

# MAKING THE CASE FOR SKID ROW CULTURE



Findings from a  
Collaborative Inquiry by the  
Los Angeles Poverty Department  
and the Urban Institute

By Maria Rosario Jackson and John Malpede

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2008, John Malpede, founding director of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), and Maria Rosario Jackson, a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, began a collaborative inquiry about cultural vitality in the Skid Row community of Los Angeles. This inquiry has been part of the Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative, developed by Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts. Early in this process, both Malpede and Jackson recognized they shared common beliefs about the value of cultural participation in communities. Malpede’s beliefs are based in decades of work in community-based activist performance art and theater. Jackson’s beliefs are based on 15 years of studying the presence and roles of arts and cultural participation in communities around the United States from an urban planning and public policy perspective. Malpede and Jackson agree that cultural participation...

- includes active and passive participation at amateur and professional levels in a wide range of venues;
- builds and strengthens social networks in the community that potentially lead to increased social capital and collective efficacy;
- provides residents with a range of emotional, intellectual, and social experiences important for personal development; and
- is essential in helping to create a healthy environment and normative neighborhood.

With this in mind, they engaged in field research to begin to identify the presence of cultural activity in Skid Row and the key entities involved in creating opportunities for cultural participation. They saw this as a first step towards recommending recurrent data collection practices and tools that could bring into relief cultural assets in the Skid Row community, residents’ cultural needs and aspirations, and the infrastructure required to make cultural participation possible. Malpede and Jackson believe that with this information community leaders can more effectively improve quality of life in the neighborhood. Without information about cultural activity, strategies for community improvement are inherently incomplete and people concerned with positive neighborhood change cannot do their best work.<sup>1</sup> Inclusion of arts and culture in the interpretation of community conditions and the formulation of community improvement strategies may catalyze new, better, and expanded ways of thinking about neighborhood transformation processes and desired outcomes by both Skid Row insiders and outsiders.

The scale and scope of this work does not allow for the actual creation of the data collection tools and recommended practices. Rather, it provides the basis from which such tools and plans for their use can be developed. In very pragmatic terms, it is

**The Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)** is dedicated to building community and to the artistic and personal development of its members—people who live and work on Los Angeles’ Skid Row. It creates challenging performance work that connects the realities, hopes, and dreams of people living in poverty to the social forces that shape their lives and communities.

**Urban Institute (UI)**, based in Washington, D.C, works to foster sound public policy and effective government. It gathers data, conducts research, evaluates programs, offers technical assistance overseas, and educates on social and economic issues. Urban Institute was founded in 1968, during President Johnson’s administration, as an independent nonpartisan entity that could provide analysis of the problems facing America’s cities and their residents.

<sup>1</sup> Jackson, Maria Rosario, Kabwasa-Green, F, and Herranz, J. Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators. Urban Institute. Washington, DC, 2006.

necessary foundational work that makes possible the creation of a sound, well-grounded proposal for the recommended mechanisms to come to fruition.

Malpede and Jackson's approach to collaborative inquiry in Skid Row is a bit different from other research that is part of the Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative. They take it as a given that cultural activity is important and do not seek to quantify impacts of community-based or civically-engaged arts activity, nor make the case for this kind of activity. Instead, Malpede and Jackson's intent to explore necessary data collection is (a) more about monitoring how and the extent to which opportunities for cultural participation are available to Skid Row residents and (b) empowering community leaders concerned with neighborhood improvement and quality of life with additional information to do their work more effectively.

## THE SKID ROW NEIGHBORHOOD

Los Angeles County is the undisputed homeless capital of the United States with the largest homeless population in the nation. (141,737 individuals "experienced homelessness at some point during 2007. Skid Row, located just south and east of the city's civic and financial centers, has the highest concentration of homeless people in Los Angeles County. In an area that comprises roughly 52 city blocks, the homeless population of Skid Row (7,717 homeless individuals projected annually) makes up approximately 7.5 percent of Los Angeles County's total homeless population. Residents range in age from children to the elderly, with the majority between 20 and 65 years of age. Of the four major ethnic groups, African Americans make up 64.7 percent of the homeless population and 12.5 percent are Hispanic, 13.3 percent Caucasian, and 9.5 percent multirace or other.<sup>2</sup>

The demographics of homelessness provide only one part of the picture of Skid Row and its residents. Since 1985, more than 40 single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) have been acquired by nonprofits and preserved as temporary and permanent housing. Many other people live in hotels and apartments on a permanent basis. Others move from one temporary housing or un-housed situation in Skid Row to another. All this means that most people in the neighborhood are long-term community members.

