

The City within the City

by Patrick Appel

THERE IS A MAN in the community with “Black Power” and “187” tattooed on his neck who has written five books, “mostly about spirituality and mysticism,” he tells me. There’s the self-appointed King of Fashion who can be seen strutting up and down the block, giving high-fives, wearing gold sequined pants and a plastic crown. More Love! reads the cardboard sign around the neck of a homeless activist, who explains how the housing crisis in L.A. is only getting worse. “Ice cold sodas. Hot chicken,” yells an unlicensed street vendor, who smiles to friends as he pushes his cart up East Fifth Street in downtown Los Angeles.

Residents call East Fifth Street “The Nickel” because a nickel is how much many people in the district are thought to have to their names. Others say the name stuck because it’s so easy to buy a nickel bag of pot on the corners of East Fifth. Whatever the reason, the street forms the stem of a neighborhood referred to over the years as Wino’s Valhalla, Bum’s Heaven—and, most commonly, Skid Row.

Observed from a distance, through the glass of a car window and through the lens of old stereotypes, everyone on Skid Row in Los Angeles appears homeless, dangerous, and drug-addicted. Up and down East Fifth St. people hobble along, babbling through shattered teeth, hitting their arms against their bodies. On the fringes of the district, people will ask for change or a dollar. In its center, they stop asking.

A boy of no more than sixteen sits on a box, shaking back and forth, muttering to himself. Women give odd looks at passersby and call their daughters to their sides. Lying in the shade, a man uses his black Nikes as a pillow. The mentally ill and drug dealers stare out at you with varying degrees of lucidity and hostility. Upon first glance, the newspaper reports about a “gaudy nightmare in neon lights,” calling the place Los Angeles’ “open sore,” don’t seem to go far enough. That first time, most outsiders can’t see through the surface of Skid Row.

They don’t see the families that live in the district, who cram as many as eight people into a single hotel room; families who suffer for want of a real grocery store and a real school in the area. Outsiders don’t notice the old and the disabled barely surviving on Social Security and disability checks. Then there are the workers who toil in the nearby garment district, and those who sweep the streets. People here earn minimum wage by sitting in studio audiences for game shows, or by collecting signatures for political consulting groups. Those are the official jobs. Young and old alike sell individual cigarettes: twenty-five cents for one, forty cents for two. Scavengers with trash bags full of bottles and cans scour the garbage bins and walkways. They drop off their collections at the recycling plant where the man in charge, Moe, can be seen sitting back in his lawn chair, listening to the music of bottles clinking away.

Walking the district, just past the pictures tacked to the front of the Midnight Mission saying “Have you seen me?” or “Missing, please call,” I see a middle-aged man who feverishly glances from face to face, sorting through the largest homeless population in the nation one person at a time, waiting for someone to meet his gaze. In front of him, people sleep rolled up in soiled blankets, the slow rise and fall of their chests out of sync and disconnected from the fast-paced city around them.

That city squeezes in on those sleeping forms, with the Fashion District pushing in from the left. Little Tokyo hedges in on the right, its apartments a wall of stucco and beige. The wholesale Toy District presses down from the front, while at the bottom, the L.A. River and the freeways corral the population.

Skid Row is a term born out of the Depression. The word is derived from a strip of earth in Seattle along which loggers once skidded trees to get them down to the river; it was a tract of land they called “Skid Road.” Hard times made the place a locus for the hard-up and unemployed, and the scarred earth came to represent the people, as it does on Los Angeles’ Skid Row.

In the 1950s and again in the 1970s, the city of Los Angeles tried to “erase” Skid Row.

Connecting the structural fatigue of the buildings to that of the residents, the municipal authorities promised to cure both problems, and quick. Eleven acres were flattened in 1956, making way for a bumper crop of more than 2,000 parking spots. The loss of cheap housing, mostly residential hotel rooms, pushed much of the Skid Row population into other parts of Los Angeles, but demolishing those buildings did not solve the problem. In South Los Angeles vice rose 30 percent and Skid Row remained Skid Row.

When the city tried to “rejuvenate” the area again in the 1970s, many of the residents ended up on the streets once more. Over the years, the city considered other plans, including pushing the whole community away from the heart of L.A., and housing the poor in a ship moored in the harbor. The district was re-imagined as an addition to the Financial District, as a Philippine Village to compliment Little Tokyo, and as a 1890s-themed adjunct to downtown.

