

## **Rosten Woo on HOTELS IN CRISIS (AGAIN)**

*Sara Bluemead: What was the inspiration for this particular exhibition? And how are you approaching the content?*

I mean, the inspiration was that John and Henriette asked me to make an exhibition about SROs. It was at a time when Skid Row Housing Trust had just folded, and they knew that they had this big archive from the beginnings of Skid Row Housing Trust, and they had been around in Skid Row through the creation of a lot of the supportive housing that's there, and the conversion of these residential hotels and to their current form. They were interested in what the archive could tell us about what's going on. Because it seems like there is an unfolding crisis in Skid Row, and something that is of interest to LAPD and to me is trying to think through how culture can be a catalyst for meaningful organizing and change.

There are really interesting materials in the archive. All the work I make is driven by context and thinking through the particulars of a situation. So, one of the things that was really important to me was making sure that we acknowledged the historic—the archive—really clearly, and also the organizing that was going on currently. So, I reached out to the Tenant's Union, trying to get the sense of what is it that people need right now. And people from the Tenant's Union were curious about this archive and they're like, "Oh, we'd love to just actually see this footage."

And I thought, why don't we make that an event? Can we watch the footage in real time and discuss it and have this real dialogue with the past? And then can we capture some of that by staging the exhibition as a contemporary conversation and historical conversation? Because it is sort of striking, when you look at the archive, how similar the problems are. You see these issues have been with us for a long time, and people have been grappling with what the solution could look like, and what tenant power could look like, for a long time. And that can be both inspiring and also frustrating to see.

I'm not an SRO resident. I've worked with Skid Row for more than a decade, but I still feel like I'm kind of visiting, and I don't really understand the details or the lived experience. And so, for me, it's always a process of just understanding the problem. It took me a long time to even figure out what is going on with SROs. It can feel so confusing, and I try to think of that as a strength, because if I'm this confused and I can't clear for me, maybe I can figure out how to make it clear for other people. Because I think a lot of people are confused. So that became part of the method. If I can animate that research process and the sense-making process and bring a whole bunch of people along with me, we can all be asking the same questions and answering the questions together. And in the end, we can make something that says, "Here's what we learned about, and what the possible solutions are. How can we use that to become a tool for change?"

*SB: I've heard you refer to the exhibition to as a "learning in public" process. I think you've already demonstrated some of what that is in your previous answer, so I'll just ask you: what have you learned so far during that process, and what are you hoping to learn through the rest of it?*

The structure of the exhibit is pretty basic: past, present, future.

The main thing I learned from the past was how persistent some of these problems have been, and how long tenants have felt really frustrated with the way their buildings are managed. Honestly, putting together the timeline was very clarifying for me. Because a bunch of us contributed a big timeline document, and we had to edit it down to make something that would fit on the wall. My training, so to speak, is partly as a graphic designer, and a big chunk of what I've learned is how to simplify and direct people's attention to the things that are important. So that process of going from thousands of words into the final timeline was helpful for me to streamline my understanding so I could hold it in my head.

The general story, as I understand it, is: SROs are at one point a for-profit housing model that works, and then they eventually become something that really fails to work, and then they started to get torn down, and then there's no other way to build housing that's affordable for people who are truly low income, and so it becomes a thing where if we lose this, it's gone forever.

The narrative that happened in the 80s suddenly made a lot of sense, and then that same narrative is happening today, except with even less housing and even more need. You really see how broken the housing system is in general. But also, it's an important story to tell—why is Skid Row the way it is? So that was what I learned from the past section.

From the panel that addressed the present moment, one of the things that was really striking to me was hearing people talk about the way public housing has been starved and then demonized and then destroyed in America. That is something I'm very familiar with.

And people are pointing to all these problems with supportive housing and SROs and Skid Row. And it's very parallel to the way that public housing was defunded and then demonized in the past. You see from that how if you underfund all the services and all the housing, it fails. You know, everything fails when you when you run out of money.

So that was a big revelation for me of how to think about the quote-unquote “failure” of SROs and supportive housing in Skid Row.

And then, as we go into this third piece, thinking about the future, I'm asking: “What is it that we need to do? What are the solutions?”

One thing that has been interesting is, when I first started out with getting the programs together for this part, I was having a lot of trouble locating people who had any hopeful solutions. And I was like, “Oh, God, no one has any ideas! Everyone feels very dire and frustrated!” But now, I finally have connected to people who have thoughts about where this all needs to go, and what can be done, and where there are still resources to make it work. So that's what I'm hoping to get out of this third piece.

*SB: Can you share a little more about your art practice, and particularly how you see art-making connecting to activism?*

To start, I'm fairly ambivalent about calling whatever I do an art practice. I don't mind it per se, but it's not like I go around trying to convince people that anything I do is art. I'm mostly interested in creating some sort of space that allows people to build a collective understanding or analysis, and then move forward from there. And I often find that the front door is not the best way to enter an issue. That you need to find some other weird way in, and make a situation surprising or interesting or appealing to learn about in some way.

Sometimes, an organizing space isn't a good way to get new people involved and understanding the struggle. Sometimes, it's easier to have a space that's an educational space, or a cultural space, and then from there you can start to build into organizing. So, I think about how I can use these tools of visual—and in some cases, audio and tactile—experience to get people interested in having conversations about the things that are important to survival.

And then, obviously, part of the practice is just being able to listen, and co-design, and correct, and change my assumptions and the way I go about things, based on the people I'm working with. So, everything always comes out very different than I imagined it going in. But that's the joy of it.

This exhibit in particular is very intuitive, and each piece points the way to the next piece, and it's pretty improvisational in that sense, though it's slow improvisation. It's like, “We did one thing and now it seems like people want to know about this, and people didn't like that, and people had questions about that. So, let's try to guide it to go that way.” And I'm hoping by the end, it'll be an interesting arc for people to follow.