Skid Row (known as "Central City East" by development interests) is a socially designed area. One hundred years of public policy decisions have concentrated missions, shelters, soup kitchens, and welfare hotels in this area. If a homeless person applies to the county welfare department or if someone is just out of jail, most likely he or she will be given a voucher to a hotel on Skid Row. Tacit understandings, as well as explicit public policy, have contributed to its social design. It has been, for

<sup>2</sup> Applied Survey Research. 2007 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Counts. Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, Los Angeles, 2007.



Los Angeles Poverty Department's *Skid Row History Museum* at the Box Gallery, Chinatown, LA, July-Aug. 2008  
Picture by Pamela Miller Macias

example, a “high tolerance” zone—one in which public safety and sanitation laws are poorly enforced if they are enforced at all. According to sources familiar with the area, lax law enforcement in recent years has given way to hyper enforcement of the Safer Cities Initiative; laws that are rarely enforced elsewhere—jay walking and stolen milk crates, for example—are stringently enforced on Skid Row. Despite the high concentration of services specifically for homeless people, the area lacks or is ill served by other basic public services. For example, there is a network of 25-cent shuttle buses that radiate from and connect all adjacent areas to downtown. The only area not served by this network is Skid Row.

A significant feature of the social design of the Skid Row area is a determined attempt to isolate its homeless and poor residents from the rest of the city. This isolation is not as evident in other cities with significant homeless and poor populations. San Francisco’s Tenderloin or New York’s Bowery, for example, are neighborhoods that also house theaters, restaurants, and retail businesses. One can’t buy a newspaper or find a Post Office mailbox in Skid Row. Parks are not designed to be kid-friendly. One resident said, “There’s not a swing in the park. Not a sandbox. That’s not an accident.”

Before the real estate bubble burst in 2008, it ushered gentrification into downtown Los Angeles. The adaptive reuse of office buildings into living spaces brought several waves of newcomers into the neighborhood: the first were artists seeking low-cost live/work space. More recently, a more affluent wave, mostly professionals, spend a half million dollars or more on luxury condos, marketed as artist lofts. This influx has led to encroachment. Over the past 30 years, the dimensions of Skid Row have shrunk significantly. Main Street currently is the front line of gentrification. Ten years ago, it was Spring Street, which is one block to the west of Main and so one block nearer to the Bunker Hill Financial District. According to people familiar with the community, there are already forces mounting to move the front line one block further east and annex Los Angeles Street from Skid Row to the gentrified “gallery row/old bank district”. As development continues, the disparities in services and amenities bestowed upon “new” downtowners versus “old” downtowners—residents of Skid Row—are striking.

For many years, a host of public and private agencies directed the poor—and services for them—to this area and away from other areas. Skid Row was used as a convenient means of avoiding politically charged NIMBY (not in my backyard) situations. It became the site for warehousing the poor; more importantly, it also became a safe site for visionary social innovation and experimental solutions to seemingly intractable social problems. The success of these efforts, combined with the affordability of the area, resulted in the creation of a true neighborhood. This was a somewhat unintended consequence of the socially designed and articulated Skid Row containment policy.

At this moment, the neighborhood of Skid Row is in contention: it warehouses the poor, is the locus of community-generative solutions, and it is the focus of development interests who want to “adaptively reuse affordable hotels by converting them to lofts for high-end rentals and sales. The term “Skid Row” is also in contention, as these same development interests have tried to use “Central City East” instead.

## LAPD’S WORK

The Los Angeles Poverty Department, despite the homeless status of many of its members, has thrived for years from its downtown outpost and continues to offer theater that’s often stunning in its honesty and lacking in pretension.

—Constance Monaghan, *LA Weekly*, 1997

LAPD has been working in Skid Row since 1985, offering free performance workshops, cultural and educational activities and events with and for the city's most disenfranchised and forgotten. At the time of its creation, it was the first theater for and by homeless people in the nation and the first arts program of any kind for homeless people in Los Angeles. Its original goals—still in place—were to create community and to use the voices of the residents to convey the experience of living in Skid Row to Los Angeles and to the nation. From its inception, LAPD has recognized the inherently social process of theater and has used it in concert with other means of public education—organizing, partnering, and activism—to achieve its community building goals.



*220 Glimpses of Utopia: An Outdoor Utopian Movement Chain*, a performance piece that was part of the *UTOPIA/dystopia* project  
Picture by Pamela Miller Macias

At the time of LAPD's founding, homelessness in the Skid Row area was dealt with primarily as a "beans and blankets" issue. From the outset, LAPD sought to engage the residents' hopes, dreams, and rational and spiritual power through collective creation, civic engagement, and the creation of interpersonal bonds—the polar opposite of the "beans and blankets" warehousing approach. LAPD recognizes that the development of Skid Row as a multi-resourced neighborhood is the civic manifestation of and the necessary condition for the continued personal development of its inhabitants. LAPD has partnered with neighborhood groups and nonprofits that share a similar vision. These efforts have emerged as initiatives that support the development of a viable low-income neighborhood—one with basic services such as transportation, decent housing, sanitation, and safety, as well as social amenities such as restaurants, parks and public spaces, community centers, and other meeting places. A significant portion of LAPD's work, especially since 2000, has documented and reported back (through artmaking activities) on the development of the Skid Row community and on how real estate developers are pressuring the neighborhood.

