

History of Downtown Los Angeles' "Skid Row"

The "Skid Row"¹ of Los Angeles is a portion of the area in downtown Los Angeles east of the Financial District and the Historic Downtown Center, partially overlaying the core of the downtown Industrial District. It is generally referred to by the City as part of the "Central City East" area, a fifty-block sector of downtown bounded by Main Street (west), Third Street (north), Alameda Street (east) and Seventh Street (south), although Skid Row's boundaries are actually somewhat fluid.

The area in which Skid Row is located was agricultural until the railroads first entered Los Angeles, in the 1870s. The railroads paralleled the Los Angeles River, and the main rail yard and station were near the current Sixth Street/Whittier Boulevard river crossing. After the arrival of the railroads, the area began to industrialize with an emphasis on agriculture, which is seasonal in nature and therefore includes influxes of short-term workers, especially at planting and harvesting season. The railroads themselves added to the transient nature of downtown as train crews "laid over" between assignments. As a result, many small hotels were developed in the 1880 to 1930 era to serve this worker population. Since many of the migrant workers were single and male, the area also saw a proliferation of bars, whorehouses and other "houses of ill repute." Today there is a large mission presence in Skid Row which can trace its roots to that period, when temperance and other groups established such facilities as havens to counteract the ill effects of, and provide a healthy alternative to, the bars and other potentially self-destructive pursuits.

The area's proximity to the railroad station also made it the point of first arrival for all types of migrants, including those who migrated for economic reasons from elsewhere in the United States during and after each major recession or depression. In particular, during the Great Depression of the 1930's, many displaced farmers and workers from the Midwest and South came to Los Angeles, often having abandoned their families, and/or becoming alcoholics – the "hobos" and "bums" who "rode the rails" were the homeless of their day and the social service organizations began to evolve into service centers for such populations. A portion of this population settled permanently in the area and became the base of today's elderly population in Central City East.

During the Second World War and the Viet Nam conflict, numerous military personnel and transient young men passed through Los Angeles, and the missions served as havens for them during their journeys. This previous exposure to Skid Row attracted numerous returning drug- and alcohol-addicted and emotionally scarred Viet Nam veterans to come back to and settle in Los Angeles. The veterans found Skid Row accommodating because of (1) the presence of service facilities and providers and (2) the rejection they faced in other communities. It was after the Viet Nam era that the demographics of the area changed from predominantly elderly, white and alcohol-dependent to predominantly young, nonwhite and drug-dependent.

In the 1960's, noting that many of the area's small hotels – because of their age and lack of upkeep – did not meet the fire and safety codes cited many of the small hotel owners. The code conformance orders allowed leeway for owners to either repair or demolish the structures. As a result of hotel owners facing costly repairs and limited income from the hotels' low rents, this leeway had the unintended consequence of numerous demolitions. In total the loss of 50% of the housing stock – from approximately 15,000 units in the early 1960's to 7,500 units in the

¹ The term "Skid Row" derives from Seattle, Washington, where "skid roads" were the places that loggers slid their cut timber to the ports for shipment. By the 1930's the term referred to the rundown areas of cities, characterized by bars, brothels and the like originally attracted by loggers, and began to include the presence of homeless and other extremely low income populations.

early 1970's – contributed to the displacement of a significant number of extremely low-income, substance dependent and/or mentally unstable persons who had settled in Central City East.

