WEST END BOYS: URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND THE ELIMINATION OF SACRAMENTO’S SKID ROW

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of History
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HISTORY
(Public History)

by

James Michael Williams

SPRING
2013
WEST END BOYS: URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND THE ELIMINATION OF SACRAMENTO’S SKID ROW

A Thesis

by

James Michael Williams

Approved by:

__________________________, Committee Chair
Lee Simpson, Ph.D.

__________________________, Second Reader
Patrick Ettinger, Ph.D.

__________________________
Date
Student: James Michael Williams

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Patrick Ettinger, Ph.D.                            Date

Department of History
Abstract

of

WEST END BOYS: URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND THE ELIMINATION OF SACRAMENTO’S SKID ROW

by

James Michael Williams

Following World War Two, federal legislation allowed leaders in American cities to implement aggressive programs of urban renewal. Designed to revitalize neighborhoods blighted by decades of neglect, such programs often razed a city’s oldest and poorest neighborhoods, replacing them with newly built residential and commercial districts. Sacramento’s period of urban renewal began in earnest in the 1950s, when city planners and redevelopment officials formulated plans to redevelop the city’s West End area.

Within the West End was the Sacramento’s skid row area, an economically depressed district of inexpensive hotels that was historically home to thousands of single, male, transient agricultural workers. Although skid row had a reputation for moral and social decay, city leaders recognized its value as a source of cheap labor for area farms. Nonetheless, the area was to be demolished and redeveloped. Through the 1950s, the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency formulated a series of proposals for the relocation the city’s skid row population to a new skid row neighborhood that was to be built on the model of the old one. The redevelopment agency abandoned its plan in 1959 and never instituted a new plan to relocate skid row residents.
displaced by redevelopment in the 1950s and 1960s. In the end, the displaced skid row population gradually relocated independently to other impoverished areas in Sacramento and elsewhere.

*West End Boys* explains and contextualizes the reasoning behind planners’ proposals for a new skid row neighborhood and tracks the effects the failure to implement those proposals had on Sacramento’s skid row population. Historical and sociological secondary sources provide the foundation for this analysis. Another valuable body of source material is the collection of studies and plans issued by the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency, the Sacramento City Planning Commission, and other local agencies. In addition, press accounts from the era provide insight into the events surrounding the demolition of Sacramento’s skid row. *West End Boys* uses these sources to illuminate a topic left largely unexamined by historians.

_____________________, Committee Chair
Lee Simpson, Ph.D.

_____________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must thank my faithful adviser, Dr. Lee Simpson. It was with her encouragement that I entered graduate school, under her guidance that I shaped this thesis, and by the grace of her enduring patience that I completed the project. I owe her a ton. Dr. Patrick Ettinger was likewise a valued mentor throughout my postgraduate career and served as an adviser on this thesis. I thank him deeply for the input, insight, and support he gave me over the past few years. Finally, thanks go out to my friends and family, who endured months, if not years, of my frequent monologues on urban redevelopment, demolished neighborhoods, and vanquished hoboes. Few people are actively interested in these topics, but so many patiently listened while I wondered, explained, and ranted on the subjects.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................. vii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   Review of Literature .............................................................................................................. 4

2. THE EVOLUTION OF SKID ROW ................................................................................... 14
   Skid Row Institutions .......................................................................................................... 16
   Postwar Changes .................................................................................................................. 19

3. THE SPECTER OF REDEVELOPMENT ........................................................................... 21
   State and Federal Redevelopment Laws .............................................................................. 21
   Visions of the West End ........................................................................................................ 24

4. PLANS AND SCHEMES .................................................................................................... 32
   Neutra and Alexander .......................................................................................................... 32
   Bauer and McEntire .............................................................................................................. 39
   Dreyfuss and Blackford ......................................................................................................... 47
   Pros and Cons ...................................................................................................................... 50

5. SKID ROW DEATHWATCH ............................................................................................. 58
   The Beginning of the End ..................................................................................................... 59
   Pulling the Plug .................................................................................................................... 62

6. CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................... 71

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 74
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Sacramento’s Second Street is currently the principal street for Old Sacramento, a historic district mostly of historic and historic replica buildings intended to evoke the city’s formative years as a nineteenth-century riverfront commercial and transportation hub. Before the early 1970s, when the district first began to take something resembling its current shape and assume its tourist-destination function, Second Street was a street of a different sort.\(^1\) It was the central roadway of Sacramento’s skid row. Where today candy shops and souvenir sellers lure travelers into their stores from the reconstructed wood plank sidewalks, a collection of dingy hotels, taverns, gospel missions, and employment services once drew a throng of itinerant working-class men destined for the region’s farms, canneries, and factories. Once a part of the city’s storied commercial district, Second Street had a second life in the early and mid-twentieth century as a grimy labor recruitment center, of sorts.\(^2\)

In its function as a center of hiring for low-wage, unskilled labor, Second Street was typical of the late-nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century American skid row. A predominantly single male population gathered there looking for work, lodging, and entertainment.\(^3\) However, the combination of depression, war, and postwar demobilization wrought changes to the demography and dynamics of American skid row.

---

\(^2\) Catherine Bauer and Davis McEntire, Relocation Study, Single Male Population, Sacramento’s West End (Sacramento: Redevelopment Agency of the City of Sacramento, 1953), 2.
rows, including the one centered on Second Street. After a Depression- and World War Two-era influx of poor and displaced persons, skid row populations receded in the prosperous postwar period. The population that remained on skid row still possessed a large contingent of transient laborers, but also included a disproportionate number of pensioners, problem drinkers, and men whose health problems often kept them from working steadily.

As cities across the United States implemented urban redevelopment programs after World War Two, local redevelopment officials targeted the physically neglected areas of the urban core that housed many of a city’s poor and non-white residents and, usually, its skid row-type populations. Redevelopment agencies carried out slum clearance and redevelopment projects to transform these blighted neighborhoods into modern commercial, residential, and industrial developments designed to lure middle-class residents, shoppers, and workers away from the suburbs and into the city center.

Skid row neighborhoods, such as the one centered on Second Street, often presented a vexing near-term issue for proponents of urban redevelopment. On the one hand, skid row was the poorest, dirtiest, most dangerous section of the city and was in the most desperate need of remedies. On the other hand, historically, the men who inhabited skid row filled an essential function, serving as a cheap source of casual agricultural and industrial labor. In Sacramento’s case, city leaders and urban planners initially felt the

---

5 DePastino, Citizen Hobo, 223-227.
6 Carl Abbott, How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 187-188.
need to tread carefully. They believed that, without making special provisions for the relocation of the denizens of Second Street, redeveloping the neighborhood would scatter the thousands of individuals who collectively made up a labor pool regarded as an important part of the region’s economy.\(^7\)

It was with this in mind that, between 1950 and 1959, the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency (SRA) formulated three plans—all ultimately abortive—to rebuild its skid row. Each of these plans would have recreated skid row with many of its hallmark institutions, characteristic demographics, and relatively high population density, but with cleaner and safer modern buildings. So important was skid row’s economic function, city leaders believed, that it was worth it to include the row’s taverns, card rooms, and crowded dormitories in the plans for its reconstitution, even if these contributed to the resident’s apparent dereliction. Planners suspected that, without the standard array of lodgings, eateries, bars, charities, and entertainments that supported and embodied skid row culture, the men would not willingly relocate to the new skid row.

If SRA had followed through with its plans, the agency’s attempt to rebuild skid row would have been a unique approach to such a slum clearance project. Other American cities might have drafted similar plans, but there is no indication in the relevant sources that any such plan reached fruition in another locale.\(^8\) After abandoning plans to rebuild skid row, SRA relocated Sacramento’s skid row population in a manner typical of most American cities. As happened across the United States, the City condemned and

\(^7\) Bauer and McEntire, *Relocation Study*, 2-3.

demolished skid row and largely allowed its population to scatter without relocation assistance.\(^9\) While SRA executed its legal responsibility to assist hundreds of Sacramento families displaced by redevelopment, the agency left the majority of thousands poor and familyless Sacramento men responsible for their own unassisted relocation.\(^10\)

**Review of Literature**

Historians have largely ignored the intersecting histories of American homelessness and urban redevelopment. By necessity, the current work looks to major sociological writings on American skid rows to fill in the gaps in the historiographical record and to contextualize the final two decades of Sacramento’s skid row area. Although sociological studies of skid row predated the major urban redevelopment efforts that began in the 1950s, sociologists’ most prolific and influential period of skid row studies began in the 1960s, in the wake of the earliest waves of redevelopment. Often sociologists completed these studies hand-in-hand with local redevelopment programs and produced them in order to facilitate and justify skid row slum clearance.