Starting with its 2002 installation/performance series, *Is There History on Skid Row?*, and continuing with 2006 to 2011 activities—*UTOPIA/ dystopia*, *Skid Row History Museum*, *Skid Row Walk of Fame*, and *Walk the Talk*—LAPD has used its credibility in the neighborhood (and beyond) to design events that bring together and make visible the cultural assets, both institutional and individual, of the neighborhood. LAPD has done this in order to articulate a counter-narrative to the official (real estate development/city government) narrative that has sought to characterize Skid Row as a holding pen for dangerous transients. Through all of these events, LAPD managed to work with most of the groups in Skid Row and highlight their accomplishments, forging new relationships and continuing old ones in the process.

At the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT), LAPD created the performance *UTOPIA/ dystopia*, which combined found texts—city council meeting minutes, Mayor Villagariosa's inaugural address, first hand experience on the streets of Skid Row, and fiction—to articulate both the developer narrative and the alternative community building narrative.

## SCENE: MARKET MELTDOWN

Kevin Michael Key

There's only one thing that can stop the real estate madness: Market meltdown.  
Gotta make a deal, gotta make a deal.  
More and more.  
There gonna be a lot of empty buildings besides Belmont High School.  
You need a set aside?  
You need a variance?  
Tax incentives?  
Take Grand Avenue PLEASE.  
We know who the real addicts are...It's these  
builders. It's these developers, but the city is their  
dealer, they're co-dependent—keeps supplying them with money for what? For  
more!...In rooms of recovery sometimes you hear  
people say, I'm an addict. What am I addicted to?  
More! One is too many and a thousand is never enough.

During *UTOPIA/dystopia*, LAPD created a number of events that reached the community in different ways. The community performance piece, *220 Glimpses of Utopia*, was 15 minutes of beautiful movement that quite surprisingly filled the air, expanding everyone's reality, taking the edge off the city at rush hour. In a series of workshops, LAPD involved 220 people from Skid Row and artists and art students from around Los Angeles in envisioning and expressing what utopia looks like to them. Each group generated a movement sequence, with the resulting creation being a line of movement on the sidewalks that extended the ten blocks from the heart of Skid Row to City Hall. Every person in the chain contributed something of their own vision and movement. The chain of movement extended unbroken throughout the community, and made clear that any true utopian vision (including one for the future of downtown Los Angeles) includes everyone and excludes no one. It also brought together two groups of people who could not afford to live in the "artist lofts" being created downtown: the long term residents of Skid Row and the artists and art students of Los Angeles.

During the project *UTOPIA/dystopia*, LAPD also created ten performance/public conversation events that were specifically designed to spiral outward and bring more community members and groups into the curatorial process and construction of future events. LAPD invited some of the most widely recognized social visionaries from the neighborhood—store owners, street vendors, developers, street musicians, a city attorney, a formerly homeless addiction counselor, a formerly homeless visual artist who became a loft dweller, etc. They were asked to speak about other people and initiatives that they valued. Through this process, LAPD and those involved became aware of little known community initiatives and initiators: a participant in one event would identify and invite a presenter for the next event. For instance, Dr. Dennis Bleakly, who works in a Skid Row medical clinic, invited Mr. Lee, a 75-year-old Korean flute master who runs a convenience store with his wife in the very heart of Skid Row. At one of the events, Mr. Lee played a flute medley that started with Korean traditional and moved to blues and gospel, bringing the house down.

Another element of *UTOPIA/dystopia* was the visual arts exhibition, *Skid Row History Museum*, created by LAPD at The Box Gallery (June-August 2008). The exhibition included artifacts and installation elements from a variety of neighborhood-generated arts and political action initiatives, archival contributions (documents, photos, videos) from numerous neighborhood groups, and a visual timeline

of the neighborhood from 1930 to the present. Springing from this exhibition will be the *Skid Row Walk of Fame*, the installation of images of 30 residents or local groups on lamppost plaques on the streets of Skid Row in the coming year (2010). *The Walk of Fame* will visibly recognize the community-creating accomplishments of neighborhood residents.