Residents had their own ideas. One old man, who had lived in the city since 1920 wrote into the Los Angeles Times suggesting that “we build a large walled city of Skid Row out in Death Valley,” so that the Skid Rowers could “dry out in the hot sun,” and so Los Angeles could replant the district with “rows of lettuce or citrus fruits.” In the 1980s, a Little Tokyo councilman agreed that the city should create an “open air farm” for the poor, where they could grow vegetables to eat and learn a trade, though he suggested Santa Clarita instead of Death Valley. This kind of thinking, coupled with rising property values downtown, continues to make what housing remains for the poor vulnerable to developers’ bulldozers.

The old hotels that survived these waves of “development” and “rejuvenation” now provide the last reservoir of low-income affordable housing in Los Angeles. The hotels,

arranged around East Fifth Street, include twenty-room flophouses and five-hundred-room hotels, some of which were built by John Parkinson, the same man who designed City Hall. People live in the single-room-occupancy hotels for two years, six years, ten years at a time, paying a daily, weekly, or monthly rate. They are the last practitioners of a lifestyle more common in the days when work was seasonal and when booming defense factories needed a glut of cheap housing for workers. Many of the hotels were built at the turn of the twentieth century, in pre-Depression times. Those who find lodging today in the hotels are among the most stable of the poor, though with a single accident or unexpected expense, they can easily fall into the homeless of the Skid Row population, who reside in mission beds, tents, cardboard cities, and jail cells.

A former L.A. sheriff used to joke that he ran the largest homeless shelter in the nation. With the biggest jail in the world, the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, down the block and with Los Angeles County Central Jail right next to that, there are more than 28,000 prison cells within a mile and a half of Skid Row, more than double the number of residential hotel units and mission beds.

A hundred years ago, before the city disintegrated into rolling suburbs, these residential hotels were the center of Los Angeles. Their neon signs still point east, towards the memory of Central Station, the main railway depot before Union Station took over as the hub of L.A.'s train travel in the last days of the 1930s. Before the trolley lines were severed to make way for cars and freeways, anyone coming to Los Angeles came first to what is now Skid Row.

Men from as far as Kansas paid a dollar fare to ride the rails west to California. Drifters and dreamers following their imaginations poured off the trains looking for work herding cattle or harvesting and shipping produce, the type of vanished unskilled jobs that the men and women of Skid Row still search for in vain. In olden days, long tracts of rich soil that were fed by the L.A. River sprouted citrus trees and rolling vineyards. By the end of the 19th century, millions of gallons of wine flowed from the region.

The drink remained long after the grapevines had been paved over. Dime wine and fifteen-cent soup defined the district up through the 1940s. Notorious for its fall-down drunks, Skid Row's inhabitants filled the LAPD's paddy wagon twenty times a night. The cops sometimes joined in and dressed up in tattered clothes; they staggered as if they too were drunk in order to ensnare the muggers who preyed upon the drunkards.

When drinking became considered a disease instead of a crime, the police couldn't haul in drunks by the truckload anymore, but the cops found other ways to keep tabs on residents. Violations which go un-enforced anywhere else—such as littering, riding a bike on the sidewalk, or jaywalking—regularly result in the offender getting handcuffed and strip-searched.

"I'm from New York," one man tells me. "I feel it's my right to jaywalk."

Sweeps for parole violators are common occurrences on the streets and in the hotels. A resident explains that, in his experience, even gang members are less likely to use casual violence than the LAPD.

That sentiment is widespread. The young and under-trained police officers, who often are assigned to Skid Row as greenhorns, don't help the situation, and the general distrust of the police makes it harder for good cops to do their jobs. On the corner of Sixth and Towne Streets, a young officer with a fresh crew cut catcalls a woman. She glares back at him. He points across the street at a man sprawled out on the curb. "Does that look like laying down to you?" he says to his older partner, who doesn't reply.

They are enforcing, among other laws, Municipal Code Section 41 18(d); a law written on metal plaques, and bolted to the brick walls on the outside of the LAPD Central Precinct in Skid Row. The people who shuffle by the building rarely look up at the signs, which read, "No person shall sit, lie, or sleep in or upon any street, sidewalk or other public way." The police and the ACLU have been battling for decades over the implementation of this ordinance. Judges have repeatedly struck down the law, calling it unconstitutional to ticket and arrest the homeless when it cannot be proven that enough mission beds are available, but still the police sweeps go on. The black and white cop cars circle the block constantly, while the crowds are monitored by video cameras and by officers standing on street corners in pairs.