For example, Donald Bogue authored his influential study *Skid Row in American Cities* as a Demonstration Project subsidized by the Urban Renewal Administration. His 1963 book offered not only a detailed account of skid row and its regulars, but also laid out


plans for evacuating and demolishing the neighborhood as well as for delivering services to those displaced by the demotions.¹¹

Sociologists were the first to approach skid row as a topic of sustained academic study and have, to date, covered the subject far more extensively than have historians. Nels Anderson’s 1923 work *The Hobo: Sociology of the Homeless Man* stands as the seminal sociological analysis of life on skid row—or, to use the less pejorative term Anderson favored, the “main stem.”¹² Anderson, himself a former transient, observed the down and out of Chicago’s skid row. His encyclopedic work documents the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of life on a 1920s skid row. According to Peter H. Rossi, Anderson’s agenda was to highlight transients’ benefits to society, “to show that hoboes and tramps fulfilled a role in the economy by supplying labor that was needed only intermittently.”¹³ Anderson’s sympathetic approach to the distinctive cultural and social elements of “Hobohemia” contrasts with the often critical approaches of later sociological studies. The one-time hobo was less likely than his successors to root this culture in the supposed failings of the men he studied. Instead, he viewed the culture largely as the result of living in a skid row environment. In the book’s preface, Anderson’s editor and mentor Robert E. Park explained that the hobo “has created, or at

least there has grown up in response to his needs, a distinct and relatively independent local community, with its own economic, social, and social-political institutions.”

The most extensive period of sociological writing about skid row began in the early 1960s, when urban redevelopment projects in American cities led to a flowering of sociological studies on the topic. Redevelopment authorities in Sacramento, where urban redevelopment began relatively early, completed their skid row studies almost entirely before this period of intensive study began. The City finished and abandoned three plans for relocating displaced skid row men by 1960 and demolished as much as three-quarters of skid row territory by 1963.

Donald Bogue’s *Skid Row in American Cities* provides a book-length account of the skids written about a decade after the earliest intensive urban redevelopment programs began in Sacramento and other U.S. cities. Per Bogue’s description, skid row was “a district in the city where there is a concentration of substandard hotels and rooming houses charging very low rates and catering primarily to men with low incomes.” Usually “located near the central business district and also near a factory district or major heavy transportation facilities,” skid row neighborhoods were also home to relatively large numbers of bars, employment agencies, pawnshops, and other institutions frequented by men of little means. The men who lived in these districts often shared three important characteristics, according to Bogue. They were poor, usually working low-wage and unstable jobs; homeless, as defined by their lives “outside private

---

households” and without “family life”; and had “acute personal problems… with respect to society at large and in their personal lives.” By Bogue’s observation, the personal problems of skid row men “frequently [found] expression in heavy daily drinking, and in withdrawal from conventional family living.”^{16}

According to sociologists Laura Huey and Thomas Kemple, Bogue’s focus on the personal problems skid row men possessed represented a shift within his discipline. Earlier sociologists regarded skid row’s problems as a product of the social structure or the urban environment. By the early 1960s, however, sociologists regarded life on skid row as “the inevitable consequence of individual pathology” and of “occasional tragedy,” but not the result of disadvantages rooted in social and economic systems. Out of this perspective, claim Huey and Temple, grew a moralistic point of view amongst sociologists, including Bogue and Samuel E. Wallace, that categorized unemployed skid row men as either unwilling or unable to work.^{17}

Wallace’s 1965 study *Skid Row as a Way of Life* offers a generalized account of the American skid row that highlights the “deviance” of the typical hobo and his “community of sorts, a community which shelters, clothes, and feeds him, and even keeps him supplied with drink… He asks for nothing more.” Important to Wallace were the three routes single men took to find themselves on skid row. According to the author, many transient working men were there because the cheap lodgings of skid row were their most suitable residential options given the peculiarities of farm labor, railroad work,

---

or other occupations that required mobility. A second group, termed “welfare recipients,” consisted mostly of victims displaced or impoverished by war, natural disaster, or economic calamity. There was a third class, “aficionados,” who could not claim to be there because of occupational requirements or historical circumstances. These were men whose “life patterns [were] inherently deviant and lead them to look for a community where they will find toleration, acceptance, and anonymity.” Whatever men’s routes to skid row, Wallace claimed, the enclave of the poor single male was in its final stages. Between the decline of causal labor and changes in welfare policies, fewer men made their way to the row in the early 1960s. Unmarried pensioners were all who seemed destined to remain there in any significant number, according to Wallace. Once they died, so too would skid row.\(^\text{18}\)

Howard Bahr’s revisionist work, on the other hand, treated skid row homelessness as a product of poverty and considered homeless men’s disconnect from society to be the salient feature of skid row culture and social life. In the late 1960s, Bahr and Theodore Caplow introduced disaffiliation as an explanation for the state of skid row in the era of urban renewal.\(^\text{19}\) According to Bahr, “Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterized by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures.”\(^\text{20}\) In the opening pages of Bahr’s *Skid Row: An Introduction to Disaffiliation*, the author includes several

---


illustrative vignettes of skid row men exhibiting desperate and apparently deviant behaviors that were accepted, or at least ignored, by others. Extreme public inebriation, to use a classic example of supposed skid row deviance, merited little note by bystanders, even when the inebriate vomited in the corner of the dormitory in where others were trying to socialize or sleep. But Bahr cautions that this isolation was not, as Bogue or Wallace might have argued, an indication of the appeal that the “freedom” or “responsiblilitylessness” skid row had for its denizens. It was, instead, evidence that social norms within the spatially segregated skid row area allowed those on skid row to avoid guilt for their behaviors as much as skid row’s segregation hid its conditions from mainstream society so that it would not have to suffer the “dissonance” that would arise from seeing such poverty.

Bahr understood that skid row was defined as much by its physical environment as by its people. Despite challenges from within the discipline of sociology, he challenged new theories that defined skid row entirely as an aberrant psychological state. Instead, like Anderson and Bogue, he held “the traditional view of skid row as a section of a city, a geographic place with coordinates in space and time.” The spatial and historical roots of skid row were such important features of the urban phenomenon that Bahr confidently placed skid row’s birth at the founding of New York’s Water Street Mission in 1872. According to Bahr, gospel missions like Water Street Mission were one of three types of institutions whose concentration in proximity to one another made up

---

21 Bahr Skid Row, 4.
22 Bahr Skid Row, 8-9.
the skid row environment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The others were taverns and, most important of all, cheap lodging houses.\textsuperscript{23}

By 1982, when Ronald J. Miller’s \textit{The Demolition of Skid Row} appeared, skid row neighborhoods were “physically gone as large, distinct urban areas.” Three decades of a two-pronged strategy of urban redevelopment and the expansion of social services effected the decline of most cities’ skid rows. The cheap hotels, bars, missions, and other typical skid row institutions gave way to tonier residential, commercial, and office buildings as well as rehabilitated historic buildings. But because the social services aspect of the war on skid row was significantly less successful, skid row people persisted as a feature of the American urban landscape. As a result, “Skid Row [was] declining permanently in the physical sense, much less in the social-behavioral sense.”\textsuperscript{24}

Recent histories of U.S. skid rows are rare, with some accounts found in broader urban histories or histories of American homelessness. Peter H. Rossi places the skid row of the middle of the twentieth century near the “fuzzy” line separating those with and without homes. In a superficial and brief historical account found in \textit{Down and Out in America: The Origins of American Homelessness}, Rossi notes that skid row sections of U.S. cities arose in the late nineteenth century. They housed single men—“familyless transients”—who traveled widely in search of menial agricultural and industrial job opportunities that straddled Rossi’s aforementioned fuzzy line. The neighborhoods these men inhabited became “institutionalized and segregated,” by the early twentieth century taking on a familiar form that included brothels, bars, pawn shops, and other businesses

\textsuperscript{23} Howard M. Bahr, \textit{Skid Row}, 17, 31, 35, 123.
\textsuperscript{24} Miller, \textit{The Demolition of Skid Row}, 12-13, 15, 16, 20.
that catered to single men with little money. According to Rossi, the marked decline of skid row in the 1940s owed to labor-saving mechanization that greatly reduced the need for transient, unskilled laborers.\textsuperscript{25}

In *Down and Out on the Road: The Homeless in American History*, Kenneth L. Kusmer, places the skid row of the 1950s and 1960s within an ebbing rate of U.S. homelessness. Kusmer connects twentieth-century skid row transiency to the large populations of homeless and highly mobile male laborers that developed following the Civil War. In the late nineteenth century, there were two homeless types, the roving, male tramp and the permanently city-dwelling homeless man. While there was “overlap,” so-called tramps tended to be younger men than were the more sedentary urban homeless population. After World War Two, however, the population of mobile tramps became substantially less prominent, and homelessness was marked more by “an aging population of destitute men… confined, for the most part, to the deteriorating skid row areas of cities.” With this change, homelessness, which had emerged in the 1930s as an issue of national importance, became a local problem peculiar to cities as it had been before the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{26}