Following the installation of the *Walk of Fame* will be *Walk the Talk*, a peripatetic performance scheduled for late 2010. It will move from plaque to plaque and tell the story of each person or group's accomplishments. Through interviews and continued exchange during the rehearsal process, LAPD hopes that most of the neighborhood will be involved in or present for the performance.

Because LAPD has no production space, it routinely works with other neighborhood groups to house workshops, discussions, and performances. These groups include: the United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), SRO Housing Corporation, Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), LAMP Community, and Church of the Nazarene. They often lend their spaces in support of individual and group community arts initiatives.

LAPD has many other longstanding relationships, including one with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community, where John Malpede first started as a volunteer 25 years ago. According to Malpede, this leads to an important point: Neighborhood initiatives consistently support other initiatives, each one spawning other individual initiatives and group arts projects. The development of neighborhood initiatives thus grows in an organic and exponential manner, and eventually reaches a critical mass for neighborhood transformation.

The Los Angeles Catholic Worker House, founded in 1970, encouraged the founding of Las Familias del Pueblo and Inner City Law Center. Inner City Law, along with Catholic Worker, was instrumental in supporting LAPD, Justiceville, and the Homelessness Organizing Team. While Catholic Worker had supported nights of poetry and music, LAPD became the first organization dedicated to arts activity on Skid Row, with Inner City Law and LAMP providing workshops sites.

Manuel "OG Man" Compito, an artist and leader in the Skid Row community, realized his potential as a visual artist at the LAMP arts project before going on to found OG's in Service and its many activities—such as Fathers Day, 3 on 3 Basketball League, Jazz in the Park, and the painted trash can project.

Melvin Ishmael Johnson founded Dramastage Qumran after working with LAPD.

Malpede has often said that if you want to find a job or housing or become active in a community where the social fabric is intact, one of the best ways to find out is word of mouth. Where the social fabric is weak, social services are relied on more strongly. The social fabric of Skid Row, at this point, is strong enough that institutional initiatives have led to a plethora of individual initiatives that are now themselves inspiring and encouraging further creative initiatives.

According to Malpede, the "containment policy" for Skid Row (officially described as such in planning documents of the city and city redevelopment agency) has backfired, in the classic "watch out what you wish for cause it just might happen" mode. The containment and segregation of Skid Row has resulted in the grassroots creation of a real community. The largest concentration of affordable housing stock in Los Angeles County is in Skid Row. The officially propagated fiction—that Skid

Row is a community of transients and that people can readily transition out of the neighborhood—belies the economic reality and the lack of adequate societal infrastructure to facilitate transition. The ideological contradiction of wishing the homeless and poor to disappear—coupled with the equally fanciful ideologically-based notion that they should be pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, getting jobs and cars, and driving off to their new neighborhoods—has insured the creation of a large, long-term group of neighborhood residents. Given the lack of public resources committed to the area, this group of residents has organized to provide and advocate for the municipal services and civic rights that are routinely afforded wealthier neighborhoods.

Despite Skid Row's poverty, LAPD's experience with its residents reveals its amazing human and community strengths. The Skid Row community has long been a generative site for visionary answers to social problems. The extent to which the visionary efforts have been the work of community members, however, has been largely underappreciated. Without the civic engagement of Skid Row's citizens, the largest concentration of affordable housing stock in Los Angeles County would not have been preserved. Additionally, neighborhood residents have created free recovery programs that have generated the biggest drug recovery culture anywhere in the United States.

Examples of Skid Row residents' resolve and resourcefulness follow. When the City of Los Angeles provided no trashcans for Skid Row, OG's in Service, an initiative of one long-term resident, created hand painted trashcans and distributed them in the neighborhood. During the real estate frenzy of the past decade, when the soaring California housing market meant that demand outstripped supply, the city council conspired with developers to turn over to them dedicated low-cost hotel housing on Skid Row. A grassroots citizens' movement, centered at LA CAN, stopped this land grab strategy. However, the struggle for neighborhood recognition and survival continues.

The proliferation of Skid Row grassroots cultural initiatives substantiates the achievements of a community that has been in jeopardy of being displaced and forgotten. Resident driven cultural activities include theater, visual arts, photography, video, and music, as well as other forms of cultural expression—neighborhood environmental and health initiatives, organized fitness and sports activities, and events organized around cultural holidays. As one resident put it, "Father's Day used to be quiet on Skid Row. Do you know what that does to a man's self esteem? We had to start our own Fathers Day (celebrations)." Skid Row's grassroots cultural initiatives compellingly defy stereotypes of the poor and homeless and will perhaps stand against its residents' displacement for purely financial gain by the already rich. It is in this context that Malpede and Jackson's collaborative inquiry on cultural vitality has proceeded.



