

08.27.21 / [Carolina Lio](#), [John Malpede](#), [Henriëtte Brouwers](#)

Changing Skid Row's Story

Established in 1985, Los Angeles Poverty Department (pointedly abbreviated as LAPD) was the first arts organization in Skid Row, the first performance group in the United States composed mainly of homeless people, and the first arts program of any kind for homeless people in Los Angeles. LAPD founder John Malpede moved to LA from New York City after President Ronald Reagan's changes to national housing policy stripped support from low-income citizens and diminished the quantity of affordable housing, resulting in a wave of displacement. California was particularly hard-hit due to the thousands of people with mental health issues that had been de-hospitalized in the late '60s and '70s during Reagan's tenure as the state's governor, forcing those with no family or close friends—more than half of them Black or Latino—onto the street. Malpede started attending meetings of the LA County Board of Supervisors, introduced himself to local activists, and took a job as a paralegal with the Inner City Law Center, providing feedback on the needs of the unhoused. After hours, he would use his legal office to teach theater classes to the homeless. LAPD was born.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Walk the Talk*, 2012–2020. Parade in Skid Row, May 24, 2014. Courtesy of LAPD.

At the core of LAPD is performative art, especially political theater. The group also organizes workshops and community conversations around topics including income inequality, the housing crisis and displacement, the war on drugs, the justice system, and the criminalization of poverty. As a result, LAPD's activities have consistently and significantly raised the value placed on the arts by social service providers and policymakers in the city. The organization marked their 30th anniversary in April 2015 by opening the Skid Row History Museum & Archive at 440 S. Broadway. In addition to archiving documents, films, and oral history records on Skid Row's activist, artistic, and recovery culture over the last few decades, the museum hosts performances and exhibitions. The archive is accessible to the general public, and provides practical examples of community resistance to the pressures of gentrification alongside personal stories of recovery and transformation.

Emblematic of "[a city that's lost control](#)" since the end of the nineteenth century, the 54 square blocks of Skid Row have long been defined by a mix of low-cost residential hotels, light industry, and religious missions, a last refuge for a fleeting population of sufferers of alcoholism and the disabled. The 1970s brought Vietnam veterans and users of hard drugs to the area. Since then, the neighborhood has been an unofficial "[containment zone](#)" where a society of homelessness is tolerated. The situation has only worsened in recent years. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the number of homeless people in Los Angeles has grown by a third since 2017. [Nearly 60,000 Los Angeles County residents are unhoused](#). In Skid Row, individuals on extremely low fixed incomes move among hotel rooms, shelters, and the street over the course of a month, with a total of nearly 7,000 residents sleeping rough at any given time.

But after 35 years of commitment to social justice and activities in collaboration with advocates, residents, and social-service professionals, LAPD has successfully shifted the area's paradigm. Over the official narratives of the city and its policymakers, people in LAPD's orbit dare to take ownership of their narratives and break the stereotypes that have been used to keep the area mired in hopelessness and justify displacement. Through the words of activist KevinMichael Key, one of Malpede's closest collaborators and friends until his death in 2017, the Skid Row residents involved in LAPD feel they are "[part of the solution rather than the problem](#)." I spoke with John Malpede and LAPD Associate Director Henriëtte Brouwers in August 2020 as part of a research project and live public program that I curated for Visible (Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna). Their current exhibition, How to House 7000 People in Skid Row, opened on March 20, 2020 and will be on view at Skid Row History Museum & Archive, 250 S. Broadway, Los Angeles, through 2021. The project is complemented by [The New Compassionate Downtown](#) (May 2021), a performance commissioned by The Museum of Contemporary Art, and artist Robby Herbst's publication "[Compassion and Self Deception: A Guide To Los Angeles' Moral Crisis](#)" (July 2021). Below is an edited transcript of our conversation.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Agents & Assets*, 2001. Alexander the Poet as Mr. Dicks. Performance, The Church of the Advocate, Philadelphia, November 3, 4, 5, 2006. Courtesy of LAPD.

CAROLINA LIO: What are the main phases of Skid Row history that you've directly experienced after moving to Los Angeles 35 years ago?

JOHN MALPEDE: The first thing about Skid Row is that it would not even have been there if it were not for a history of resistance that started in the 1970s. In fact, in that period, before there was a homelessness crisis in LA, an adjacent area was completely knocked down and turned into a corporatized area, which became the skyline of downtown. This is what was planned for Skid Row too. Some very smart young activists intervened. They saved 50 square blocks of the single-room occupancy hotels in that area and disallowed any market-rate housing. So that's why Skid Row exists.

