

Blue Book / Silver Book:
Can Urban Design Empower A Low Income Neighborhood?

In 1948 Los Angeles business and political leaders established the Community Redevelopment Agency for the purpose of reversing the decline of Bunker Hill, a previously upscale neighborhood in the heart of Los Angeles. On Oct 31, 1951 the CRA officially designated Bunker Hill an Urban Renewal project. November 7, 1956 the “Tentative Plan for the Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Project” was adopted by City Council and 11 years later amended by the Council on October 30, 1967.

In 1966 Mayor Sam Yorty asked Downtown businessmen to confront the blight of Skid Row by forming The Central City Development Committee. In 1968 they generated their plan for the area, “The Central City East Project”. Mayor Yorty’s Central City Development Committee had proposed cajoling and coercing the Skid Row population and downtown’s missions to consolidate in a 3-block area at 6th Street and Central Avenue. According to the report this consolidation of Skid Row would make possible and engender “massive development” in the remainder of the Skid Row area.

The City asked the Community Redevelopment Agency to create a redevelopment project area for the entire Central City. In developing their plan for central city redevelopment, the CRA commissioned an academic study of Skid Row that implicitly critiqued the assumptions, perceptions and conclusions generated by the Central City Development Committee. (e.g. Vanderkooi)

While the CRA was developing their plan, a second ad hoc committee of civic leaders was formed. The Committee for Central City Planning, Inc. released its own refined and tempered report in 1972 after 18 months of study. Their report, Los Angeles 1972 /1990 futuristically imagined the city as it would be in1990, if their plan were realized. The report, produced by a hired firm of consulting architects and urban planners was

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designed in a coffee table book format, with a bold silver cover, it became known as the “Silver Book”.

Instead of concentrating Skid Row on 3 blocks of Central Avenue as the Central City Committee Plan would have – The Silver Book simply proposed the creation of a detoxification / rehabilitation center, more centrally located near San Pedro Street and claimed, from it’s 1990 futuristic vantage point, that all Skid Row residents would be “rehabilitated” within a few years and disappear into the general population: and so Skid Row would be disappeared – but, magically, no one would be displaced.

Tom Bradley was elected Mayor in 1973. He also backed downtown redevelopment and on July 18, 1975 the LA City Council approved the CRA’s "Plan for the Central Business District Redevelopment Project" which was generally in accord with the Silver Book plan.

However, despite its adoption, the plan had engendered significant opposition from large and small property owners in other parts of Los Angeles. They had witnessed the urban renewal of Bunker Hill and didn’t like the Community Redevelopment Agency’s broad authorities: to condemn private property, their ability to resell it to private developers, and their power to keep the augmented taxes from development in their areas to spend as they saw fit, rather than being returned to the general funds of the City, the County and the School District.

Though coming from a far different place politically, affordable housing activists were also outraged by urban renewal projects, like Bunker Hill, that displaced entire communities and they doubted the CRA’s determination to create equivalent housing elsewhere. They viewed tax increment monies going to the CRA as funds, which would otherwise go to the County’s social programs.

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Five months after the plan's adoption, on December 19, 1975 the City Council's Planning Committee voted a moratorium on the Central Business District Redevelopment Project and moved to appoint a Citizen's Advisory Committee to advise on the projects future. The 19 member Citizen's Committee was comprised of 5 citizens appointed by the Mayor and one each by L.A.'s 15 City Council members. The Committee was charged to address seven specific questions about the alleged economic benefit to be derived from the development and to offer other recommendations on the plan. They wrote their own report, and with qualifications and advice, they ultimately signed off on the development plan.

In working toward their findings the Citizens Advisory Committee conducted public hearings. A group of young activists and planners concerned with changing the conversation about the future of Skid Row appeared and testified at the public hearings. They then brought Leonard Blumberg of Temple University, who'd written extensively on Skid Rows, to Los Angeles to look at Skid Row LA and meet with willing Citizens Committee members. Blumberg wrote a report with the local activists Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris from the Catholic Worker, Chuck Elsesser of the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Gary Squier of The Community Design Center, and The Public Inebriate Program director Ron Peterson that they addressed to the Citizen's Advisory Committee and distributed to City Council. The activist plan proposed saving the housing in Skid Row and in so doing it established boundaries for the neighborhood that would become generally recognized. The activists argued that no miracle cures were at hand and that without housing in Skid Row people would be displaced to other communities, Westlake, Long Beach, San Pedro and other L.A. communities.

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The Citizen's Committee, ultimately with qualifications and advice, signed off on the development plan. In writing their report, they offered a series of recommendations to the City about how to proceed with the development that went far beyond the seven specific economic benefit questions they were charged to answer. Importantly, their analysis of the Skid Row situation was taken directly from the recommendations of the activists. The entire Blumberg study was submitted with the Citizens Advisory Committee's blue covered report (thus becoming "The Blue Book".) The Citizens Advisory Committee urged the City in the strongest possible language to enact the activists' ideas.

When the Central City Redevelopment Plan again moved forward, the activist ideas --- of saving the housing on Skid Row and recognizing the boundaries of the neighborhood to prevent development --- were incorporated in the new plan.

Mayor Bradley appointed the progressive Ed Helfelt as CRA director and he creatively oversaw the implementation of the plan's mandate to save the housing. A range of housing was created from temporary emergency housing to permanent supportive housing. Initially the CRA, provided funds to several private hotel owners, to renovate individual hotels, including; The Brownstone, the Lorane, but, quickly recognized this as a misstep. The CRA then created SRO Housing, Inc. a non-profit and a much more reliable partner. Created in 1984, SRO Housing began buying hotels the following year and their first renovated hotel The Florence came on line in 1986. Several years later (1989) Alice Callahan and others formed Skid Row Housing Trust, a second non-profit whose mission was to buy up, renovate and preserve the low income housing within Skid Row. The Trust focused on acquiring properties that would preserve the boundaries of Skid Row, with their first three acquisitions being hotels on Main Street.