Todd DePastino’s 2003 work *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* is the most thoroughgoing professional historical treatment of American skid row homelessness. It follows the long sweep of the history of homelessness with attention to the implications the phenomenon had for American culture and politics and vice versa. According to the author, homelessness was a concept dependent for meaning

\textsuperscript{25} Peter H. Rossi, *Down and Out in America*, 10, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{26} Kusmer, *Down and Out on the Road*, 204.
on changing conceptions of the home. The early twentieth century birth of a “new vision of suburban home ownership, a vision that emphasized aesthetic and spiritual values of rootedness, place, and familial belonging,” gave rise to a view of tramps, hoboes, and homeless as people in a state of “alienation and estrangement.” This view of the homeless persisted, intensifying in years immediately after World War Two, when a reigning suburban ethos elevated the status of the nuclear family. \(^{27}\)

This helps to explain attitudes toward skid row during the era of urban redevelopment. DePastino argues that skid row before the war was the province of a “freewheeling working-class American manhood,” of “a certain swaggering élan.” Postwar trends made it appear as a place where unattached men were “confined to a few city blocks and shut out of the abundance and fulfillment that the postwar world had to offer.” By the 1950s and 1960s, skid row was seen as a crowded hotel district peopled with supposed bums—no longer “hoboes”—and perceived to be isolated from, and left behind by, the mainstream of American society. \(^{28}\)

Numerous social problems and urban planning issues greeted Sacramento’s city planners when they began studying skid row and other depressed neighborhoods in conjunction with the city’s earliest urban redevelopment efforts. In the 1950s urban planners and other advocates of slum clearance and redevelopment documented and publicized the West End neighborhoods’ aged buildings, susceptibility to fire, and high crime rates, among other issues, in order to meet the requirements of state and federal


\(^{28}\) DePastino, *Citizen Hobo,* xvii, xxi, 219, 223.
redevelopment law as well as to build public support for clearing and rebuilding the West End. Most vexing was the dense knot of dilapidated buildings and urban pathologies they found in and around the city’s skid row.
Chapter 2

THE EVOLUTION OF SKID ROW

In the early years of the postwar period, when Sacramento’s civic leaders first began seriously to consider slum clearance and urban redevelopment as a solution for the problems of its aging inner city sections, the city’s West End already had a reputation for poverty and seediness. Lying roughly between the State Capitol grounds on the east, the Sacramento River on the west, Southern Pacific’s bustling rail yard on the north, and S Street on the south, the West End was home to the earliest areas of Sacramento, including its Gold Rush-era Embarcadero. This waterfront commercial zone fell into disrepair and disfavor as established merchants followed each other several blocks east to form a new business district centered on J and K streets. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the wider West End was already home to several down-market ethnic neighborhoods sitting in the vicinity of a “decaying waterfront.”

The West End of the early twentieth century was a solidly working-class section of the city that was marked by a high degree of social integration. It consisted of a few dozen city blocks in which a number of racial and ethnic enclaves bordered one another. Japantown sat between Second, Fifth, L, and O streets, before expanding several blocks to the south and east. About 2,000 African Americans lived in the West End on the eve of redevelopment. Significant Croatian, Portuguese, Mexican, Chinese, Italian, and Filipino populations also built communities there.

---

30 Steven M. Avella, Indomitable City, 77, 78, 108, 111; DePastino, Citizen Hobo, 72-75.
At the fringe of this multi-ethnic section of the city was Sacramento’s skid row, centered on Second Street and immediately adjacent to the old Embarcadero. Typical of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American skid row, Second Street, and environs, was home to a densely built district of hotels, flophouses, and commercial services catering to the type of transient, low-skilled, male laborers who became a fixture of U.S. cities in the years following the Civil War.  

Partaking in a culture defined by “casual lodging, temporary labor, and frequent migrations,” the nineteenth century tramp was part of a roving “army” of homeless men who made temporary homes in the least desirable sections of American cities and traveled widely in search of work, usually as laborers for railroad construction and maintenance or as agricultural field workers. Skid row also hosted a “home guard” comprised often of older working-class men who resided permanently in skid row and were occupied in many of the same categories of labor as their younger, more mobile counterparts. According to Peter H. Rossi, in the late nineteenth century, the “transient homelessness” of skid row “became institutionalized and segregated in American cities.” It was in this era that the familiar, spatially separated skid row neighborhood took shape in U.S. cities, with the populations and institutions—“cheap lodgings,” bars, employment offices, brothels, pawnshops, cheap clothing stores, and gospel missions—that defined the area on and around Second Street starting by the 1890s.

---

32 Despastino, Citizen Hobo, xviii.
33 Rossi, Down and Out in America, 21.
34 Anderson, The Hobo, 96.
35 Rossi, Down and Out in America, 20.
36 Rossi, Down and Out in America, 21; Avella, Sacramento: Indomitable City. 123.
Because of its considerable supply of unattached workers, Sacramento’s West End assumed an important regional economic function as the site of a bustling agricultural labor market. Private employment agencies drew workers largely from what became known much later as the Labor Market Area (LMA), a section of the West End generally considered to be bounded by Front Street on the west, I Street on the north, Fifth Street on the east, and L Street on the south. Second Street, a thoroughfare that took on many of the characteristics of the classic skid row, was the nexus for hiring in this era. Farmers, industrial outfits, and other employers hired workers through one of the several LMA employment offices. From the late 1920s into the late 1940s, the majority of the city’s employment offices were on Second Street between I and L streets.\textsuperscript{37}

**Skid Row Institutions**

Private employment offices occupied a prominent place in skid row culture and were “the greatest single lure” for migrant laborers to a city’s skid row.\textsuperscript{38} Often, employment offices offered Spartan lodging, food, drink, and haircuts, in addition to connections to job opportunities on farms in the outlying areas of a city. Employment agencies in major regional economic centers, such as Chicago, had a role in distributing


\textsuperscript{38} DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 72.
seasonal workers throughout a far-flung, interstate, rural hinterland. Sacramento’s reach extended mostly to its home county and several neighboring counties. By one account, however, the LMA supplied workers to states as far away as Idaho and Montana.

The employment agency was only one of several types of important skid row institutions. Hotels and other forms of temporary or low-cost lodging types also played a large role in skid row life. In the late nineteenth century, the “grim” lodgings available on skid row often were improvised quarters in lodging houses. But by the 1880s, U.S. skid rows increasingly were home to so-called “workingmen’s palaces,” substantial hotels that catered to both transient and sedentary single male laborers.

Mid-twentieth century descriptions of Sacramento’s skid row housing note that a variety of residential arrangements was available, including dismal flophouses and dormitories, in addition to established and better-appointed hotels. On the whole, observers categorized these as unsanitary, crowded, and “substandard.”

Gospel missions, religious charities such as the Salvation Army or the Water Street Mission that Howard Bahr places at the 1872 birth of skid row, also filled a prominent role on American skid rows. Through the end of the skid row era in the twentieth century, these religious institutions distributed free meals and provided lodging for a predominantly male hobo population. The cost of the charities’ services was typically attendance at a lengthy sermon. While the missions viewed these sermons as a

---

39 DePastino, Citizen Hobo, 73.
41 DePastino, Citizen Hobo, 74-75.
42 Sacramento. City Planning Commission, Sacramento Urban Redevelopment, Existing Conditions in Blighted Areas, 33.
means of uplift through moral teachings, skid row men often attended them reluctantly, in mock penitence, waiting only for the free meal the mission served following the sermon.\textsuperscript{43} In Sacramento, this drama played out—in the most desperate times, hundreds of times a day—until skid row’s demise in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{44}

Bars were another fixture of skid row that remained well into the middle of the twentieth century. No place of mere diversion, early-twentieth century skid row bars were, as DePastino claims, scenes of reciprocity and “affirmations of working-class masculinity.” The familiar practice of “treating” companions to drinks was a central mechanism through which these working-class men reinforced their masculinity, built relationships, and banked promises of material favors to be returned—or repaid favors gained earlier. But in addition to providing venues for the building of hobo solidarity, drinking establishments, like employment offices, offered a range of practical services that included grooming, meals, and check cashing, among other services. Businesses selling alcohol took on a different appearance for those viewing skid row from outside.\textsuperscript{45} By the time Sacramento civic leaders trained their eyes on skid row’s social ills in the 1940s, the West End’s relatively high number of bars and other businesses with liquor licenses was a prominent symptom, and perceived cause, of many of the social problems city leaders identified among the skid row population.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Bahr, \textit{Skid Row}, 132 ; \textsuperscript{43} Kusmer, \textit{Down and Out on the Road}, 197.
\textsuperscript{45} DePastino, \textit{Citizen Hobo}, 80-81.
**Postwar Changes**

