

CITIES

Skid Row Is Here to Stay

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Photo by Stephen Zeigler/Wikipedia

On a sunny autumn day in Los Angeles,
more than a hundred people gather at

Gladys Street Park, located at the heart of Downtown's Skid Row. This 54-block neighborhood has been referred to as the "homeless capital of America" but it's also the site of a nascent community of artists, activists, and emerging leaders, many of whom worked to put together the day's festivities. At the center of the park, underneath a banner that reads "Festival for Skid Row Artists", musicians, singers, and poets rhapsodize and perform for a jubilant audience.

Gladys Park, a gated expanse on the corner of 6th and Gladys streets, was once a hotbed of criminal activity—the site of drug use, rampant alcohol abuse, and all manner of illicit exploits. Since then, the park has been revitalized, thanks to community efforts pioneered by activist Jeff Page, known locally as "General Jeff," the unofficial mayor of Skid Row. The park is now outfitted with clean water fountains, chess tables, exercise equipment, and a full basketball court, home to Skid Row's 3-on-3 Streetball League. The park is also the location of the Annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists, which marked its fifth year running this past Saturday. All residents are invited to participate in this energetic exhibition of local talent.

"What we're lacking in Skid Row is a cultural center where we can harness all this talent and all this positive energy under one roof," says Page. When he arrives to the park, Page is immediately flanked by friends and festival attendees, many of whom have to crane their necks upwards just to look at him. His height, in addition to the bright orange t-shirt he's wearing, makes him easy to spot in the commotion.

"Because the residents don't own any property here in Skid Row, we use Gladys Park as the headquarters of our positive movement," says Page.

On stage, music plays constantly, even as announcements are made. When Suzette Shaw is called up to perform, it is to substantial applause. Large silver hoop earrings and black sunglasses frame her face, and a bandana pulls her hair back on this hot day. Shaw has lived in Skid Row for two years, but she's quickly emerged as a prominent activist figure in the community. Known as a firebrand, she frequently shows up at city council meetings and community forums to lobby for Skid Row interests. She also hosts her own radio talk show segment called [Skid Row Ladies Take the Mic](#).

Although the festival weekend's events were about positive energy, Shaw's performance exposes some of the underlying anxieties that are wracking the Skid Row community. Shaw doesn't say the word "gentrification," but the subtext is still clearly there.

"They see us poor folks down here as taking up space that could be better utilized for other people they feel are more important, that matter," railed Shaw on stage.

For years now, the Downtown Los Angeles area has experienced a resurgence of economic activity. Since 2011, the median household income of Downtown L.A. residents has [risen](#) by 10 percent and in the past eight years, the population has [grown](#) by 23,520 residents.

But you don't have to see the numbers to recognize gentrification where it's happening: fashionable new yoga studios, pet stores, and coffee shops are popping up along the once-desolate streets of this neighborhood. One of Los Angeles' most popular restaurants, [Baco Mercat](#), sits right on the western border of Skid Row, on Main Street. Down the road, also in official Skid Row territory, a hip pet shop called [Pussy & Pooch](#) features matching pet and owner costumes in their window display.



Photo by Tasbeeh Herwees

A Brief History of Skid Row

To understand Skid Row today, you've got to go back to the heady 1970s, when Los Angeles was in the midst of a redevelopment boom. The city had just finished with its [Bunker Hill Redevelopment Project](#), which removed the slums that occupied the area and partially flattened L.A.'s hilly landscape for commercial plazas, buildings and skyscrapers. It was referred to—in shorthand—as the Blue Book Project.

After the success of the Blue Book Project, the developers' attentions turned to the area known today as Skid Row. Beginning in the late 19th century, the territory had become home to a transient population of migrant workers and short-term laborers. After World War II, homeless veterans began moving there as well. A number of social service organizations and shelters emerged to accommodate the specific needs of these inhabitants.

“That’s where all the single-room occupancy hotels were, because it had been where the train station used to be,” says John Malpede, founder of the L.A. Poverty Department. “That’s where things were offloaded to the produce district and that’s where day laborers went. There were all these hotels in terrible condition and in private hands.”

The architects of the Silver Book Project intended to wipe it all away in favor of creating a commercial center like the one forged by the Blue Book Project. But local advocacy organizations—the Catholic Worker, the Legal Aid Foundation, and the now-defunct Community Design Center—proposed a different plan. The infrastructure for social services and rehabilitation facilities already existed in this area. Why not allocate public money to buy out all the single room occupancy hotels and turn them into transitional housing? The new redevelopment plan enforced a policy of “containment” which would “contain” the poor and the homeless to a 54-block area where they could receive all the services they needed. The original designation for this area was Central City East, though it would later become more commonly known as Skid Row.

What first began as a transitory community has since become a permanent one. There are Skid Row residents who have lived here for decades. While “skid rows” in other parts of the country like San Francisco and Chicago have been cleared out or gentrified, L.A.’s Skid Row remains a durable fixture. According to Malpede, about two-thirds of the population is in permanent housing. The other third is homeless or occupies transitional housing.

“There’s indigenous leadership that’s shown up,” says Malpede. “It’s a dynamic community that’s taking care of it’s own.”

Cleaning Up Skid Row

Today, Skid Row is home to the highest concentration of homeless people in the United States. The sheer size of the homeless population means that the area is host to a number of poverty-

related problems, among them theft, vandalism, untreated mental illness, sexual violence, and public health issues.

