persistently worked to improve their neighborhood, to hold on to and add to housing that for some is a last resort and for others is a first step towards permanent recovery. They have created means of survival and social cohesion despite a dearth of economic resources, and have organized to resist disenfranchisement by more powerful business elite, property owners, and governmental forces, who at times act as if being unpropertied diminishes your rights to a safe and healthy place to live, green space, places for artmaking, and a say about your community.

The large and small achievements of residents and grassroots organizations in Skid Row offer keen evidence of this and run the full range and course of recent Skid Row history. Organizers of Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris, for instance, who helped craft the community responses in the Blue Book of 1976, first arrived in Skid Row in 1970. They distributed food out of a van before opening a Hospitality Kitchen with better meals and a more forgiving environment than the nearby missions. It was dubbed the Hippie Kitchen and also became a place to organize on behalf of welfare, health, and housing reform, and to find people services such as free dental care, legal counsel, and needle exchange, not to mention an aspirin or a toothbrush when needed.⁵⁹ They still operate “outside the context of an institutional apparatus, whether that be state or Church or foundation or nonprofit corporation” and continue to “meet human needs in a human way” that also includes basic acceptance, without moral righteousness, of those living on the margins. Early efforts include: baking tons of “Justice Bread” and giving it away (1979-1993); striking and picketing commercial blood banks on Skid Row (1973); distributing groceries at cost at Nuestra Tienda (1977-83);

building Skid Row's first children's playground on an empty lot of a former junkyard out of tires, scrap metal, oil drums, and tons of sand (1980s); giving away free Christmas cards and mailing them for Skid Row denizens (1988-1990s); and more.⁶⁰ Since 1997, the Catholic Workers have distributed tens of thousands of shopping carts bearing a sign on the front drawn up by a lawyer explaining the rights of the pusher of the cart to use it, as a way to prevent arrest for possession of stolen property.⁶¹

Operating out of a construction trailer behind the Hippie Kitchen, in 1980 Nancy Mintie began to offer free legal services to unhoused men and women and working poor families in the SROs. Formalized as the Inner City Law Center (ICLC), it continues to operate under the belief that "the poorest among us should have the same access to justice as the richest and most powerful."⁶² In case after case they won against slum housing, ICLC held landlords accountable. In 1997, with civic leaders, housing advocates, and public interest attorneys in Skid Row, led by Gary Blasi, they established a "Blue Ribbon Commission on Slum Housing." The reports generated by the group showed in visceral ways and through first-person testimony the horrors of the 150,000 substandard housing units they discovered. The Commission agitated for the City to enforce building and safety codes, resulting in what the *Los Angeles Times* called the "most important anti-slum reform in L.A. History."⁶³

First-person testimonials, community activism, and innovative "community-lawyering" models—the belief that "social change comes about when people without power, particularly poor people or oppressed people, organize and recognize common grievances"—have been central to efforts in Skid Row to ensure the civil rights of residents.⁶⁴ Such grassroots efforts include:

- the Homeless Litigation Team, comprised of public interest lawyers and legal workers, who litigated Los Angeles County in the 1980s for obstructing access to welfare relief, and then joined the City in suing the County for bureaucratic barriers used to deny benefits to indigent and homeless people, eventually resolved in 1992 with the formation of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority;⁶⁵
- Carol Sobel of the ACLU, who came down to Skid Row to help "fight for the rights of the homeless to sleep on the sidewalk without

fear of arrest and 'secure in their person and possessions'";⁶⁶

- Legal Aid of Los Angeles (whose Eviction Defense Center began prosecuting slumlords in 1980) and Public Counsel's regular work supporting Skid Row residents; and
- Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), which grew out of prior organizing work of the Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, formed in Skid Row in 1999 by a group of residents, and is devoted to organizing and empowering community residents, recognizing that lasting social change is led by the people most affected.