In the late 1940s, demographic shifts and economic changes altered the character of skid row, both in Sacramento, specifically, and generally in U.S. cities. For one, while a Depression-era and wartime influx to the cities had swelled the populations of skid row hotel districts, technological innovations adopted widely after World War Two, such as earthmovers, forklifts, and agricultural harvesting machines, diminished the need for skid row’s cheap pool of surplus labor.\(^{47}\) In addition, as DePastino notes, fears of an army of demobilized men returning to American inner cities informed the World War Two demobilization effort. A coalition of interests that included liberal politicians, corporations, and organized labor promoted the G.I. Bill, in part to entice young, white males to seek out the “suburban ideal” of home ownership and the nuclear family.\(^{48}\) The result was an older and poorer skid row—though one still peopled by unattached men, who aroused suspicion for their apparent isolation from the mainstream of society. The “unattached man” or “single man” became a staple of the social commentary on, and sociological analysis of, skid row in the era of urban redevelopment.\(^{49}\)

An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 single men lived in the LMA at the onset of redevelopment. The upper end of this range represented a population swelled to meet harvest-season demands for cheap farm labor. Besides the transient field and cannery workers who lived there from late summer to early autumn, there was a large, but uncounted, population of elderly pensioners who permanently resided in the LMA. In

\(^{47}\) Rossi, *Down and Out in America*, 21.


\(^{49}\) Kusmer, *Down and Out on the Road*, 21.
addition to that, the area’s 5,149 beds became home to people permanently employed locally in low-wage occupations and, as one report put it, “others who either cannot work or do not want to work.” Reflecting a trend playing out across the United States, Sacramento’s skid row now housed increasing numbers of unemployed and elderly men, who supplemented a shrinking population of agricultural and industrial laborers.

In the 1940s, city planners trained their eyes on the social problems that appeared to thrive in the decaying buildings of the fading West End. In 1940, the Sacramento Housing Authority (SHA) completed a block-by-block study of West End residential building stock. Upon evaluating the dwelling units on ninety-one square blocks west of the State Capitol Building, SHA found hundreds of aged, crowded, and substandard houses, hotels, and apartments that it believed were responsible for a far-ranging collection of issues. The agency declared, “Root causes of physical and moral blight can be eliminated by changing environmental conditions.” SHA’s report presaged arguments that redevelopment proponents later put forth, claiming that environmental factors, such as crowded and aging buildings, insufficient sanitary facilities, and the lack of safe play areas, among others were to blame for the disease and social problems of the West End. SHA’s reports set the stage not only for subsequent studies of blighted Sacramento neighborhoods, but also for the way leaders and the press discussed the troubled West End as the city considered its redevelopment in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

---

51 Housing Authority of the City of Sacramento, *First Annual Report, 1941* (Sacramento, 1941), 1.
Chapter 3

THE SPECTER OF REDEVELOPMENT

The Depression and war years fostered severe neglect and crowded conditions in inner cities across the United States. Following World War Two, local, state, and federal leaders implemented urban redevelopment programs to deal with the blight and slum conditions that depressed property values, constricted tax receipts, burdened public health and safety budgets, and incited white, middle-class flight to the suburbs. In Sacramento, the promise of government-supported redevelopment inspired leaders to publicize the deteriorated state of the West End and promote the potential of urban redevelopment to reverse the decline in the urban core.

State and Federal Urban Redevelopment Laws

The state government’s entry into urban redevelopment came with California’s Community Redevelopment Act of 1945 (CCRA), a milestone in the state’s history of urban policy. CCRA established guidelines for cities and counties for clearing blighted urban areas and facilitating private redevelopment in those areas. The law required participating cities and counties first to create a master plan for redevelopment that included a survey of areas slated for redevelopment. On the basis of such a survey, a redevelopment area could be established by a two-thirds vote of a local government body, allowing private individuals to petition for rights to build new projects on the designated redevelopment zones. CCRA required that such proposals be incorporated into detailed project plans making up subsections of wider redevelopment areas. It further required
airing at public hearings at which citizens could voice their objections to a project. The law also authorized a city council to establish, by a two-thirds majority, a redevelopment agency responsible for implementing redevelopment projects and vested with the authority to buy and sell land, including through eminent domain. In addition, CCRA authorized redevelopment agencies to issue bonds and maintain revolving funds to pay for projects.52

Federal law also had a significant impact on local approaches to slum clearance and urban redevelopment. Passed in 1934, the National Housing Act established, among other features, mortgage insurance criteria for the Federal Housing Authority that disfavored older buildings and those located in areas with a significant non-white presence. Significantly, the law discouraged the purchase of such properties, often concentrated in the urban core, contributing to continued declines in their value and condition.53

The 1934 bill’s successor, the Housing Act of 1937, created a working legal definition of what constituted a slum or a blighted area, often designating as such those areas deemed ineligible for FHA sponsored insurance under the 1934 legislation. In addition to defining slum and blight conditions, the bill made housing-centered redevelopment a joint federal-municipal effort by offering federal subsidies of up to

ninety percent of the cost of the construction and maintenance of public housing facilities.\textsuperscript{54}

Twelve years later, the 1949 Housing Act bolstered this federal-municipal coordination by introducing an expanded funding mechanism that continued generous federal subsidies for slum clearance programs and public housing projects for city dwellers displaced by slum clearance.\textsuperscript{55} Title I of the 1949 law promised $1 billion to fund local efforts to acquire slum properties and clear their undesirable buildings. Additional federal subsidies covered as much as two-thirds of any shortfall between the cost of acquiring a slum property and its value after being redeveloped. The 1949 act also authorized the construction of more than 800,000 units of public housing. With major provisions for both public housing and extensive rebuilding through urban redevelopment, the 1949 bill won the support two rival camps, public housing advocates and the real estate industry.\textsuperscript{56}

The Housing Act of 1954 later shifted the emphasis of redevelopment efforts away from public housing. The 1954 legislation made commercial and industrial projects eligible for generous federal redevelopment subsidies for the first time, ushering in the era of “urban renewal.”\textsuperscript{57} Importantly, the bill authorized local redevelopment agencies to make payments for relocation assistance to those displaced by redevelopment. It was under this legislative regime that many urban redevelopment programs, including

\textsuperscript{54} Jackson, \textit{Crabgrass Frontier}, 224.
\textsuperscript{55} Jackson, \textit{Crabgrass Frontier}, 224-225.
\textsuperscript{57} Simpson and Prince, “The Invention of Old Sacramento,” 8.
Sacramento’s, began earnestly to target depressed urban neighborhoods adjacent to CBDs.\(^{58}\)

The 1954 law reflected the political leanings of pro-growth urban politicians, assorted business interests, and real estate developers, who justified state subsidies for projects with the belief that redevelopment would boost the economy of a flagging CBD and so serve “progress and public interest.”\(^{59}\) Pro-growth neopragressives, to use historian Carl Abbott’s term, often favored replacing slums and blighted ethnic neighborhoods with office, commercial, and entertainment districts that catered to suburban middle-class commuters and shoppers.\(^{60}\) Two years after the housing bill’s enactment, the 1956 Highway Act authorized a system of freeways that connected suburbs with rapidly changing CBDs.\(^{61}\)

**Visions of the West End**

The 1949 Housing Act brought the first promise of a concrete plan and reliable source of funding for clearing and redeveloping Sacramento’s worst slums. It also incited a more visible public dialog about the city’s most troubled neighborhoods. A major milestone was Hale Champion’s 1949 *Sacramento Bee* series on conditions in that section of the city. Based on reports by the city planning commission and Champion’s own observations in the West End, the often sensationalistic six-part series appeared on


the paper’s front page between November 29 and December 5. Champion began the series with terrifying bluster, announcing, “Disease crawls out of the rooming houses and flophouses and chicken shacks of Sacramento’s blighted areas into shocking statistics on tuberculosis and infant deaths” and other afflictions presumed to propagate in the crowded and unsanitary sections of the city. According to Champion, four main problems plagued the West End: the aforementioned prevalence of infectious disease, plus crime and vice, juvenile delinquency (the “junior partner” to crime and vice), and “the fourth horseman, fire.” At the root of this apocalyptic onslaught, as the author told it, was a single determining factor, substandard housing, which the city inspectors Champion consulted put “at the base of [the] mass of accumulating destruction and despair.”