Along with the LAPD and county sheriffs are the private security guards, hired by the business district, often out of the same population they are policing. The guards are known as "purple shirts" for the color of the uniforms they wear. They ride by on mountain bikes with their radios tacked to their shirts. They stand in front of jewelry stores, and some even clear trash from out of the street. For these guardians of public safety, slipping from the group that monitors to the group that is monitored can happen in a month, a week, or a day. For Dennis, a longtime resident of the Alexandria Hotel, it only took one jerk of his arm to change sides. While working as a "purple shirt," he tried to pull a heap of trash out of the road. Traffic was bearing down on him as he tried to lift too much, too quickly, tearing ligaments all along his arm and neck. Unable to work, he survives on his workers' compensation money, which, after six months, is already a quarter gone. He does recycling to earn a little cash, keeping a shopping cart in his room.

Dennis has become the type of person he once was paid to hassle. The cart he sometimes pushes is the same sort of debris he would have moved off the streets in his former job. Moving from one role to the other was a humbling experience, he tells me. He's wearing a "Los Angeles" tee shirt, with stars and stripes painted across it.

Along the streets many people wear similar "California," "Los Angeles" and even "Beverly Hills" tee shirts, because of some lingering notion of pride, as some kind of ironic gesture, or—most likely—because you can get three for \$5 just down the street. The homeless often look like haggard tourists who missed a connection somewhere along the way. They wheel luggage along Skid Row's corridors, cheap knock-off bags that they buy for as little as \$10 from the tangle of wholesalers in the Fashion District. The Cecil

Hotel even claims to be a tourist hotel, and from the front, with its gold trim, fake Doric columns, and long marble corridor, this seems plausible enough, though not many tourist hotels have residents living in them for years at a time, or Meals-on-Wheels deliveries instead of lobby restaurants.

The Cecil Hotel, like many others in the area, shuffles residents from room to room every twenty-eight days, or may even evict them for a day, to deny them the rights that they would be entitled to after a month's stay. Legally, a tenant is anyone who rents the same room for thirty consecutive days. Tourist status is a class of housing that gives a hotel the ability to avoid granting some of these rights. According to UC Berkeley professor Paul Groth's research on residential hotels, a net loss often helps a hotel owner's tax accounting, and long periods of neglect often make repairs to the buildings more costly than potential earnings. Due to these circumstances, many property owners neglect even small repairs and find low-cost solutions to major problems, such as plastering over large holes in the wall, or ignoring lead and infestation problems. I met one woman in the Huntington Hotel who claimed she wasn't going to pay rent again until the rats started paying half.

The hotels face human problems as well. On the side of the Frontier Hotel, sunk back into the masonry, is a black door made by slotting together sheets of plywood. Above the wood, dirty windows display seven red-and-black warning signs. "Private property," they read. "No loitering. No entry with out permission. Closed to the public. No drugs. No drug dealers. No weapons. No drinking of alcoholic beverages. The Los Angeles police department makes regular and frequent patrols of these premises." As I stood admiring the signs one day, the middle sheet of plywood on the black door swung open to reveal a long corridor at the other end of which was a wrought-iron gate with security guards in front of it. The signs and the guards are a part of a settlement from a 2003 lawsuit requiring the hotel to curb the drug dealing and other illegal activities going on in the hotel. But, of course, not every hotel provides such safety features, and even when they do, the residents have to put up with living in a place that feels like county jail.

For two hundred years, people of all social classes have lived in hotels. Up until the 1950s, most hotels still offered a daily and a monthly rate. In the past, it was the hotel owners who wanted to hold onto their buildings and the city officials who wanted to tear them down. But now, with many officials recognizing the benefits of affordable single-room housing and with the rise of property values, these roles have been reversed. Many owners these days want to sell their properties or convert them into more fashionable and valuable forms of housing.