Los Angeles Poverty Department's *Skid Row History Museum* at the Box Gallery, Chinatown, LA, July-Aug. 2008

Picture by Henriëtte Brouwers

## METHODOLOGY

The collaborative inquiry process began with a series of conversations between Jackson and Malpede during which each discussed their work and areas of interest. Together they identified premises and ideas about what would be most useful to pursue given LAPD's ongoing work and goals and those of its partners and colleagues in Skid Row. Jackson and Malpede conducted initial interviews with leaders from five key organizations (mostly organizations that have partnered with LAPD on community performances and projects, but are not primarily concerned with the arts). They interviewed leaders from the Los Angeles Community Action Network (an activist organization dealing with a wide range of community concerns, including civil and human rights, housing and tenants rights, poverty/wealth, women's issues, violence, and food access), United Coalition East Prevention Project (an activist and social service organization that partners with and mobilizes the community to develop environmental solutions to problems related to drug and alcohol usage), the LAMP Community (an organization working to end homelessness and build self-sufficiency among people with mental illness), OG's in Service (discussed previously), and OPCC, (formerly the Ocean Park Community Center, a network of shelters and services for low-income and homeless people in Santa Monica that collaborates with LAPD and colleague agencies in Skid Row).

During these interviews, respondents were asked to describe what they saw as the cultural activities and assets in Skid Row and the extent to which their organizations or other key entities were involved in encouraging or making these possible. All of the agencies provided opportunities or resources that made possible different kinds of community cultural participation. The interviews enabled respondents to step back and reflect on the centrality of arts and cultural activity to their broader work. During the interviews, respondents also could react to the premises that Jackson and Malpede articulated about cultural participation.

In all cases, respondents agreed with the premises and even elaborated more specifically on why community arts and cultural activity is imperative. While leaders from these organizations do not represent their agencies as cultural entities, the interviews helped to bring into relief their identities as stakeholders in arts and cultural activity and participants in the cultural infrastructure of the community.

Having concluded these initial interviews, Jackson and Malpede conducted three focus group discussions—two with Skid Row residents (nine and 11 respondents, respectively) and one with leaders from various resident-focused agencies working in the community (ten respondents). Among these, LAPD was the only organization that was primarily cultural. In the focus group discussions with residents, Jackson delved more deeply into various aspects of cultural vitality. Specifically, she asked respondents to discuss the following:



'Round Trip,' recreation of an Allan Kaprow *Happening* on Skid Row, May 19, 2008  
Los Angeles Poverty Department's Ron Taylor  
Picture by Henriëtte Brouwers

- General impressions of the neighborhood
- The prevalence and nature of arts and cultural activity in Skid Row—type of activity, where it happens, who organizes it, if and why it matters, as well as barriers to cultural participation
- Their own arts and cultural practices, if any—the nature of it and why it matters
- Their aspirations for arts and culture in the Skid Row community—vision for what they would like to see come to fruition in the next five years—and their thoughts about what it would take to make it happen.

In the focus group discussion with community leaders, respondents were asked similar questions. However, they were also asked about the particular roles that their agencies might play in making cultural participation possible and more detailed questions about what it would take to sustain and bolster cultural participation in the community.

## FINDINGS

The focus group discussions proved to be insightful and passionate. All involved agreed that even in the face of often extreme hardship (and, to some extent, because of it) arts and cultural activity is vitally important to the neighborhood. Respondents described participation in many different kinds of cultural activities—performance, poetry, music and some visual art. They affirmed the effects of arts and cultural activity held by Malpede and Jackson and connected artistic and cultural expression to both personal and community results. On the personal level, respondents talked about the importance of basic expression and emotional outlets, and the ways in which engaging in creative activity help people feel more whole and empowered in a context that at times can be dehumanizing. It was evident from respondents that involvement in creative endeavors contributed to the development of leadership and problem solving skills. At the neighborhood level, respondents talked about how artistic and cultural activity was seen as essential to (a) making the community livable (creating the social fabric where people can connect with one another), (b) giving the community an identity, and (c) creating a context in which reflection, expression, and critical thinking is possible.

The following are other key themes that emerged from the discussions. These themes inform our thinking about how to monitor various aspects of cultural vitality in the Skid Row community as well as how information about cultural vitality might best be used to improve conditions for residents of that community.

### Art Comes From the Ground Up

When identifying community cultural assets, most community members cited cultural initiatives that came from the ground up. As one organizational representative put it, “[Art happens] all around us—any place deemed ‘safe’ where you can sit and write or think and talk.” While a number of community organizations of all sizes were cited as initiators and supporters of neighborhood cultural initiatives, the perception of neighborhood residents is that they rely largely on themselves to create culture. A resident said, “Art happens in both parks and on the street,” citing the example of two groups of neighborhood percussionists. Other examples of individual art initiatives included mural painting, poetry projects, and block parties.