When the homelessness crisis showed up in the 1980s—and I showed up as well, as a performance artist from New York wanting to do something about it—I fell in with these activists. I discovered that the place existed, and continues to exist, only through the consistent efforts of people living and working in the neighborhood. Since then, there have been repeated attempts to displace the neighborhood and create multi-gazillion dollars' worth of real estate out of it. The area appeals to investors because it has the Downtown Historic Core and the high-rise district of Bunker Hill on one side and the "Arts District" on the other—an oxymoron because the artists were kicked out of there years ago.

Anyway, part of the bargain was that the city intended to move all of the support resources to Skid Row, so poor people would not be seen anywhere else. The city created a nonprofit using the development dollars from the high rises they were building. They started buying up the old slum hotels, renovating them, and turning them into safe, affordable housing. But there was always antagonism against this plan. Ultimately, the sympathetic development people were kicked out, and everything ground to a halt.

In 1999, the city passed an adaptive reuse ordinance that allowed hotels and other former commercial buildings to be used as live/work spaces, such as artist lofts. But they were never occupied by artists. They were very high priced and occupied by people who had money, and they started pushing against their Skid Row neighbors. Many people were illegally evicted because the private hotels' landlords realized they could kick out their low-income residents and make a lot more money. This was eventually stopped by lawsuits, again by activists in the neighborhood. But then a regime of aggressive policing, called the Safer Cities Initiative, began. CL: In 2007, you realized a project called [*UTOPIA / dystopia*](#), which was about these tensions and polarized ideas about what destiny Skid Row should ultimately have. The guiding question of the project was: how much dystopia is the big downtown utopia causing?

JM: Yes, or, in other words: how much suffering are you going to create while you are making a "world-class downtown" (which was what the civic boosters were calling it)? *UTOPIA / dystopia* culminated with a performance at REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater) in which almost all of the characters were pulled from real life, including downtown real estate developer Tom Gilmore and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. They were portrayed by a mix of Skid Row residents and professional actors. Among other things, we reenacted a hearing in which a councilwoman representing downtown was dueling with the lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union and telling the city not to settle with the poverty lawyers because, if they did not settle, they could continue arresting people for being on the street for another year.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *UTOPIA / dystopia*, 2007. Performance, REDCAT, Los Angeles, December 6–9, 2007. Courtesy of LAPD.

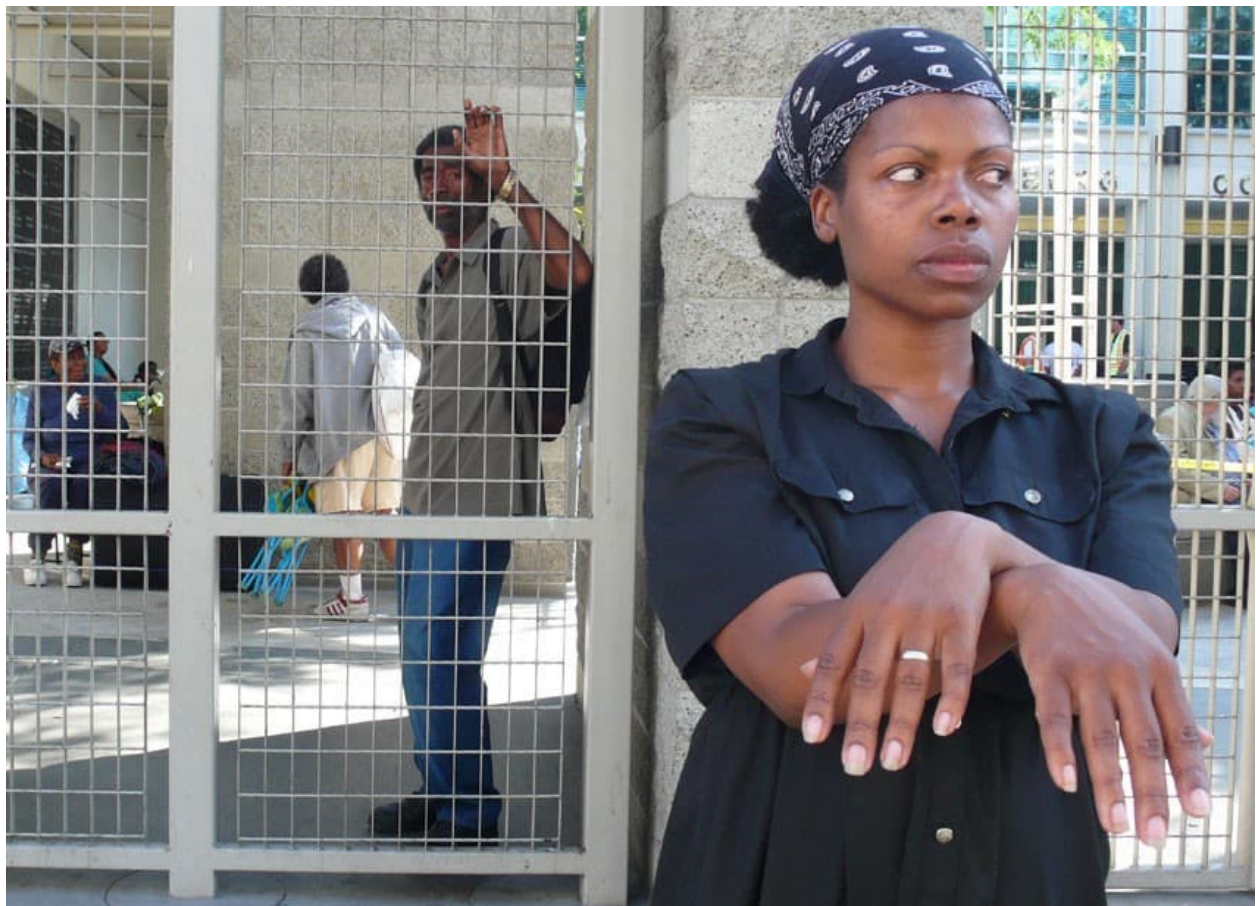
HENRIËTTE BROUWERS: Before the final performance of this show's run, we also did three different actions engaging different parts of the community. One was a 15-minute slow-motion dance movement extending ten blocks from the heart of Skid Row to City Hall. It was called [*220 Glimpses of Utopia*](#) (2007). About 220 people were involved; we did workshops with missions, schools, and other groups downtown.