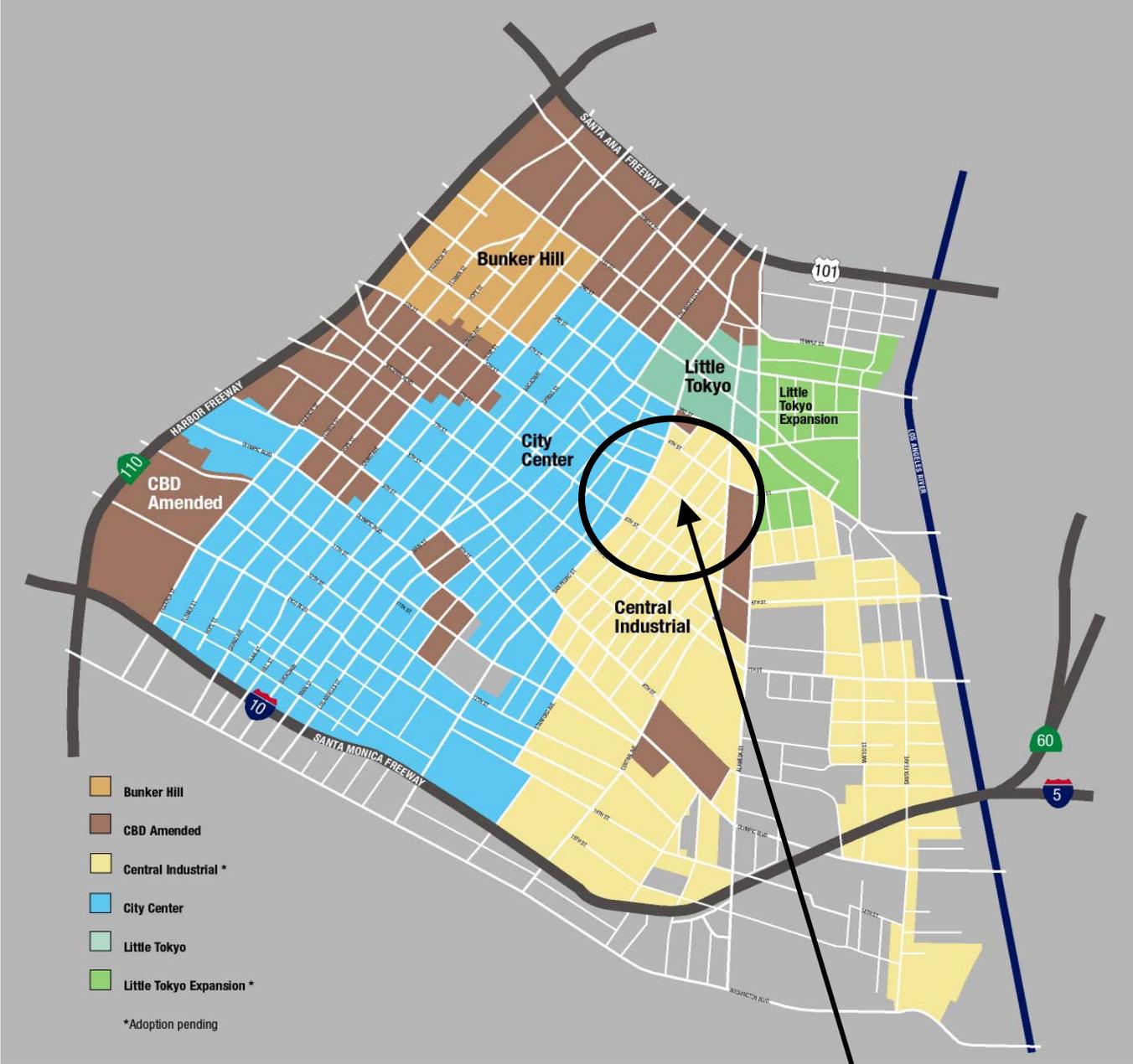
In 1975, the area became part of the then newly adopted Central Business District Redevelopment Project Area. A Blue Ribbon Committee comprised of civic leaders, business persons and academics established shortly after adoption of the Project Area issued a report in 1976 calling for the preservation of the remaining housing stock and other steps to address the social, economic and medical problems of the downtown population. As a result, Los Angeles embarked on a program of acquiring, rehabilitating and managing the remaining single-room-occupancy hotel units and adding a limited number of community amenities, most notably two vest-pocket parks, clinics and shelter facilities. To date, roughly 3,500 of the surviving 6,500 single-room-occupancy units have been acquired and rehabilitated or replaced. Another unintended consequence of the City's action, however, has been that other communities were then able not to provide for their own social needs, but rather shipped their homeless and problem populations to downtown Los Angeles.

The area of these small hotels, missions and shelters is also characterized by numerous industrial, warehousing and distribution activities. This local manufacturing, processing and wholesale sector of the economy, which also dates to the coming of the railroads, has been growing significantly; a sharp contrast to the sluggish performance of other sectors of the economy on the national level. Because many of these businesses are small, often run by immigrants and employing low-skilled workers who do not have transportation options, these businesses need to remain close to the City's core. As they expand, however, they put pressure on the limited housing stock in the area, raising the specter of additional loss of the area's very low cost housing stock. In addition, many of the businesses are food-based, which engenders serious public health problems in a dense area with a large street population lacking access to sanitary facilities.

Moreover, while throughout most of its history the area's population has been predominantly single and male, the recession of the 1990's resulted in many middle class families breaking up, with both single adults on their own and single adults (mostly women) with children arriving in Skid Row and in need of shelter and other assistance.

Today the Central City East area, including Skid Row, contains a population of approximately 12,000 persons. Approximately 8,000 of them live permanently or semi-permanently in the 6,500 single-room-occupancy hotel rooms and approximately 2,000 persons occupy beds in shelter and transitional facilities, for periods of time ranging from days to several months. The population living on the streets is variously estimated by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the Los Angeles Police Department and others, and numbers are estimated to range from 2,000 to 4,500 or 5,000 persons, with the numbers changing both seasonally and throughout the month. While the population is still predominantly made of up single males, there are increasing numbers of women and children, now pushing five to ten percent of the total population on Skid Row.

With the increasing popularity of communities surrounding Central City East for middle- and upper-income housing, along with the pressure for expansion of local industries, there are concerns for the potential for some of the Skid Row housing to be displaced. As a result, it is becoming increasingly important to identify mechanisms to deal with – and, hopefully, solve – chronic homelessness in Los Angeles.



"Skid Row"



Downtown Los Angeles Skid Row Street Scene



Example of a rehabilitated Single-Room-Occupancy Hotel in Skid Row



Downtown Los Angeles Skid Row Street Scene



Jim Wood Center at 5th and San Julian Streets, a social service facility in Central City East close to the largest concentration of residential hotels