By all contemporary accounts, including those told in the series’ accompanying photos, there were many truly awful houses, hotels, and apartment buildings in the West End. Champion’s series crawls with details of filth, dilapidation, obsolescence, clutter, and crowding. In the series’ second article, Champion focused on the area’s degraded housing stock, lingering at the R Street alley between Second and Third streets. There Champion described an apartment building with the looks of “an undiscriminating alcoholic flop.” Further inspection revealed the building to be the home of a small child whose weary peering from a third floor window made for a maudlin scene of West End peril. Leaving the front of the building, Champion continued into the alley, surveying a landscape of garages, “junk,” and improvised back-lot additions. Throughout the series, the author showed a particular preoccupation with the West End’s toilets, which in at

---

least one case appeared in a substandard bathroom improvised on the porch of a particularly decrepit West End apartment building.63

The interiors of these buildings were no better than the exteriors, according to the author. He wrote of the apartment in which juvenile delinquent “Jack” once lived. The crowded two bedroom unit included dirty walls and floors, an entrance that passed through the subject’s bedroom, a wood burning stove with a nearby pile of wood and paper fuel, an icebox (not a refrigerator, Champion notes pointedly), and an “old fashioned” toilet, in addition to a number of other unappealing features.64

Crowded, unsanitary conditions in the West End and other apparently blighted sections of the city bore social and economic costs for Sacramentans. Champion cites crime, fire, and public health statistics that reappeared in one form or another well into the 1950s, as supporters of redevelopment put forth arguments for demolishing the West End. Of major concern to slum clearance proponents was the burden West Enders put on city and county services. If Champion’s statistics are to be believed, that burden was enormously out of proportion with the blighted areas’ population, total land area, and property tax liability. For example, per Champion’s sources, Sacramento’s blighted neighborhoods covered eight percent of the city’s total area, but accounted for around forty percent of the cost of handling crime. Considering the relatively high density of the West End, it is likely that the blighted areas Champion refers to were home to more than eight percent of the city’s population and that the author selected that particular measure for its startling effect.

63 Hale Champion, 29 Nov. 1949.
64 Hale Champion, 29 Nov. 1949; Champion, 1 Dec. 1949.
The relative danger of life in the West End and other depressed Sacramento neighborhoods is apparent in the public health figures that Champion includes in his series. According to the author, while Sacramento, excluding the West End, had a tuberculosis death rate matching the national rate of thirty fatal cases per 100,000 persons, West Enders died of tuberculosis at a rate ranging between 240 and 900 per 100,000 persons. Campion implies that the West End death rate was largely responsible for pushing Sacramento’s 1948 TB death count to 121, which he claimed tied Chattanooga and San Antonio to lead U.S. cities in that statistical category. In Champion’s view, the cramped and dirty conditions of the West End were responsible for the high rate of infectious illnesses there. Drawing attention to the neighborhood’s biggest killer, he quoted Dr. Herbert Bauer of the city health department, who opined, “The final answer to tuberculosis is slum clearance.”

This emphasis on the supposed environmental causes of the West End’s various ills also appeared in Champion’s treatments of crime in that section of the city. “Jack,” the juvenile West Ender mentioned above, served to highlight what Champion saw as a fairly straight and uncomplicated line between a West End childhood and a life of adult criminality. Champion’s subject began his life in the aforementioned two-bedroom hovel. The only suitable play space for Jack as a youngster, “the nearest grass,” in Champion’s words, was three blocks away at the Croker Art Gallery. The reader is left to assume that this was sufficient cause for Jack’s subsequent somersault into a life of crime. With scant attention to other factors at work in Jack’s life, the author noted that “juvenile

---

authorities” held that the filth, density, and lack of modern conveniences in the West End shaped “[Jack’s] character through the phases of childish curiosity to boyish mischief to petty larceny to major crime and then to murder.” As Champion’s story went to press, Jack was awaiting his execution—apparently.66

The veracity of Champion’s anecdotes and un-cited numbers was probably not as important as his series’ high-profile visibility. Throughout the series, with each installment slotted into the front page of the Sacramento Bee, Champion offered readers the case that the West End was terrifying and dangerous, that its physical environment was at the root of the neighborhood’s various ailments, and that the wider community paid the costs of keeping the blighted area’s crime, fire, and disease at bay. Champion’s series on the West End was likely the first widely publicized effort to disseminate city leaders’ arguments for redeveloping the area situated roughly between the State Capitol and the Sacramento River. Much of Champion’s logic would appear in subsequent missives by the press, local government bodies, and other redevelopment advocates.

When the Sacramento City Planning Commission released its report on the 1949 survey that informed Champion’s series, the planning body gave its readers a more detailed and less sensationalistic portrait of the West End. The commission surveyed a 223-block section in the western part of the old city limits for the exterior conditions of all buildings as well as utility usage, unit occupancy, and structural maintenance in dwellings. Completed to fulfill the survey requirement included in the CCRA, the document framed the 1949 survey results in a manner that addresses the various aspects

of blight as defined by the state law. Like Champion, the planning commission addressed the relatively high incidence of crime, juvenile delinquency, fire, and disease in blighted Sacramento. But the document also detailed less gaudy aspects of the blight, such as the supposed obsolescence of the buildings, parcel coverage on West End lots, and street layouts in the city’s declining areas.67

A major factor in the obsolescence of blighted neighborhoods, according to the planning commission, was the age and construction types of the buildings. On fifty-nine blocks in the survey area, all of the buildings were constructed in or before the turn of the twentieth century, while 157 blocks included only buildings erected between 1900 and 1919. Although a map accompanying the report shows that the older building stock was relatively well dispersed throughout the study area, the highest concentrations of buildings constructed before 1920 were found within Skid Row, the Japantown enclave centered on the eastern end of the present Capitol Mall, and the Alkali Flat neighborhood located immediately southeast of the Southern Pacific rail yards. These were primarily rental units not occupied by their owners, according to the report. Not only did the predominantly wood-framed rental stock not meet the planning commission’s ideal standards for safety, the buildings often had been subjected to “cutting up” to create densely occupied structures with many more individual dwelling units than the buildings had been designed to accommodate originally. As a result, while these highly profitable rental units sat on land with low assessed values that generated little property tax income for the city, they made up neighborhoods that used a disproportionate amount of city and

county services, whether this was due to their density, the populations they housed, or both.\textsuperscript{68} This imbalance of income to public investment met the federal government’s definition of “blight.” \textsuperscript{69}

Another argument issued in the press regarded blight as an animate force that spread slowly of its own volition. In a 1954 \textit{Sacramento Bee} editorial, spreading blight took the form of disease that could be cured only by the “medicine” of redevelopment. Rounding out the medical metaphor, the \textit{Bee} advised that the dose be administered "at the best possible moment, that of the city's teenage growth."\textsuperscript{70} An editorial cartoon appeared the following day, this time casting “creeping blight” as a dark-skinned figure sprawled across a representation of the West End, smashing buildings with its outstretched arm, its hand reaching for yet undamaged parts of the city. Three men watch nearby, labeled “Minority Opposition.” The caption reads, “If We Keep Talking, Maybe It’ll Go Away.”\textsuperscript{71}

In preparation for urban redevelopment, the press and city leaders established an argument for clearing the West End slums that highlighted the neighborhoods’ danger, their drag on the city’s financial resources, and their threat to the vitality of neighboring areas. However, the poorest and, arguably, most reviled of the West End’s communities aroused the concern of planners for its presumed value to the city’s economy. The LMA centered on Second Street emerged as a troubled asset that, according to several

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Sacramento Bee}, 1 Jul 1954.
\textsuperscript{71} “If We Keep Talking, Maybe It’ll Go Away,” \textit{Sacramento Bee} 2 Jul 1954.
observers, supplied Sacramento and its periphery with an integral supply of cheap, single male labor that served area farms, industrial enterprises, the construction trades, and the service industry. After planners identified the LMA in 1950, the City created the SRA in September of that year, authorizing the agency to “prepare the preliminary financial analysis, studies, and plans for redevelopment areas.”\textsuperscript{72} The City of Sacramento poured nearly a decade into planning, studying, and debating proposals to reconstitute a new, post-redevelopment skid row to house a minimum of 1,000 single men seen widely as bums, hoboes, and transients.