The residents of the Frontier Hotel are being asked to move out, to make way for more profitable lofts. Already the top floor has been converted. Around the corner from the black plywood door and wrought-iron gate— but in the same building— a clean, Art Deco hallway leads past plastic plants into a lobby where an elevator goes only to the top floor. It moves twelve stories up, an express coach that bypasses those few remaining residents who return home via the black plywood door. These two ways of life, hotel and loft living, are stacked upon each other, like strata in the earth, the new atop the old.

Rent control ordinances, local legislation, and tenants' rights lawsuits keep all of the old hotels from disappearing. Then there are the civic-minded hotel owners. Many of them speak about wanting to rent housing to low-income residents as part of a social obligation, and more and more non-profit organizations are buying, refurbishing, and managing old hotels to maintain the housing stock. But the sad fact remains that there are not enough rooms at affordable prices, and each time a property switches hands the hotel's status, and therefore its tenants' well-being, is at risk.

The type of community formed in hotels was once dubbed the "intangible republic" by early New York journalists. In the 1800s, citizens rented on the "American Plan," where they paid for lodging and meals in one lump sum. Hotels were grand affairs, pillars of social life. They were the place where many newlyweds settled down to get their first leg up in the world. In fact, the hotels were where members of all social classes made their homes. In 1844, when a hotel in the New York area offered private dining instead of communal meals, an editor for New York's Weekly Mirror declared such antisocial behavior "directly opposed to American ideals of democracy."

This social cohesiveness is still prevalent in the hotels of Skid Row and out on its streets. Real human interaction is hard to avoid when residents walk everywhere they go, and the walls in some hotels seem about as thick as a slice of bread. On the roof of the Alexandria Hotel, residents hold barbeques from time to time; on the Fourth of July they stand on the roof together, watching fireworks splash against the night sky, the silhouette of the San Gabriel Mountains in the distance.

Skid Row is a place where the friendless find acceptance, or at least tolerance. Out on the streets, two men sit down next to a wheelchair-bound man to make sure he is okay, while everyone else walks past, staring. Support groups meet daily, like the Skid Row Drifters, who have gotten together for years in San Julian Park at dusk, a place where I see a man shouting out to those around him, offering the last mouthful from his plate of soggy beans.

There are people like the director of the Midnight Mission who used to be homeless himself, before he worked his way back up. There are activists and volunteers on every block, and there are former addicts, like Michael, who despite having lost his license to practice law decades ago, has virtually become the community's lawyer, always ready to help people understand their rights.

This rough-and-tumble community, full of personalities, memories, problems and pride, is being scattered by developers, landlords, and the police. Already there are fewer people on the streets. The side of a building that residents call the "Berlin Wall," which is infamous for the hundreds of people usually camped along it, is sometimes vacant in the daytime. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's promise to clean up the area, a statement made by mayors of L.A. for fifty years, has been getting rid of the people along with the trash.

The need for help can be seen in the eyes of an aged hotel resident with a long white beard who tells me he is lucky to get \$12,000 a year; that at the end of the month, he eats dog food because he is too proud to beg. I listen to a teenage girl who describes how crack addicts and syringes line the hallways of her family's hotel. A man whom I walk up Sixth Street with talks constantly about Hezbollah, Lebanon, and Beirut, where he "couldn't seem to get himself killed," he says. He mentions someone named "Psycho" from the Marines and the Battleship Iowa. "Volkswagen-sized" shells he says, as he bounds down the street, trying to mimic the shell's movement with the arc of his hand. People stare at him. They stare at me for talking to him. I get the tiniest sense of what it is like to be made inhuman through the frigid looks of strangers.

Another day, I look up at the sixth floor of the Frontier hotel, and see a boy of no more than eight playing at the windowsill. Caution tape billows from the windows above him, where residents have been moved out. The tape stands in place of the Christmas lights, crucifixes, and laundry that fill the windows of other hotels in the area. Only four tenants remain in the building. Soon the boy's room too will be vacated for incoming lofts.

The boy turns over a pair of binoculars in his hands, and moves them up to his eyes. I watch him as he looks out and over the street below: East Fifth Street, "The Nickel." He looks past the shapes of people and the tops of buildings, gazing over more than a century of architecture. He looks down at the two cops standing on the corner and the huddle of men around the adult bookshop. He takes in the sounds and smells of the streets: the honking of cars, the smell of trash and exhaust, and the collective footsteps of thousands of people. He stares out and he surveys what is left of the neighborhood he calls home.

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