JM: We had five different community groups convening, which brought people from very different perspectives into the same room for a less contested moment together than they would typically have.

CL: What did this action specifically consist of?

HB: Participants were asked to provide an answer—in the form of slow motion movements—to the question of what utopia was for them, and the collective response was a “chain of caring,” but also a strong act of reappropriation of the street.

LIO: Was this work also in response to the 2006 “sit-lie” law, which makes it a criminal offense to sit, lie, or sleep on a public sidewalk anywhere in the city?



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *220 Glimpses of Utopia*, 2007. Performance, November 16, 2007. Courtesy of LAPD.

JM: Yes, it was. That was initially called the Hippie Law, and it was put in effect in Hollywood in the 1960s to keep hippies from hanging out. Later, it was dusted off and enforced only in Skid Row. From 2006 to 2015 and '16, thousands and thousands of people were given tickets. When they did not pay them, they were put in jail. Hundreds of thousands of people were arrested for jaywalking. Thousands of people were arrested as drug dealers when they were drug users. The police were also taking people's belongings, including medicines and identification papers, when they went to eat lunch. A 2014 lawsuit brought by the Los Angeles Catholic Worker ultimately went all the way to the Supreme Court and this heavy policing situation was eventually thwarted.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *State of Incarceration*, 2014. Performance, Queens Museum, New York, January 31 and February 1, 2014. Courtesy of LAPD.

CL: Speaking of jail, this reminds me of one of your most paradigmatic works, [*State of Incarceration*](#) (2010-14). The set at the LAPD's retrospective at Queens Museum consisted of prison bunkbeds crammed wall to wall into a gallery space. The audience sat among the performers, who delivered monologues and choreographed sequences on the topic of the California prison system. In the same retrospective, [*Agents & Assets*](#) (2001-14) reenacted a 1998 US House of Representatives hearing on alleged CIA involvement in crack cocaine trafficking into the Los Angeles area. These and other works do not just illustrate some issues. There are indeed many changes directly triggered by LAPD and the stories of resistance your group tells. Could you talk me through some of these cases?



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Agents & Assets*, 2014. Performance, Queens Museum, New York, February 28, 2014. Courtesy of LAPD.