\textsuperscript{72} Simpson and Prince, “The Invention of Old Sacramento,” 6.
Chapter 4
PLANS AND SCHEMES

Plans to reconstitute the LMA and relocate its large single male population emerged in 1950, 1953, and 1959. In spite of the persistent social problems found on skid row, planners favored visions of a new LMA that not only fulfilled the economic function of the old one, but also preserved its internal functions. The new buildings would be modern, sanitary, and compliant with building codes, but they would also house the institutions that informed the aversions to skid row in the first place. If everything had gone according to the City’s plans, LMA transplants would have lived on the edge of town in densely packed hotels situated near new bars, restaurants, charities, and a California Department of Employment branch office. In 1959, however, city redevelopment officials permanently abandoned the plan for lack of funding.

Neutra and Alexander

The first comprehensive plan for redeveloping Sacramento’s West End appeared in 1950 in the form of an architectural and urban planning scheme by noted modernists Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander. Neutra and Alexander’s vision of the new West End consisted of an almost complete leveling and reconstruction of the purportedly blighted area roughly between the Capitol building, the Sacramento River, I Street, and R Street. Not only would the plan have replaced scores of aged buildings with a brand new, master planned downtown of low- and mid-rise residential, commercial, and governmental districts, it would have also achieved a long-planned goal of transforming
Capitol Avenue into a “broadened and landscaped” western entry into the CBD. In sketches accompanying the report hundreds of acres of International Style office and apartment districts and a large riverfront park expanded south from I Street, checked only by a tentatively planned freeway routed along the current alignment of R Street.73

The report voiced the City’s contention that, as bad as the whole West End was, the skid row section near the river was worse; it was the most degraded and in need of special attention. A victim of neglect and obsolescence, according to the report, the area located within three blocks of the Sacramento River was a deteriorated “eyesore.” Even the once-thriving warehouse district along Front Street had seen better days. Many of these warehouses were city-owned and provided the government with only negligible rental income. The railroad that served the riverfront shipping district was also destined for removal under the plan, slated for a site that Neutra and Alexander considered more consistent with industrial uses.74

East of the warehouse district, the primarily residential Labor Market Area appeared to pose a more complex problem for the planners. This neighborhood—to use an affectionate word that seldom appears in descriptions of Sacramento’s skid row—continued to house and serve a population left behind during the postwar boom. Under Neutra and Alexander’s plan the “flophouses,” hotels, and other unglamorous residential facilities that lined the infamous Second Street would be demolished to make way for

---

new commercial development that would occupy most of the land that comprised Sacramento’s Skid Row.\textsuperscript{75}

If the estimated 3,000 to 5,000 residents of the LMA had one saving grace, it was that planners believed they inhabited a niche important to the local and regional economies. The LMA residents’ role in what was long regarded as California’s most important agricultural hiring market prompted planners to treat them with a degree of sensitivity—or at least with an eye toward keeping them in Sacramento. Neutra and Alexander accordingly submitted a provisional plan that included lodging and important commercial services oriented toward transients and poor farm laborers. Most of the commercial development oriented toward these West Enders would have been on two city blocks adjacent to Second Street, in the heart of the existing skid row. On the first of these rebuilt commercial blocks, just south of the I Street Bridge and west of Second Street, a “wholesale produce exchange” was planned to serve the existing migrant farm labor community. For the block bounded by Second, Third, J, and K streets, Neutra and Alexander envisioned a diverse collection of down-market commercial enterprises earlier and subsequent reports indicated as symptoms of skid row degradation.\textsuperscript{76}

Thanks to their role in the local economy, the agricultural laborers who supported such businesses were to be housed nearby, on parcels set aside for this exclusive purpose, and set apart from the renewed commercial district set to rise along K Street. In the first several years of redevelopment at least, leaders considered the agricultural laborers an

\textsuperscript{75} Sacramento City Planning Commission, \textit{Sacramento Urban Redevelopment, Existing Conditions in Blighted Areas}, 5.

\textsuperscript{76} Sacramento City Planning Commission, \textit{Sacramento Urban Redevelopment, Existing Conditions in Blighted Areas}, 5.
element of the LMA population separate from the winos and other “derelicts” living near the Second Street corridor. In order to preserve the existing function of the LMA, the area north, south, and west of what became the Downtown Plaza shopping center the architects proposed several dormitories for permanent residents and transients who city planners believed worked primarily in the regional agricultural sector.

The parts of the Neutra-Alexander scheme that directly addressed the LMA population envisioned a rebuilt, and likely smaller, skid row neighborhood centered spatially on the northern reaches of Second and Third streets. This plan, like those that followed it, showed a degree of sensitivity to the needs and lifestyles of the Skid Row population. Provisionally slated for the city block bounded by Second, Third, J, and K streets was a collection of socially undesirable businesses that included pool halls, pawnshops, bars, cafeterias, and public lockers, among other commercial types. As much as previous and subsequent studies of the LMA decried these déclassé staples of Skid Row commerce, frank pragmatism led urban planners to include such establishments in order to keep transient laborers from leaving the Second Street day-haul labor market.

Dormitories and other housing types for the indigent appear in the recommendations as possibilities for the blocks north, south, and east of the proposed LMA commercial center. From Front Street to Fourth Street, between J and K streets and on the block between Second, Third, K, and L streets lay potential locations for new residential development. Neutra and Alexander sketched a densely packed dormitory

---

complex, a “three-story walk-up” complex that would have been the new model for Skid Row dormitories. It included a large principal residential building with a U-shaped floor plan enveloping a second rectangular residential building. Each such complex would provide 940 sleeping quarters measuring six feet wide and nine feet long. This offered six square feet more than the classic prison cell and allowed the rebuilt Skid Row to achieve a maximum density of 369 living, breathing bodies per acre. A stand-alone, single-story cafeteria sat adjacent to the housing complex, nestled in a landscaped courtyard. Its clientele probably had long been accustomed to living without kitchen facilities or would, at any rate, have to get used to it, if Neutra and Alexander had ever built the Spartan complexes.  

There is a glimmer of optimism in the three-story walk-up that appears in the plan, and not only because rebuilding Skid Row was a significant part of an ambitious proposal to dramatically replace almost every building in a fifty-block section of the city. Rather, what impresses most is the steady, environmental-deterministic thread that started with the earliest Housing Authority reports on West End conditions, continued with Hale Champion’s 1949 serial takedown of Skid Row squalor, and began to bear fruit, even if only conceptually, with the Neutra-Alexander plan. What these share is a belief, sometimes only implied, that the ills of the West End could be attacked at the root by removing people from substandard buildings and allowing them to relocate to cleaner and more sensibly planned buildings and neighborhoods.

Whatever the planners’ and developers’ respective dispositions to public housing, the 1950 plan for the rebuilt LMA was not to be a public housing development, strictly speaking. Sacramento’s City Planning Commission considered a private non-profit operator to be the best fit for the farm-labor dormitory. A net annual return of $68,620, plus whatever money the cafeteria generated, was possible if the operator successfully weathered the LMA’s seasonal population fluctuations and managed to run the facility at 100 percent of its residential capacity for the year. Subsequent proposals to rebuild the LMA also called for private investment in the project. This was either because the multi-family dormitories and commercial facilities were not eligible for available federal grants or because available federal grants would not have covered the cost of the project.

For a few years, Neutra and Alexander’s proposal served as the de facto plan for West End redevelopment. However, by 1953, the plan lost favor with planners and developers, mostly because of developers’ distaste for the large number of public housing units slated for construction in the West End. In part, this reflected a shift of American opinion on the topic of public housing. Government sanctioned housing construction arose as a concern of the federal government during the Depression-fueled housing crisis.

---

80 Sacramento City Planning Commission, Preliminary Report and Recommendations, Sketch # 13.  
83 “Sacramento,,, A Model for Small City Redevelopment, 155.  
84 Avella, Indomitable City, 128.
of the early 1930s. But even as the National Housing Act of 1937 made provisions for the federal government’s first foray into housing construction for the poor, this was done explicitly as a stimulative measure for a broken economy and not so much as a federal endorsement of housing advocates’ views.\textsuperscript{85} Federal-level ambivalence about public housing apparently subsided temporarily because of the early postwar period’s critical housing shortage. This happened to the extent that in 1948 both major political parties included pro-public housing planks in their platforms—although by some accounts, the Republicans’ support was more a matter of political expediency.\textsuperscript{86} A year later, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1949, with its expansive provisions for the construction of public housing.\textsuperscript{87}

The 1949 Housing Act was a limited victory for public housing advocates. Of all the law’s features, provisions authorizing slum clearance, support for the housing industry, and urban redevelopment drew the most political and popular support.\textsuperscript{88} Cast with the taint of “socialism,” government-built, state-subsidized housing gained only limited traction with the American people.\textsuperscript{89} Uncertain public support and strong opposition from the real estate industry slowed the construction of public housing projects, ultimately channeling many would-be residents into privately owned buildings.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{85} Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 223-224.
\textsuperscript{87} Cuff, The Provisional City, 214; von Hoffman, “A Study in Contradictions,” 308.
\textsuperscript{88} Cuff, The Provisional City, 214, 222.
\textsuperscript{90} Cuff, The Provisional City, 214, 222.
In place of Neutra and Alexander’s public housing-heavy CBD there emerged a conception of downtown Sacramento renewed by the construction of numerous commercial and office projects. Following national trends, planners began to envision a West End with more office towers and hotels and a K Street shopping district. In the new West End there would be no room for low-income public housing. It appears that there would be even less room there to house those who inhabited Sacramento’s most despised neighborhood, whether or not the government was to fund and operate the project. Subsequent plans for the reconstituted LMA included provisional locations outside downtown Sacramento, on inexpensive land north of the city limits.