Among the actions of members has been the fight to resist illegal displacement and eviction practices, including what LA CAN calls the "28-day shuffle" (hotels that made their residents change rooms every 28 days so that they will not gain tenancy rights). After years of agitation, the group convinced the City Council in 2006 to enact a "Residential Hotel Unit Conversion and Demolition Ordinance," which permanently preserves nearly 9,000 downtown housing units.⁶⁷ LA CAN members launched Community Watch in 2005 to document and protect against large scale destruction of people's personal belongings without due process, and to stop human rights abuses by police and Business Improvement District security guards.⁶⁸

Nuisance Abatement and Compatible Uses

Other policy shifts have come from families working with organizations like United Coalition East Prevention Project, founded in 1996 to address the problems related to alcohol and other drugs in Skid Row. For instance, in 1998, the Martinez family and their neighbors filed complaints identifying 13 nuisance businesses that were sources of illegal activity, including bars and liquor stores. While some in the city and the businesses themselves claimed, "what do you expect, this is skid row," residents and UCEPP disagreed.⁶⁹ Their march on City Hall a year later to demand action finally paid off, with the City's nuisance abatement branch identifying 25 nuisance businesses, and creating two positions within the Department of Building and Safety to investigate; five years later, Skid Row residents were back before City Council and the Planning

and Land Use Management committee on the same matter, to enhance the City's Land Use Abatement and Nuisance Business. They've continued to advocate for the neighborhood, and for compatible land use, as Charles Porter, UCEPP prevention coordinator put it, "We don't think it is sound planning to have liquor stores in a community where people are struggling with addiction," and as one member of the police force assigned to the area said, "it's like handing out Jello shots at an AA meeting."⁷⁰

This same issue as that which arose at the New Genesis recurred in 2021 at the High Tide, a restaurant seeking conversion to a full bar in the self-proclaimed North Sea Development, where seafood distribution businesses (some dating back a hundred years) now co-exist with a glass blowing studio and an art gallery, and are surrounded by a fair number of vacant buildings.⁷¹ The appropriation of the history of this portion of Skid Row without community consultation (even some "partners" listed on North Sea's website had no knowledge of this⁷²) is problematic. Putting a bar, which due to SB389/AB389 can sell alcohol on site and, with food, to go, in the thick of Skid Row (the location is across the street from Fred Jordan Mission, on the way to the Department of Public and Social Services on 4th Place) and where many encamp is even more troubling. **DTLA 2040 should restrict bars, liquor stores, marijuana dispensaries, and smoke shops within the historical boundaries of Skid Row and as a buffer zone along its perimeter, as incompatible use, as UCEPP and Skid Row community members have asserted in public hearings.**

Community Solutions: Health, Hygiene, & Well-being

Decades-long struggles to bring toilets and wash-stations to Skid Row have been waged by nearly every advocacy group in Skid Row. These range from LAMP, founded as a drop-in center for people with mental illness in 1985 (later expanded to include permanent supportive housing), to Las Familias del Pueblo and Catholic Worker, who organized sit-ins blockading the men's room at City Hall to advocate for porta-potties in the 1990s, to recent community-driven studies *The Dirty Divide in Downtown Los Angeles: A Call*

for Public Health Equity in Skid Row in 2013 and the audit of "the public toilet crisis" entitled *No Place to Go* in 2017, which compared how much worse conditions were in Skid Row than in United Nations refugee camps.⁷³ Community efforts by OG'N Services, Skid Row Brigade, and Operation Face Lift Skid Row joined these efforts, with focus on other gaps in City services: the lack of trash cans and pick-up.

Today, a hygiene center, envisioned, created, and staffed by community members operates 24-hours-a-day as the Skid Row Community ReFresh Spot through the Skid Row Community Improvement Coalition. This adds more permanent hygiene offerings to those by other groups like LavaMae, which provides mobile showers.



Skid Row Community ReFresh Spot

Other grassroots community efforts that reveal the broad spectrum of achievements include:

- 53 resident-led recovery meetings per week (pre-pandemic),
- Fun Zone Reading Club at the Huntington Hotel to teach literacy,
- Enhanced infrastructure for community parks,
- "Funky trashcan campaign," painting and putting out trashcans on corners,



Funky Trashcan Campaign. Courtesy Manuel Compito.

- Skid Row Brigade of residents deployed to clean the streets of the neighborhood and monitor port-o-potties and handwashing stations,
- Three on Three Street Basketball league at Gladys Park,



Three on Three Basketball League. Courtesy Manuel Compito.

- Tree planting by Industrial District Green,
- Skid Row Coffee, serving up joe and providing job training,

- Skid Row Photography Club,
- Community garden on the roof of LA CAN.

The preponderance of cultural activities and artistic expression in Skid Row also fortifies its cohesion as a community, from the founding of Los Angeles Poverty Department in 1985 to create art documenting the social and political realities of people in Skid Row to LAMP Art Projects, now Studio 526 (founded 1998), Inner City Arts, and the more recent Street Symphony, Urban Voices Project, and Piece by Piece. This is in ample evidence during movie nights at San Julian Park, and with the thousands of people attending and performing at the annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists and biennial “Walk the Talk” parade honoring people who have made a difference in the lives of Skid Row residents. Though the City of Los Angeles lacks one, Skid Row has its own Skid Row History Museum and Archive, with people represented whose voices are rarely heard, much less uplifted in traditional libraries and museums.



Walk the Talk, 2012 parade / performance by Los Angeles Poverty Department. Photo: Avishay Artsy, KCRW.

Skid Row Now and 2040 Coalition

The Skid Row Now and 2040 Coalition was built out of larger efforts by residents and advocacy groups for self-representation and self-determination. The coalition's Vision Plan represents the lived experiences, needs, and wishes of people living in Skid Row, and takes into consideration the histories and boundaries of Skid Row, and the big and small achievements of the community.⁷⁴

The group's genesis is in outreach and participatory planning efforts from 2014-2015 that culminated in *Our Skid Row*, a visioning process initially sponsored (and then abandoned) by Skid Row Housing Trust.⁷⁵ Participants came together to form Skid Row Now and 2040 to facilitate educational programs that, along with outreach accompanying Los Angeles Poverty Department's 2017 public exhibitions and programming "The Back 9" and 2020 "How to House 7000 People In Skid Row" projects, explicitly engaged with Re:Code LA and the prospect of a new community plan for downtown.⁷⁶

These efforts included zoning and affordable housing workshops with Skid Row residents; community outreach with the Department of City Planning; and hosted discussions with planning, development, and other experts on issues pertaining to low-income downtown communities and unhoused populations. These community meetings around DTLA 2040 took place from 2016 to the present, held at LA CAN, the James Wood Community Center, the Skid Row History Museum & Archive, and via Zoom. Qualitative interviews were also conducted at Gladys and San Julian Parks in 2018 and 2019. Tent-to-tent outreach added to those efforts. All of these organizing efforts have informed the Skid Row Now and 2040 Vision Plan.

The current vision plans articulated by the Skid Row Now and 2040 Coalition marks a continuum with the Community Plan of 1976 insofar as it advocates for an IX1 Zone that follows the boundaries of Skid Row demarcated in the Blue Book, advances strategies for adding affordable housing and retaining and improving the existing low-income housing, among other demands, as determined by long-term community members.



"The Back 9: Golf and Zoning Policy in Los Angeles" exhibition at the Skid Row History Museum & Archive, 2017. Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department.



Los Angeles Department of City Planning at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists, 2017.

Conclusion

In 2007, UCLA and USC scholars, including public interest lawyer Gary Blasi, wrote what is true today and resonates in terms of what sociologists and community advocates expressed in the 1970s and 1980s. “The current homeless care system amounts to a massive exercise in shuffling people around the city, as if they were pawns on a chessboard, in a game without end. After being roused from Skid Row, people with nowhere to go simply return to Skid Row or end up in jail, temporary shelters, voucher motels, or hospitals. They may find their way to communities where they may be tolerated for a short while but soon ‘moved along’ to somewhere else. In short, those who are displaced from Skid Row, or some other place, will not disappear but instead emerge elsewhere in the metropolis.”⁷⁷