Based on Jackson's research on arts and culture in other communities, it appeared from the focus group discussions that Skid Row residents are more concerned with active participation and personal expression—making, doing, and witnessing creative expression that is relevant to their everyday lives—than passive audience participation. Other communities also desire active engagement, but in Skid Row this desire appeared to be more visceral—in no way an optional amenity.

### **Access and Separation**

While respondents identified many creative and artistically talented people and a good deal of ongoing cultural activity in the community, they also identified important barriers to such activity. They named creative needs that have not yet been met, disparities in how Skid Row residents have access to the resources they need for creative expression and experiences compared to other neighboring communities, and concerns about cultural isolation from neighboring areas and also the broader Los Angeles community.

Focus group respondents expressed concern about access to safe spaces where cultural expression can happen—spaces available for performance or other kinds of expression that are unencumbered by red-tape, regulations, or concern for personal safety. They cited run-ins with the police, who enforce codes and regulations that ban some of the desired creative activity. Safe space for cultural expression was identified as extremely important. Respondents also wanted access to materials and equipment—such as computers and musical instruments—to make art. Several respondents noted that many musicians in Skid Row long to play, but don't have the resources to purchase instruments nor access to such instruments even on a borrowed basis. They also cited big social service organizations in the community that control many of the resources—space and equipment—needed for cultural activity, but don't allow access. More than one community member expressed frustration that they, as permanent residents of the community, could not use the cultural resources available at the missions (which only provide temporary shelter). As one community resident put it, "When was the last time we had access to the basketball court in the mission?"

Residents also identified a need for better communication about cultural activity in the community. "It's important that we know what's going on—an acting class, karaoke. We need to develop a calendar and share information so everything is more accessible to everyone." Organizational leaders concurred. One defined the current state of communication by saying, "Let's talk about what's real. There's a long history of institutions doing the real work with their nose to the grindstone and not communicating, and we've got to fix this ourselves. How do we do that? Knowledge: central clearing house for art and culture, a master calendar, artist registry." Consistent with Malpede and Jackson's initial inclination, respondents suggested that the neighborhood could use a cultural inventory to identify existing resources and potentially bring more resources to the community.

Residents were also concerned about their access to emerging cultural activity in newly re-developed parts of the Skid Row and areas adjacent to Skid Row. Are Skid Row residents welcome in new cultural venues? Can they afford to participate as artists and audience? Is the programming relevant to them?

An organizational representative cited a problem stemming from blocks being promoted by development interests as "gallery row." "When we are not allowed to play music on the street, for example, our creativity is being suppressed. It's not okay that the police move you for drumming. I wish the polarization didn't happen. Clearly there are two arts communities within these 30 square

blocks. The rules of engagement are different, racialized. In one, certain things are protected, and in the other, similar things are suppressed.” Another organizational representative succinctly summed up the issue: “We want parity. Whatever happens for artists on Main and up, happens on Main and down.”

It was pointed out by several people that the cultural agents on Skid Row have been the ones to create opportunities for all creative people to come together—new people moving into the area “above Main Street” and long term residents. One organizational representative said, “We’ve created the space for creative exchange where all are welcome. We opened a spoken word gallery and space, and the first thing it did [was it] brought all the creative people together, not new downtown/old downtown. And now some of the “gallery row” and other groups are also doing the same, creating space of exchange among all creative people and cultures in downtown. In some areas, galleries are encouraged.” This was one of many examples where individual Skid Row artists and organizations took the initiative to break down the barriers between the long-standing and new community residents. Respondents noted that even despite their efforts to surmount barriers, there is still a sense of separation from the community at-large. As a representative from one of the large missions commented, “we have acting and mask making, but we’re struggling with how to get out beyond the walls of the community.”

### **A Place Where Culture Can Thrive**

Alongside the need for safe spaces where residents could be creative and expressive, many community residents felt it was important for Skid Row to have a dedicated cultural center or designated area that could function as a cultural campus. “Theater groups need a place to go, a stage for bands, spoken word, a building with state of the art equipment, where we could perform like others do.” Again part of the impetus for this, in addition to genuine desire for expression, is parity with the more affluent areas of downtown. Reflecting on recent planning and development in nearby areas, one community member astutely put it, “I’d like to see planning and culture linked. The planning process doesn’t exist east of Los Angeles Street; we’re not even invited to sit at the table.” Another resident formulated the cultural center idea as “a headquarters where anyone with artistic talent could go...with departments for music, dance, sculpting. It would be a place of exchange for all that’s going on, a commons like a campus.” Respondents also talked about the need to integrate cultural amenities with necessary amenities that currently do not exist in the community—such as shops and offices. Residents and organizational leaders alike talked about different interpretations of spaces designated for cultural activity—a full block, a large building, a cluster of buildings.