JM: Roughly in the same period, a building that had long hosted a drug recovery program was closed down and was going to be made into market-rate lofts. We prevented that from happening. Then there was a hotel owned by a nonprofit and renovated to house people right off the street—downstairs was going to be a mental health service. However, it was right on a completely gentrified main street, and there was an attempt to turn it into an alcohol-serving restaurant. Together with other people in the neighborhood, we appealed that ruling and defeated their liquor license. In 2016, we also made a performance out of it, [*What Fuels Development?*](#), in which some of the characters were developers and politicians making a plan for that restaurant, and we had the audience sitting around trendy dining tables. Community members testified at the far side, and the zoning commissioners on the other side. As a script, we used the original transcript from the hearing, where the commissioners reversed their decisions in favor of the neighborhood.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *What Fuels Development?*, 2016. Performance, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, March 25 and 26, April 1–3, 2016. Courtesy of LAPD.

The following year, we did an exhibition and a performance in our space, called [*The Back 9*](#) (2017), alluding to rich people getting together on the golf course and making deals. [Artist and designer] Rosten Woo designed a zoning-themed miniature golf course, and LAPD made a performance in which we portrayed developers and politicians playing golf while carving up the future version of Los Angeles. During the process, we engaged the Department of City Planning in an ongoing dialogue with the Skid Row community. As a result, they have made adjustments to their plan. Shortly after *The Back 9*, a coalition of community groups and individuals, including LAPD, was formed to create an alternative plan that prioritized the vision of Skid Row's current residents: The Skid Row Now & 2040 Plan. We have already won considerable concessions, but there is still a significant amount of work to be done in the next year and a half before it turns into law.



Rosten Woo and Los Angeles Poverty Department, *The Back 9: Golf and Zoning Policy in Los Angeles*, installation view, Skid Row History Museum & Archive, Los Angeles, June 10–October 31, 2017. Courtesy of LAPD.

CL: Hearing you talking about these plans reminds me of one of the first statements I came across on your [website](#): “We want to create a normative community on Skid Row and normative communities for all people living in poverty. In other words, if they’ve got municipal services in some parts of town, then we want them in ours. If they’ve got parks, restaurants, community centers, then we want the same. We want the same policing in our community as in others.” People of Skid Row and their rights are certainly at the core of your work, and this leads to another of my favorite LAPD projects, the biennial parade [Walk the Talk](#), which started in 2012. Initially, you wanted to position some street plaques, like the Hollywood Walk of Fame, to honor people who had lived and worked in Skid Row. The city council denied the permission to do that, so an alternative had to be found. You opted for parades accompanied by performances telling the stories of regular Skid Row residents. What’s the process behind that?

JM: We have one- and two-hour video interviews that we made with all these people who have done transformative things in Skid Row—people who live there, people who work there, people who are well known for starting initiatives like the Downtown Women’s Center, and lesser-known people. We then distill their interview into a small performance, we get an artist to do their portrait, we get a New Orleans-style brass band, and we take all that to the streets.

HB: We have an [archive](#) online that goes back to 2012, when *Walk the Talk* started. For each person, there is a bio, a video of the performance with its script, and the full interview. Everything is searchable. We also are in the process of making reels, like little three-minute introductions.

CL: Jumping now to your most recent projects, the latest exhibition is [How to House 7000 People in Skid Row](#) (2020), again by Rosten Woo. Only 60 percent of the people living in Skid Row are long-term residents of hotels and apartments, and seven thousand additional units would be needed for the rest of the people, living on the streets or currently in transitional programs.



Los Angeles Poverty Department, *Walk the Talk*, 2012–2020. Parade in Skid Row, May 26–28, 2012. Courtesy of LAPD.

HB: Exactly. The whole exhibition is trying to make visible and tangible what it means to house those 7,000 people. We collaborated with a group of artists and planners called the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, and with Anna Kobara, a planner working for a nonprofit housing organization. She used the numbers of all the development projects that are allegedly going to be happening downtown, and was able to quantify how much that would generate and how much more could be generated by inclusionary zoning, a vacancy tax, the creation of a tax increment financing (TIF) district, and other possibilities.

“Affordable housing” is a problematic notion, though, because what the city sees as affordable is still very unaffordable for the people living in Skid Row. Therefore, we also have advocated for really supportive social housing, and the Department of City Planning has now actually made a

new affordable housing zone called Extreme Low-Income Housing. We made our own community plan, and one of the things that we said is that we do not want anyone living in the neighborhood to be displaced—whether they are on the street, in a hotel, or at a mission. We want housing for all our people.

[CAROLINA LIO](#) is a curator, writer, and lecturer based in London. She is founding director of LOOKING FORWARD, a curatorial office developing new models of ethical curating within an international network of organizations. She is also curator at Empathy & Risk, London, and Visible (Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna), Italy, among others. She extends her thanks to Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander.