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The Other LAPD: The Los Angeles Poverty Department on Skid Row

by [Alicia Eler](#) on May 19, 2014



Documentation of the 2012 Walk The Talk parade/performance. (all photographs by Austin Hines and Henriëtte Brouwers, used with permission from the LA Poverty Department.)

LOS ANGELES — The [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) uses the acronym LAPD, which is deliberately named to evoke associations between police, the criminal justice system, and how people living in poverty are treated. Concentrating on LA's Skid Row, which has the [highest concentration of homelessness in the United States](#), this LAPD, unlike its police department namesake, seeks to give voice to homeless people rather than criminalizing their situation or shoving them aside.

Since 1985, LAPD Founding Artistic Director John Malpede has been working on Skid Row, which is a fifty-block area just east of downtown LA home to an [estimated](#) 3,500 homeless people, a thousand of whom sleep on the sidewalks. The LAPD exists for [the purpose of creating a](#) "normative community on Skid Row and normative communities for all people living in poverty."

On May 24, the LAPD presents [Walk The Talk](#), a parade/performance that starts at Gladys

Park (6th Street and Gladys Avenue), which will celebrate the history of Skid Row through performance, visual art, music, and the coming together of an accidental community. Hyperallergic got in touch with Malpede to learn more about *Walk The Talk*, and how it came to be.

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Documentation of the LAPD's 2012 Walk The Talk.

Alicia Eler: *This is the second iteration of the Walk The Talk, parade/performance, which means that it must have been a success the first year. Tell me a bit about how the project began, and why it started.*

John Malpede: *Walk the Talk* is biennial. First was two years ago in May 2012. It was great success and it was a blast.

Walk the Talk highlights people and initiatives — visionary social and/or artistic — that have contributed mightily to creating [a sense of] community on Skid Row, a community marked by compassion and a willingness to respond creatively to seemingly intractable social problems. One efforts begets others (like ping-pong balls jumping off of mousetraps in 50's science films explaining atomic energy).

In *Walk the Talk*, people dance down the street with a funky brass band, and stop at the spots where people have done their inspiring work. At each spot, we perform a scene about them,

utilizing their own words. (They all come to rehearsal and are interviewed by LAPD. We transcribe the video record, distill it, and that becomes the scene. Reason being we don't want to misrepresent these people).

Why it started: The community is located in an important place. There are other folks who would like to displace the community — as ga-ba-zillions could be made. Skid Row is a community and the home and workplace of wise, passionate, caring people and their efforts on a variety of fronts. *Walk the Talk* tells these stories, articulates the values of the existing community and so resists displacement.

Why it started #2: Also in the parade is an artist-generated banner/portrait of each person whose initiative is highlighted in the parade. There is a public art component of the project and this portraits are intended to ultimately be permanently located in public space in the community.



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AE: *Are people who are not a part of the Skid Row community allowed to participate in the parade? If so, how do they get involved?*

JM: Yes, of course. Anyone can and does join the parade. You do that by showing up. Last time hundreds of people from Skid Row adjacent and other parts of LA attended part or all of the parade. The map of route is being distributed citywide in our *Walk the Talk* tabloid newspaper. You can also [download a PDF](#) of the tabloid and map from our website.

AE: *I was really struck by this idea that you mention in the history of Skid Row — that Skid Row was designed to concentrate the poorest citizens and services in this specific area of the city, but then this ‘containment policy’ backfired and a real community sprung up in its place. You’ve been working on LAPD since 1985; can you talk a bit about what you have seen in terms of the community evolving?*

JM: Through *Walk the Talk* I’ve learned more of the important background on the social construction of the neighborhood.