### ***Reframing the Community: A New Image of Skid Row***

Respondents from all three focus groups acknowledged that Skid Row has a valuable set of community assets—assets that are valuable not just for Skid Row, but also for the entire region and potentially for communities everywhere. They expressed that the presence and influence of these assets has to be acknowledged by others. Additionally, respondents felt that the image of the neighborhood must change to accommodate the reality that it is a community with long term residents and families, not only a community of single men in temporary impoverished conditions. Respondents clearly saw arts and cultural activity as central to both of these concerns. They repeatedly identified the artistic talent of Skid Row residents and their resolve and initiative in organizing cultural activity as important community assets. Respondents also saw arts and cultural activity as essential to creating a new image of Skid Row—a new way of envisioning and talking about

it. The reframing does not turn a blind eye to the poverty, problems, and needs of the community. It provides a more balanced and realistic picture, making possible different approaches to it from internal (residents and organizations in the community) and external forces (city departments, foundations, developers, and others who do not live or work there but have an interest in Skid Row).

Skid Row, as one organizational representative put it, “has been perceived as a place to dump what you don’t want, but the fact is that Skid Row is the only answer in the entire region for problems of homelessness and recovery.” Skid Row has the infrastructure of organizations and dedicated people who are not only improving the community, but are leading the way for how this can be done in other communities.

There was consensus that, despite its problems, the neighborhood should be recognized for its significant accomplishments, such as its large, active recovery community. Respondents also felt that Skid Row residents stand up for themselves and each other, and that its image be based on the transformational initiative of its residents, rather than exclusively on weaknesses. One respondent said, “We as a community are creating the recovery process. A part of the wisdom that has been discovered and is operational in the neighborhood is that once you are given a safe space, positive things happen.” Another person said, “art therapy is part of recovery.”

Respondents also said that Skid Row is an area of exemplary tolerance where people of different races and abilities live together respectfully. A community resident commented, and others agreed that, “We do not judge anyone on Skid Row because we are all one step above the bottom step.” “A man on a park bench with a saxophone—he is at peace and at home on Skid Row.” The value of tolerance is understood in Skid Row as “the ability to accept the unconventional. Where others see weakness and degradation, we see strength and hope. Where others see a valley, we see a mountain to climb.” Other communities can learn this from Skid Row. Unfortunately, the perception of the area, including that shown by some of the major institutions in their fundraising strategies, is based on the brand of being down to the curb.

### **Advocates/Stewards of Cultural Vitality**

Respondents were concerned that there are few entities in place that serve as stewards of opportunities for cultural participation—people whose job it is to protect, cultivate, encourage, and expand cultural activity in the Skid Row community. There was repeated discussion of the need for something like an “arts commissioner” or “arts commission” from the community to coordinate and advocate for the arts on Skid Row. “The reality is, our audience is ‘us,’ the residents, the community members. In other words, the purpose of art in the community is to engage the community as participants and as audience,” said one respondent. Respondents reflected on the way things work currently: “When something starts, the social service providers battle for control. [We need] a committee/ association so organizations don’t bump heads.” Residents and organizational leaders agreed that there is power when people are organized and that self-determination is important. “There is no greater joy than to let the people who live in Skid Row run Skid Row. At an open house, I was embarrassed, there was a gentleman who said something negative, he doesn’t even like Skid Row, but he’s making decisions about Skid Row,” said one respondent. The repeated call for this type of leadership is itself an indicator of the importance that this kind of activity holds for Skid Row residents.

## IMPLICATIONS: DATA COLLECTION AND USE OF INFORMATION/ACTION

### Data Collection

In the recommendations that follow, the recurrent collection of data is optimal. Baseline data with recurrent measures allows for tracking changes in issues with which people are concerned—opportunities for active engagement in artistic activity; the incidence of actual participation; spaces where such activity can happen; organizations or individuals who make such activity possible; access to tools, materials, and equipment necessary for artmaking; and the presence of talented creative people in the community, among other issues. Without such data, changes cannot be tracked and planning and program design is compromised.

### Cultural Inventory

Malpede and Jackson began with the notion that a cultural inventory would be beneficial to the Skid Row community. This was confirmed in the fieldwork. Community members, individuals, and organizational representatives indicated that the positive values, neighborhood accomplishments, and community wisdom that come from cultural participation need to be represented and better understood by the broader public. This would help Skid Row to gain a fair share of resources and parity with other communities. Additionally, respondents asserted that within the neighborhood there should be, at minimum, better communication of cultural resources. Better communication would allow all individual and organizational cultural initiatives to reach and include more community members. At the same time, it would elevate the profile of culture in the community, which would benefit everyone.

