

# HYPERALLERGIC

## ARTICLES

# A “People’s History” of Los Angeles’s Skid Row

Artists and activists have a long history in the Skid Row neighborhood. An online archive documents their stories and influence.



Natalie Haddad August 24, 2020



Walk the Talk in 2012, featuring portraits by Mr. Brainwash (photo by Avishay Artsy, KGRW)

LOS ANGELES — By the time the COVID-19 pandemic forced Los Angeles into lockdown, plans for Walk the Talk — the biannual parade celebrating community activists in Los Angeles’s Skid Row neighborhood — were well underway. The event is organized by the [Los](#)

[Angeles Poverty Department](#), or LAPD (an intentional allusion to the Los Angeles Police Department), a nonprofit performance group composed of housed and unhoused Skid Row residents. It features a New Orleans-style brass band, public art projects, and performances by LAPD members. Each year it honors eight activists (with the exception of 2012’s inaugural event, which honored 36), who have contributed to improving the neighborhood and strengthening its community. Honorees range from civil rights and housing advocates to mission leaders, local merchants, and artists, who

work and, in many cases, live in Skid Row.



Angelia Harper portrait by Man One for Walk the Talk 2020

The live parade was postponed to May 2021, but rather than delay the festivities altogether, LAPD decided to go virtual with it, launching the online [Walk the Talk Archive](#). The archive comprises video interviews with over 60 past and present honorees discussing their backgrounds and work, as well as documentation of the performances, videos that elaborate on Skid Row’s history (added monthly for the next year), and portraits of honorees by a different artist each year (this year’s by [Man One](#)).

Plans for an online version of the physical archive at LAPD’s [Skid Row History Museum & Archives](#) (SRHMA) date back to the museum’s opening in 2014. LAPD founder and artistic director John Malpede explained by email that the original plan was to “include everything we have in our Skid Row archive,” which contains documentation from LAPD’s performance history, including scripts, rehearsal notes, and videos dating back to its inception, as well as historical materials such as city planning documents related to the Skid Row neighborhood. “Later, we decided it was best as a dedicated site for Walk the Talk. When COVID forced the cancellation of a live, in-the-streets parade this year we decided to finish the site and make it public.”



Walk the Talk 2012, featuring portrait by Mr. Brainwash (photo by Austin Hines)

The website was created by San Francisco-based artist and technologist Robert M. Ochshorn, who previously collaborated with LAPD on the museum’s inaugural 2015 exhibition, [Blue Book/Silver Book](#), linking historical documents with viewer-activated digital content. For

the Walk the Talk Archive, which is hosted by Ochshorn’s company, Reduct.Video, the interviews and performances are accompanied by transcripts, allowing for transcript-based searches and enabling easy cross-referencing among videos and access to any topic.

Ochshorn said by phone there was “something meaningful to me about bringing new technology to it,” adding, “it felt very important to find some way to give visibility to [the honorees], who have been doing transformative work in the community.”



Walk the Talk 2014 (photo by Austin Hines)

Since the inaugural three-day Walk the Talk event in 2012, the parade has raised awareness of the diversity of the Skid Row community and the social forces that foster poverty and disenfranchisement. The LAPD website describes it as a “people’s history of the community.”

Skid Row resident and [Industrial District Green](#) co-founder Katherine McNenny is one of many honorees whose ground-level work to improve the community reflects larger systemic issues. The organization’s initiative to plant trees and gardens in Skid Row responds to the ingrained racism and criminalization of poverty in US urban planning. “Neighborhoods all across our country which were redlined in the 1930s are now measurably hotter and have about half as many trees on average as nearby predominantly white neighborhoods,” she said by email.

Other honorees have made similar community contributions, bringing toilets, cleaning stations, garbage cans, and cell-phone charging stations to Skid Row, in addition to such large-scale projects as opening missions and battling the city for housing.

Central to this “people’s history” is the imperative for community members to “control the narrative about Skid Row,” as 2014 honoree Charles Porter, of the [United Coalition East Prevention Project](#), stated in the website’s Zoom launch in May. 2018 honoree Pastor Cue echoed the sentiment in his Walk the Talk interview: “People don’t need anyone to speak for them. They



Walk the Talk 2014, honoring General Jeff  
(photo by Austin Hines)

just need us to amplify their voice.”

These voices have strengthened Skid Row as a community while low-income (and often non-white) residents in other areas, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, have been displaced by moneyed developers and gentrification. Porter noted in the launch, “We can extend back in time [with the archive] and listen to how

people were responding to issues we’re still facing right now, and we can learn lessons about what worked and what didn’t work.”



Walk the Talk 2014 (photo by Genaro Molina)

For Cathy Gudis, a University of California Riverside history professor and ACLS scholar-in-residence at the SRHMA, the breadth of the archive’s narratives repudiates common stereotypes about how people end up in poverty and the potential to transform low-income

neighborhoods into viable communities — issues that are especially relevant as Americans experience record unemployment and financial insecurity, and people of color endure escalating violence and discrimination.

To promote the archive, the Box gallery (which has collaborated with LAPD on multiple exhibitions, beginning with [Skid Row History Museum](#) in 2008) is posting excerpts of some of these video interviews and performances on its [Instagram](#) all summer.

In addition, LAPD is planning a limited-edition publication this fall of this year’s performance scripts, with an introduction by Malpede and essay by Gudis, to distribute to community members without internet access. (It will also be available to buy on the LAPD website.)

Gudis, who has participated in the parade since the beginning, described it

fondly as “re-appropriating civic activities with a rag-tag crew,” while Malpede summed up the archive in the Zoom launch: “It’s a people’s history of the Skid Row community’s resistance, in the voices of the people who have refused to be disappeared and displaced.”