In the 1970’s, after [Bunker Hill was redeveloped](#) (and everything there prior to the development was flattened), the city had a similar plan in the works for Skid Row. Jeff Dietrich of the Catholic Worker, along with The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and The Community Design Center, submitted an alternative plan that preserved the SRO housing in the 50 some blocks of Skid Row. The plan called for creating nonprofits to buy the hotels (then in deplorable slum lord conditions), renovate it creating safe affordable housing, and then to locate additional services there (e.g. eventually Union Rescue Mission was relocated from Main Street to San Pedro, [Midnight Mission](#) from Los Angeles Street to San Pedro and LA Mission from Los Angeles Street to 5th and Wall Streets, etc.). So the trade off of not leveling the area completely was to consolidate people and services in Skid Row proper. This became known as the “containment policy.”

However the other alternative would have completely obliterated Skid Row, which has happened in other cities. Because, a commitment to preserving the housing, creating more housing and services is to this day enshrined as the official zoning policy of the city, it has created the conditions for the community to develop itself and increasingly craft its own future. In other cities, where the interests of its poorest residents compete with other interests in the same neighborhood, guess who loses out.

... [Regarding the] community evolving, here I’ve got to invoke [the image of] the ping-pong balls [again]: One effort generates others (like ping-pong balls jumping off of mousetraps in 50’s science films explaining atomic energy). Many of the efforts — social and artistic — come from and are led by neighborhood residents and their associations. Organized neighborhood residents banded with other renters to get the city to pass a moratorium on converting residential hotels for other uses at a time when the real estate bubble was at its biggest. Currently there are a number of resident-led groups including [LA CAN](#), Issues and Solutions, and [UCEPP](#) that are advocating for a variety of needs in the neighborhood.



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AE: *In broad terms, can you talk a bit about what type of art you see happening on Skid Row? What subject matter is discussed? How is the work being made? Is there such a thing as a studio when you live on Skid Row*

JM: Art comes from the ground up on Skid Row. Musicians play in their rooms or in public spaces. Sometimes they are prevented from playing in public. People make visual art and write in their rooms. Some projects take place in community spaces. We've always rehearsed in community spaces — currently at UCEPP (United Coalition East Prevention Project). Other groups also meet there. LAMP has a visual arts workshop for its community members. The Downtown Women's Center and some of the missions also have workshops for their residents. LAPD throws a yearly *Festival for All Skid Row Artists* every October. It's a two-day event with over 100 performing and visual artists participating. Over the four years of the festival, we've created a database of 450 self-identified Skid Row artists.

Over the years there have been other innovative spots including at one time a basement of one of the hotels where musicians could store their instruments and come together to practice and rehearse for gigs. That effort "The Skid Row Musicians Network" existed for a few years in the late 1990's — it was highlighted in 2012's *Walk The Talk*. So, there have been many visionary efforts, in *Walk the Talk* we try to chronicle them, not just as history but also as possibility. Because new efforts keep jumping off — we keep making new editions of *Walk the Talk*.



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AE: Can you tell me a bit about the Walk the Talk [tabloid newspaper](#)?

JM: *The Walk The Talk Tabloid* works really well to get the word out in Skid Row because it's a face-to-face urban community where you walk down the street and talk with people you know and don't know. We distribute it throughout Skid Row and the rest of downtown. This year, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) is distributing it citywide along with info about the Mike Kelley retrospective at the Geffen.

The tabloid is also the program for the parade. It includes a map of the parade route and information (and pictures) about all of the initiatives and people that are being highlighted. It has information on the artists involved in the parade: visual artist Brian Dick, who's creating parade portraits/banners of the people being celebrated, Mudbug Brass Band, who will wail and animate everything, and one-line bios from the 20 or so LAPD performers. It also has information that contextualizes the project and information about the other elements of this year's *Walk the Talk*, including the community conversation that happened earlier this week (May 14), and the installation of images and other materials from the project and about the history of Skid Row that will be installed in Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead and will be open to the public May 29 through June 16 at Geffen-MOCA. (The installation will include a 20-foot-long timeline on the development of the Skid Row community that is currently on display at the Queens Museum's [retrospective exhibition](#) on the work of Los Angeles Poverty Department.)



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[Walk The Talk](#) starts at 11am PST at Gladys Park (corner of 6th Street and Gladys Avenue, 90021) on Saturday, May 24th, and ends at 3pm.

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