Throughout the years, the city and county have tried out several proposed solutions—they've allocated funds to the Skid Row Housing Trust and SRO Housing, two of the largest property owners in the neighborhood; they've also supported street cleaning programs and funded mental health facilities.

But some of their fixes have received criticism from the community. In 2006, the city introduced the [Safer Cities Initiative](#), a program aimed at reducing crime in neighborhoods. [Local critics](#) lambasted the initiative, arguing that it encouraged aggressive policing—in the first few years it was in place, more than [1,000 citations](#) were issued every month to Skid Row residents for jaywalking and loitering. The result was the criminalization of an already underprivileged community.

This year, the city and county have taken a different approach with the [Operation Healthy Streets](#) program, a \$3.7 million dollar undertaking that funds cleanup crews and new trash cans in Skid Row. During the [first cleanup](#) in August, county officials offered health screenings and temporarily housed 30 people. City Councilmember Jose Huizar, who's had jurisdiction over Skid Row for only two years, has been a champion of the Operation Healthy Street program.

"I would challenge you to find any person in the city, county, or anyone within this region who has actually put themselves out there more than he has," says Rick Coca, a representative from Huizar's office. "When you [put yourself out there], often times you're going to get the good, the bad, and the in-between. Some folks are not going to be happy."

Activists from the Skid Row community have been very vocal about their unhappiness with Huizar. Last month, Huizar hosted a homelessness solutions panel at the Los Angeles Theatre Center to discuss an eight-page report called [the Plan for Hope](#), which included proposals to "incentivize scattered site housing throughout Los Angeles county." Skid Row activists staged a

walkout at the panel, and others boycotted it completely. They argued that not only was the plan ill-conceived but also that the panel discussion was co-opted by moneyed interests. Shaw took explicit offense at the panel's inclusion of Tom Gilmore, a multi-million dollar real estate developer who owns properties within the borders of Skid Row. She castigated what she called a "dog-and-pony show".

"You had to have gone online to reserve a ticket in order to even get into the room that day," says Shaw. "How many poor people have access to a computer? I have to go to a library to have access to a computer."

The Homelessness Solutions panel might have been a misstep, but it was only one event in a larger campaign to clean up Skid Row. Coca, Huizar's senior advisor, argues that the councilmember has kept homelessness at the top of his agenda. He even stepped in when Gladys Park and San Julian Park, another Skid Row recreational space, were in danger of being closed down for lack of funding.

"[Councilmember Huizar] put in \$50,000 in discretionary funds to keep them open," says Coca. "He convinced Recreation and Parks to take over Gladys Park to keep it open because he knows how critical is it to those people."

The activists are also disgruntled with the Skid Row Housing Trust and SRO Housing, which receive county funding to provide low-income housing to Skid Row. In the past year, the Skid Row Housing Trust has been battling for an alcohol permit for one of its properties, the New Genesis Apartments on Main Street. The New Genesis' first floor has space for two retail units, one of which is occupied by an artisanal ice cream shop called Peddlers' Creamery. The other space belongs to a food truck-turned-restaurant called Great Balls On Tires, which hopes to serve alcoholic beverages alongside its artisanal meatballs. Community members raised an uproar.

"How are you going to have an alcohol permit when you're housing tenants who are dealing with alcohol addiction? That's a conflict of interest," says Page.

The Skid Row Housing Trust lost its bid for an alcohol permit, which includes hard liquors, but appealed to win a beer and wine license. Skid Row activists, who plan on interfering with any other efforts to acquire an alcohol permit, consider it a victory.

“That building became the symbol of gentrification,” says Page. “That’s a big win for our community that shows our political power—that we have the ingenuity and know-how to stand up for our community.”

Page, like many others in the Skid Row community, rejects the idea that gentrification threatens their community. Their continued existence, he says, is already a testament to their staying power.

In recent years, the idea of moving Skid Row further east has come up more than once. These suggestions are not only unrealistic, but even seem cruel in light of the vibrant community that’s sprung up here.

“The notion of moving it somewhere else is a total fiction, because it was such a huge investment to create this area,” says Malpede. “If it gets destroyed, it won’t be replicated somewhere else. It will just be more people living under bridges.”



Photo by Tasbeeh Herwees

Operation Facelift Skid Row

Though the neighborhood has been uncharitably been dubbed “the homeless capital of America,” many people in fact, are proud to call Skid Row their home. Estimates number the population at 10,000, with more than 1,700 others living on the street. Although they’ve had Skid Row residents serve on the Downtown Neighborhood Council—Jeff Page served for three years—activists argue it’s time for their own autonomous political body.

“It’s in our best interests as a community to start the Skid Row Neighborhood Council,” says Page. “So myself and a couple other community leaders are actually rolling up our sleeves, getting ready to have this fight.”

In the meantime, Page, Shaw, Malpede, and their fellow Skid Row residents are creating their own change, starting at the grassroots. In 2008, Page co-founded Operation Facelift Skid Row,

the project responsible for cleaning up Gladys Park. The organizers host weekly [Skid Row Cleanups](#) and paint murals to brighten up the community.

“Instead of talking about Skid Row going away, it’s about improving Skid Row where it is today,” says Page. “Just like it’s improved today [through] events like this, an arts festival that is for the people, of the people, by the people.” ●

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