The field research provides insights into what a cultural inventory suitable for the Skid Row community should include. Conventional cultural inventories—efforts to identify explicit arts agencies or arts venues and professional artists—are insufficient for Skid Row. While it is certainly important to identify the arts-specific organizations that do work in the neighborhood and the professional artists who might be there, it is essential to also recognize the following:

- non-arts agencies that provide programming, space, or other resources that make cultural participation possible and the activities or programs with which they are involved;
- safe spaces where residents are engaged in arts and cultural practices (and what make them safe); and
- individual cultural leaders who have been responsible for organizing much of the grassroots organic cultural activity and the efforts with which they are associated.



Scene from 2002 performance of LAPD Agents & Assets, Detroit  
Photo by Sjoerd Wagenaar

The interviews and focus group discussions conducted by Jackson and Malpede provide the basis for a future community charrette where Skid Row residents and stakeholders can validate, challenge, and add to the cultural infrastructure identified so far.

### ***Artist/Creative Registry***

Given what appears to be the high incidence of creative expression in the Skid Row community, the development of an artist or creative registry that allows residents to identify their talents is an essential component of a cultural inventory. This could be an annual or biannual survey allowing people to list and describe the artistic activities in which they are involved—where they do it, with whom, how often, any formal or informal training, the materials required for their work, if any, and any needs or preferences they would like to register in relation to their creative endeavors. If their work can be captured digitally or in any format that can be shared, efforts should be made to gather that as well.

Information gathered from this registry will overlap to some extent with the cultural inventory suggested. This is a useful redundancy in that one method confirms information from the other source.

### ***Policy and Regulation Assessment***

The call for safe space in which people can exercise their creativity suggests the need for an assessment of policies and zoning and other regulations that can facilitate or impede cultural activity in the Skid Row community. Building on some of the initial insights gleaned from the recent interviews and focus group discussions, it would be beneficial to find out what policies and regulations act as barriers or facilitators of cultural activity. Are these reasonable? What changes might be appropriate to optimize cultural vitality in Skid Row? In this regard, it seems useful to enlist the assistance of those entities currently understood as gatekeepers of sorts—the City Planning Department, police and fire departments, parks and recreation, public works, as well as large agencies that have spaces that are perceived to be inaccessible to residents.

### **Action**

Interviews and focus group discussions suggest several possible uses of the data collection efforts in Skid Row. First, the information provides content for cultural resource guides, a community cultural calendar, and potentially other tools that can help to advance arts and cultural practices. Second, the information can help develop a new image for the neighborhood. On a related note, the artist/creative registry might reveal talented people within the community who can help with the re-imagining process and communicate that identity within and outside of Skid Row. Third, the information provides the basis from which to further develop the idea that safe spaces for creative expression, as well as a designated cultural space, would be beneficial for the community. Certainly, discussions about the viability, form, and function of such spaces can be more grounded and useful with this information. Last, the idea of developing a Skid Row arts commission or commissioner—a cultural advocate—would be informed by the data gathered. Moreover, if such an entity were created, the information gathered is essential for its effectiveness.

In fact, the information gathered is worthless unless a neighborhood cultural advocate uses the information gathered to harness the communications and advocacy capacity of the community's residents. An important part of achieving this would be mutual recognition within the community of the role of individuals and organizational community cultural creators. This, in turn, would involve negotiations that would make existing resources more widely available within the community, and, more importantly, greater recognition of the role of Skid Row residents in creating culture and neighborhood. This recognition, when extended outside Skid Row, could be a powerful means of re-imagining the neighborhood in the greater public imagination.

## NEXT STEPS

The Skid Row community was energized by the exchange generated by the field research. Malpede and Jackson offered to meet with community members to present their report. They would convene the attendees from the three focus group sessions, thus bringing together some of the individual and organizational cultural leaders. This could lead to other initiatives, such as making cultural opportunities more widely available to community members and making the case for Skid Row culture to multiple audiences.

This follow up meeting holds the promise of surprising positive outcomes and increased awareness of the cultural richness of the neighborhood. The willingness of people to work together to develop the cultural resources is very hopeful. It also holds out the possibility of using the evolving cultural richness of Skid Row to re-align public perception of the area with current neighborhood reality. The authors think universities within the Los Angeles area would help with the design and implementation of the research and would find resources to do so, provided they dealt with a consortium of neighborhood members. Additionally, the authors think that what has happened and might happen in Skid Row as a result of their work could have implications for community leaders and service providers concerned with similar communities in other cities.

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