Bauer and McEntire

Following the failure of the Neutra-Alexander plan, a series of city-sponsored studies and proposals analyzed and reimagined the LMA with the provisional goal of relocating the neighborhood’s predominantly single male population. Starting in 1951, the SRA commissioned a number of academics, economists, and urban planners to identify the Skid Row population, rate its importance to the local and regional economy, and determine the economic feasibility and usefulness of relocating en masse the farm-working portion of the LMA population, whose aggregate contribution to the local and regional economy had long appeared to be essential. The authors argued for a systematic, large-scale relocation and adopted an approach similar to the one in the Neutra-Alexander

---

91 Avella, Indomitable City, 129.
plan. The LMA was to be built anew with many of the important institutions, or business types, that characterized the Second Street corridor in the 1950s. However, since the city planners tended to justify mass relocation on economic grounds, government-supported reconstruction plans lost a major pillar of support once city-commissioned analysts countered the mistaken, outdated belief that skid row provided the rural hinterland an indispensible supply of farm workers. Instead, the shrinking number of migratory farm hands shared the LMA with a growing component of service sector workers. The death of the original conception of skid row’s economic function in the late 1950s coincided with SRA’s interest in assisting the relocation of the vast majority of the LMA population.93

In 1953, Catherine Bauer, a pioneering advocate of public housing, and Davis McEntire penned *Relocation Study, Single Male Population, Sacramento’s West End*. Bauer and McEntire’s report included a plan to move and reconstitute the LMA, albeit on a smaller scale than the existing skid row neighborhood. The planners believed that this would not only satisfy the provision of the 1949 Housing Act that required redevelopment agencies to assist displaced persons in finding new housing, but would also allow the city to maintain its place as a leader in supplying temporary, low-wage labor to the regional agricultural sector and other areas of the economy. As Bauer and McEntire reported, the single male laborers of the LMA also served local industrial and construction efforts.94

What Bauer and McEntire proposed was not only to rebuild the LMA from scratch, but also to do it in a manner that allowed it to operate immediately as a fully

---

functioning complex. As Architectural Forum put it in a 1954 article on the city’s redevelopment plans, the proposal moved “the labor market of the West End to the outskirts of the city to a hygienic campus.” Three major components would shape the new community, a minimum of 1,000 residents, “essential business services and community facilities,” and a new State Employment Department branch office through which local employers could hire LMA residents. The authors envisioned the proposed Employment Department office as the anchor for the development, as its job placement function had been the lure for those LMA residents who chose that neighborhood for its proximity to the Second Street labor market. Without the Employment Department office, the planners feared, many LMA men had little reason relocate to the new site.

Bauer and McEntire proposed a large, dense residential component to house the low-wage workers and other marginalized subsets of the West End population soon to be displaced by the demolition of skid row. The plan allowed for as many as 3,000 single-occupancy hotel rooms for “relatively permanent” residence. Free of most unnecessary perks, these hotels were to contain a small lobby for residents and shared bathrooms on each floor. To accommodate the annual influx of harvest-season migrant laborers, Bauer and McEntire planned “unheated” dormitories capable of housing as many as 1,500 transient laborers each September and October. There were also fifty “family dwelling units” for neighborhood business operators. Like the migrant laborer dormitories, this piece of the housing element seems designed more to create than to relocate permanent or semi-permanent LMA residents. By economic necessity, and likely due to the cultural

95 “Sacramento... A Model for Small City Redevelopment,” 155.
96 Bauer and McEntire, Relocation Study, 3.
and political unpalatability of publicly funding housing at much more than the bare minimum, the main residential buildings proposed in the plan would be “extremely simple, easy to clean and maintain, and preferably of masonry construction.”

To complement the new residential district, Bauer and McEntire proposed the construction of new buildings to house a range of commercial services that, for better or worse, were much like that found in the existing LMA. In the vein of the Neutra-Alexander plan that came before it, the 1953 proposal called for a large number of restaurants, in addition to “cheap clothing stores, drug stores, barber shops, and pawn shops,” to cater to a low-income, single male population. In addition, noted the authors, “drinking places, card rooms, and pool halls are a major source of recreation for this type of population” and were essential to the proposal. However, although Bauer and McEntire recognized the allure of card rooms and bars to the single men of the LMA, they nonetheless lamented the fact that these establishments were often the only places in the LMA where men could sit down comfortably. The pragmatism that induced the planners to include the card rooms and bars yielded, at least partially, to a desire to socially engineer an outcome that would curb the “excessive” frequenting of such places. As a healthier supplement to the existing recreational options, the authors proposed that a reading room and a park be located in or near the reconstructed LMA.

Despite the obvious concern Bauer and McEntire had for the single men of the LMA, and although the authors showed some inclination for social experimentation, they built their proposal less around reshaping supposed winos’ lives than preserving what

---

98 Bauer and McEntire, *Relocation Study*, 4-5.
SRA believed was the economic function of skid row. SRA executive director J.T. Bill’s foreword to Bauer and McEntire’s report illustrated this. Bill’s prefatory remarks recited the importance of the “largest agricultural labor market in California” to the city and region, declaring that, “Maintenance of the labor market is essential to the economy of Sacramento and surrounding farm districts.” While he noted that new facilities must serve the needs of migratory workers, meeting those needs appears to have been a matter of creating an environment that would have kept farm laborers entwined with the agricultural economy. Bill’s emphasis on the economic aspects of the problem suggests that SRA viewed any benefits residents might draw from a reconstructed LMA as secondary, or even incidental.

Planners realized that preserving the LMA’s economic function required ensuring that prospective employers and employees could find one another. Typically, this employers hired formally through the State Department of Employment or the many private employment services located on the Second Street corridor. A less formal approach was day-haul hiring, in which men seeking employment congregated at an established meeting spot to wait for an employer to arrive and offer an opportunity for work. An LMA reconstituted along the lines proposed by Bauer and McEntire eliminated the niche for private employment services, but preserved and encouraged hiring through the state and through informal day-haul practices. To accommodate this, the plan allowed for the construction of the aforementioned branch office of the State Employment

---

Department and an open area large enough for “crowds of men to gather” and connect with employers.\textsuperscript{100}

It is not clear whether the exclusion of private employment services would have significantly altered the skid row environment once it was reconstituted. Certainly, as mentioned above, early-twentieth-century private employment offices played a varied and supportive role in the lives of transient laborers.\textsuperscript{101} That these institutions remained so important in the early 1950s seems unlikely. Contemporary reports on life in Sacramento’s skid row at midcentury mention private employment offices only in the context of hiring, and not with reference to the personal services and informal lodging they provided at the turn of the century. Instead, hiring firms likely concentrated on job placement, while services for destitute migrants came from welfare agencies and the gospel missions that continued to serve the LMA into the 1950s and 1960s. In any event, private hiring firms were in decline by the time the city began earnestly redeveloping the West End in the mid-1950s. If classified listings in city directories are a useful indicator, the heyday of private hiring firms came sometime in the 1920s and 1930s, when approximately two dozen such companies operated in Sacramento, located mostly in the Second Street corridor between I Street and the current Capitol Mall. By the 1950s, the numbers had fallen sharply.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} Bauer and McEntire, \textit{Relocation Study}, 3, 5.
\textsuperscript{101} DePastino, \textit{Citizen Hobo}, 72-73.
Whatever the fate of the private employment offices, the reconstituted LMA Bauer and McEntire proposed was, in its most extensive iteration, a plan to rebuild Sacramento’s most notorious neighborhood, essentially on skid row’s terms and with only a limited degree of social uplift built into the plans. To accommodate all the residents, businesses, and non-commercial institutions, planners believed they needed twenty to forty acres, excluding land that would be used for streets and alleys. In comparison, the existing LMA encompassed forty-five acres, although that measurement included the riverfront warehouse district, which was not included in plans for the new site. Another potential means of limiting the acreage devoted to the reconstituted LMA would have been to include only the laboring population and not the elderly men who made up a large portion of the skid row population.\(^{103}\)