It seems obvious: **DTLA 2040 should create permanent, supportive low-income housing within the existing Skid Row boundaries, to also shelter and improve conditions for women, children, family units, and those who are currently unhoused. Services, support, and low-income housing need to be multi-nodal, offered across the city and not just in Skid Row. By creating an IX1 zone that allows only affordable housing in industrial areas,** Skid Row will be mixed income, with a blend of people including those without means; garment, service industry, and minimum-wage workers; artists and those in cultural production (film, media, etc.); teachers; civil servants; and others who earn moderate incomes. **By expanding the IX1 zone to represent historical boundaries of Skid Row, DTLA 2040 can help preserve the social and cultural fabric of the neighborhood and its low-income housing. By creating a means of self-representation, such as a district council comprised of residents, workers, and other people with lived experience, Skid Row representatives can advocate for the particular needs of this distinctive neighborhood, and ensure that, when implemented, the DTLA 2040 plan fosters a healthy and sustainable neighborhood for those who live and work in Skid Row.** If you look at Skid Row, you see the way community members and advocates, working long term, have realized out sized achievements. The Blue Book plan from 1976 was ahead of its time. “The achievements” then and in the intervening decades, as John Malpede has expressed, ought to be “recognized, celebrated, and used as inspiration to animate a more equitable future.” DTLA 2040 can build on such achievements and towards such a future.

Endnotes

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- 8 Unlike the city’s other community plans, it was paid for by the city and downtown business interests, who hired an outside planning firm from Philadelphia. Ray Hebert, “Development Plan for Downtown Challenged,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1972, 21. Scholar Alfredo Huarte recounts the history of community planning in LA, though his focus is on a nearly simultaneous effort to preserve housing in Boyle Heights. See Alfredo Huarte, “Is Boyle Heights Worth Saving?” *Boom California* 10 July 2018, https://boom-california.org/2018/07/10/is-boyle-heights-worth-saving/#_ftnref6.
- 9 *Central City Los Angeles 1972/1990: Preliminary General Development Plan* (Los Angeles: Committee for Central City Planning, 1972). The Silver Book followed the model offered by the 1959 Bunker Hill redevelopment plan in recommending more neighborhoods be razed, recommending public investments in private development that would position LA as a “global city.” Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990), 72–74, 230–232. The Citizens’ Advisory Committee included a blue-chip downtown law firm whose junior attorney had first-hand experiences of Skid Row through his father.
- 10 Irv Burleigh, “Downtown Plan Questioned,” *Los Angeles Times* 1 February 1974, C1.
- 11 Irv Burleigh, “Central Plan Spillover Irks Westlake,” *Los Angeles Times* 15 February 1974, C1.
- 12 This was, arguably, the first genuine effort at community planning for the Downtown area after two decades of planning efforts in the post-World War II period marked by the destruction of housing in favor of commercial development.
- 13 *Report of the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Los Angeles City Central Business District Redevelopment Plan* (Los Angeles: Citizens Advisory Committee, July 1976), colloquially known (and cited hereafter) as the “Blue Book.”
- 14 Blue Book, 58–59.
- 15 Skid Row had never been

bounded before. In fact, boarding houses, single-room occupancy hotels, missions, cheap bathhouses, and soup kitchens had been on the site of today's City Hall, along 1st and 2nd Street in Little Tokyo, and beyond Main Street and Alameda Street.

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21 Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 103, 101-33; Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profits: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). On the population growth and settlement patterns of African Americans in Los Angeles, see Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Stephen Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2006), 18-19.

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26 Tanya Tull interview and Nancy Mintie interview, both by LA Poverty Department, Walk the Talk digital archive, <https://app.reduct.video/lapd/walk-the-talk/>; Jennifer Wolch, "From Global to Local: The Rise of Homelessness in Los Angeles during the 1980s," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 395, 401. People from El Salvador and Nicaragua, casualties of U.S. military intervention in the 1980s, swelled the numbers of unhoused people in MacArthur Park, Skid Row, and the L.A. River. In some cases, they circulated from La Placita, where the churches did not yet have an organized system for offering aid. Though both Mintie and Callaghan mention growing numbers of Latino families, the legacy and impacts on Skid Row have not been addressed.

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