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[Los Angeles Poverty Department's Skid Row History Museum](#)

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Thirty years is a milestone for any cultural organization, but for [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) (LAPD), it's something of a miracle. Founded in 1985 by John Malpede, the multidisciplinary performance troupe explores the social forces creating poverty, and was the nation's first theatrical group comprised primarily of homeless and formerly homeless people.

In a pair of rooms on the second floor mezzanine of the nondescript Broadway Mall is the new home to the Skid Row History Museum and Archive. Its inaugural exhibition, "Blue Book/Silver Book," opens April 11 and runs through June 27.

This exhibition is the first in a series of shows Malpede and LAPD hope to present about activist initiatives that have preserved Skid Row over the years.

The 440 S. Broadway location is the first time the troupe is paying rent. Malpede, whose background includes teaching at UCLA, NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and the Amsterdam School for Advanced Research in Theater and Dance says with a laugh: "We've never had a space and have always worked in community spaces We just got these spaces last month."



Rob Ochshorn looking at the archive | Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department

Although the museum is described as a "pop-up," Malpede said that LAPD has plans for it. "It's only permanent if we can keep paying the rent, but we did get it for this project in particular, and we're still doing other projects. We did a performance last week at the Agape Center ["Red Beard/Red Beard"], which we also did at Highways [Performance Space] and USC a few months ago."

The exhibition will feature the juxtaposition of dueling city development plans for the future of Skid Row, both created in the mid 1970's, as a way of making transparent the role urban design plays in determining the fate of communities.

"What's significant about Skid Row," acknowledged Malpede, "what they now say is the last Skid Row in America, the reason has a lot to do with these plans -- in my opinion."

The minimal installation, curated and designed by LAPD -- and funded by Creative California Communities from the California Arts Council -- will derive from physical objects: two books, one Blue, one Silver, on a bare table. As visitors turn the pages of each book, thematically linked photos, videos, audio and paper documents, will be projected on the gallery walls. The digital element is being created in collaboration with Robert M. Ochshorn, who has also performed, lectured and exhibited internationally, and is currently a researcher at San Francisco's Communications Design Group.

The "Book" exhibition takes place in the larger room and makes use of the interplay of historical documents and non-linear, digitally reconfigured content -- activated by each visitor -- to unfold its story, ultimately creating a mechanism to experience the exhibition uniquely. The smaller space will contain an archive of Skid Row history (planning documents, articles, videos, audios, interview transcripts and the like), which will be available for both casual and scholarly research.

Netherlands-born Henriëtte Brouwers, producer and associate director of LAPD since 2000 (and married to Malpede since 2002), said she was excited about having finally located the actual Blue Book.

"Nobody had it. We called the CRA archives, but nobody could find it," Brouwers says. But eventually someone at the city dug one up.

Collaborating on the exhibition with Ochshorn, 27, was a no-brainer. The duo met in 2009, when Malpede was an artist-in-residence at M.I.T. and Ochshorn a research assistant. It's been a fruitful pairing, with Ochshorn having designed the ceiling box that films and projects highlighted portions of the books' texts.

Explained Ochshorn: "We can figure out what is being looked at at the moment. There will be two projections, one corresponding to people flipping through the books, and as they move through these, different videos and interviews from LAPD will also be projected on the wall, linking on the interface to take parts of any book and then tying them into readings people are doing."

Added Malpede, who said the exhibition is meant to be both educational and aesthetic: "Sometimes documents will show up and either be projected or just be in the book, but sometimes they'll be projected and then they'll turn into voice-overs, or sometimes an image will show up or sometimes it will be something completely different. It's not a performance, but we will have performative stuff that is germane to whatever is being talked about."



City Archivist Michael Holland with Blue and Silver Book | Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department

"The show is crystallized in terms of these two books," said Malpede, who is a walking Wikipedia of L.A.'s urban development history, as well as a frequent collaborator with dancers, poets, artists, architects and other directors.

"There was an ongoing civic conversation about what to do about downtown. In one book, there was a plan that has a very shiny silver cover with orange silver letters -- sort of a coffee table dimension book that was written by a committee of civic leaders that the mayor, Sam Yorty, encouraged to convene. It had a sort of futuristic vision when it was written in '72 and imagined the city in 1990."

The Blue Book is the plan that saved Skid Row's low income housing, defeating the Silver Book plan that proposed massive development of the area.

Malpede explained that the plan adopted in the 1970's saved the housing in the neighborhood and Skid Row, whereas previous plans had other ideas for that land. "They also had ideas for bulldozers and construction. It was a significant moment that led to a neighborhood that's continued and really gotten a sense of itself in the years since."

[Skid Row History Museum](#) from [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Angelenos with a bent for urban history know how the scene has played out over the decades, but none, probably more than Malpede.

"A lot of it got translated into a CRA [California Redevelopment Agency] plan, which ran into obstacles around tax increment financing. They had powers to do that, which is essentially to take money from any added value created in their district and instead of sending that back to the general fund -- the city, the county, the school districts -- they got to keep it.

"Social activists," continued Malpede, "also didn't like it because those moneys could have gone to the county to support the programs for low income people, and instead they didn't."

And so the Blue Book plan was adopted by the city as a strategy that would "contain" poor people in one corner of downtown. More significantly, perhaps, this had the reverse effect of also preventing upscale development within the decades-old social experiment known as Skid Row, resulting in the area's primary stakeholders being its low-income residents, their interests increasingly prioritized as the community continues to work to create a viable neighborhood.

"By '76," explained Malpede, "when the Citizens Committee filed their report they appended the entirety of [what] had been written and said, 'This is super important and you need to implement these recommendations.' That really changed the conversation. Suddenly, instead of being 'skidrow,' as one word, no capitals, it was Skid Row with two capital letters; this neighborhood here with these people living in it."

[LAPD's retrospective exhibit @ Queens Museum](#) from [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The first iteration of the museum, in 2008, was co-curated by Malpede and Mara McCarthy at Chinatown's Box Gallery.

Malpede received New York's Dance Theater Workshop Bessie Creation Award and, in 2013, and was the recipient of the Doris Duke Performing Artist Fellowship. "After the Box show," he says, "people said it would be great to have it as a permanent thing somewhere, but we weren't

able to realize it. Last year, Queens Museum did a retrospective of the history of LAPD, but that was more focused on the group. This is not focused on LAPD, but on the history of Skid Row and particularly the activist initiatives that saved the neighborhood."

Malpede, who agreed that Los Angeles is often called the 'homeless capital of America,' certainly knows his stuff, citing other areas, including New York's Bowery, where high-end development was allowed to happen in the same spots where there was low-income development.

"You can now go to a Whole Foods in the Bowery, sleep at a high end hotel and go to a tapas bar called SRO. The interests of the long-term -- the poor people who've been living there forever -- are not the dominant interests in that area. But here, that's true."



Camen Vega reading | Courtesy Los Angeles Poverty Department



About the Author

Victoria Looseleaf is an award winning arts journalist and regular contributor to the Los Angeles Times, Dance Magazine, Performances Magazine and KUSC-FM radio. [MORE](#) ▶