Although the proposal offers few details regarding the physical shapes the buildings and other facilities would have taken, it indicates a willingness to rebuild the LMA on a thoroughly urban model in an era when low-density, functionally segregated commercial and residential areas suburban planning models were the norm. Bauer and McEntire called for the construction of mixed-use “three-story walk-ups with commercial facilities on the first floor as at present, if desired.” Allowing for the typical seasonal changes in the population count, density under this plan would have been an estimated minimum of 120 people per acre for most of the year and a harvest season peak of 170 people per acre, which was at or above the density of the existing LMA, depending on the

\(^{103}\) Bauer and McEntire, *Relocation Study*, 3, 5, 8.
While Bauer and McEntire claimed the new LMA’s population density would be higher than that of the existing skid row, consultant Harold Wise’s report from two years earlier indicates that the LMA’s density was 172 people per acre in the peak season. According to Bauer and McEntire, at least, this ratio would have made the new LMA denser than any existing or planned residential district in the city. Planned at the beginning of an era of sprawling, low-density suburban expansion, the projected high density was a matter of pragmatism, rather than the product of any planning goal. Indeed, Bauer opposed at least one public housing project from that era based on its planned density. Here, however, Bauer and her collaborator placed two objectives—relocating the men of the LMA and maintaining the LMA’s economic function—above following contemporary urban planning precepts. Bauer and McEntire’s report evinces a cost consciousness that suggests that it was important that Bauer and McEntire limit the plan to the smallest allowable physical footprint.

The preliminary report offered no concrete location for the planned LMA, but the few potential sites Bauer and McEntire identified were all located in the current Richards Boulevard area north of the old city limits and near the confluence of the American and Sacramento rivers. As of 1953, much of the area was yet to be annexed by the city of Sacramento and held a mix of industrial, agricultural, residential, and commercial development, not to mention a handful of less-than-desirable projects that included the

---

107 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 213-245.
Dos Rios public housing project and the city’s trash incinerator and water filtration plant.\(^{109}\) As late as 1957, much of the land was either undeveloped or dedicated to agriculture.\(^{110}\) Although Bauer and McEntire were avowedly dedicated to surveying “all the fringe areas of Sacramento,” they targeted two potential sites for the new LMA and another for a stand-alone single male housing alternative project, all in the Richards Boulevard area. For the rebuilt LMA, they proposed an area along the left bank of the American River and west of the North Sixteenth Street Bridge and an alternate location between the American River and the water filtration plant near the Sacramento River. Reflecting their position that SRA was responsible, at a minimum, for relocating those displaced by redevelopment, the authors proposed unspecified spaces on the bank of the Sacramento River or near the Southern Pacific rail yards for stand-alone single male housing, should the reconstruction of the entire LMA prove not to be feasible.\(^{111}\)

**Dreyfuss and Blackford**

In 1958, SRA continued to consider reconstructing the LMA, albeit in a scaled-down fashion. Dreyfuss & Blackford, a Sacramento architectural and urban planning outfit, submitted plans for such a development, one intended initially to house only 1,000 men, with the possibility of doubling the facility’s capacity, if warranted. The architect—and probably SRA officials—hoped to incur as little expense as possible and presented the proposed project as “the most successful design which can be provided with an

---


\(^{111}\) Bauer and McEntire, *Relocation Study*, 6, 7.
absolute minimum cost” and which would meet specified design guidelines.\textsuperscript{112} Even at an occupancy of 2,000 single men, the proposed development represented a substantially less expansive vision than the 3,000 to 4,500 occupant LMA that Bauer and McEntire pursued in 1953.\textsuperscript{113}

Dreyfuss & Blackford proposed a $1.7 million commercial and residential component that was to sit on two adjacent, unspecified city blocks, with the street between them closed and incorporated into the project. A schematic image accompanying the report depicts three pairs of hotel buildings occupying the northwest, northeast, and southwest corners of the super block. For the southwest corner of the block, the architects proposed a small apartment complex that included two rows of units planned to accommodate 100 men. A centrally placed commercial building dominated the block. A small park sat between the northwest hotel complex and the apartment buildings, while parking lots were located on all four sides of the development. Planted trees and other vegetation peppered the landscape, as conceived by the firm.\textsuperscript{114}

As in previous proposals by Neutra and Alexander and McEntire and Bauer, Dreyfuss & Blackford’s hotel buildings were austere buildings designed to accommodate a relatively large number of residents at reduced cost and with little luxury. There were six three-story hotels with concrete lift-slab floors, steel- or aluminum-framed windows, and prefabricated hardwood interiors. The interior space of each of the six hotel buildings included 150 eight-by-ten single-occupancy rooms that each included a lockable closet.

and, presumably, a bed. For the first floor of each building, the architects proposed a manager’s apartment and a lobby, while the second and third floors would include activity rooms and sanitary facilities. In all, the six hotel buildings fit 900 former Skid Row residents in an equal number of rooms.115

Plans for the proposed project’s commercial building illustrate the durability of plans to reconstitute the commercial core, and with it a portion of the social environment, of the existing LMA. While the commercial element of the plan was, like the residential portion, reduced from the relative expanse of the 1953 proposal, it included the supportive institutions that helped to shape life in the existing LMA, as well as in those reimagined in the 1950 and 1953 proposals. Dreyfuss & Blackford envisioned a departure from Bauer and McEntire’s proposal to house commercial services in ground-level storefronts, as in many of the existing LMA buildings. The architects used calculations from Western Real Estate Research Corporation (WRERC) to sketch out the most likely usage for the commercial building. Dreyfuss & Blackford reserved the largest commercial space for a restaurant, with a market and a combination pool hall and card room occupying smaller spaces. Even smaller storefronts would accommodate separate shops for shoes, clothes, tobacco, liquor, and “drugs, miscl.” Additional space not included in WRERC’s recommendations would be added for “welfare and employment agencies and service areas.” Per WRERC’s recommendation, the developer awarded the contract to rebuild the LMA would provide only the bare necessities, including walls,

---

floors, “minimal storefront,” utility outlets, and a shared restroom. The onus for improving the shop spaces would be on individual tenant business operators.\textsuperscript{116}

**Pros and Cons**

While the plan prepared by Dreyfuss & Blackford and WRERC was likely the most thoroughgoing attempt by SRA and its surrogates to address the relocation of the LMA population, the plan appeared the same year as serious questions arose regarding the potential benefits of reconstituting the LMA. As early as 1957, Albert Schaaf, a Bay Area consultant for SRA whose bibliography includes a number of works on the economics of urban redevelopment and publicly subsidized housing, questioned the economic rationale of the project. Schaaf argued that common assumptions that characterized the LMA as the location of a thriving agricultural workforce important to the regional economy were inaccurate. For one, the consultant asserted, the population from which LMA employment services drew its casual labor supply did not reside exclusively in the LMA. In addition, and perhaps more important, Schaaf claimed that, between 1951 and 1957, the farm labor population of the LMA had declined significantly.\textsuperscript{117}

Questions over the importance the LMA’s proportion of the regional agricultural workforce were not entirely new; Catherine Bauer noted as early as 1952 that the LMA’s contribution to the farm sector was likely not as important as planners had thought. She


even cautioned SRA’s J.T. Bill that publicly referring to the project as a “farm labor
center” mischaracterized the project and the population it was to serve.\textsuperscript{118} Still, whereas
Bauer and McEntire considered overall labor supply of the LMA significant enough to
attempt to preserve the population and its apparent economic function, Schaaf considered
the plan advisable only on “a combination of social and economic reasons.” If SRA were
to make its decision on purely economic grounds, Schaaf advised, rebuilding skid row as
a combined residential, commercial, and labor market project was not advisable.\textsuperscript{119}

It appears that Schaaf’s reservations about the usefulness of a reconstituted LMA
prompted SRA to ponder the farm labor problem in greater depth. The agency
commissioned Andrew H. Trice, a Sacramento State College economics professor, to
investigate the extent to which the region’s farmers depended on the skid row labor pool.
Trice compared previous tabulations of the LMA resident workforce’s characteristics.
While Trice admitted that Schaaf was correct that there was decline in the proportion of
the total LMA population employed in casual agricultural labor between 1951 and 1957,
he concluded that the broader trend between 1940 and 1957 was stable. In addition to
that, the primary industrial attachment—that is, the measure of an individual or group’s
affiliation with a particular sector of the economy—of LMA laborers to the regional
farming sector also remained stable between 1940 and 1957, although it decreased from
39.5 to 34.7\% between 1951 to 1957. The more important trend, according to Trice, was
that the overall decline in the LMA population, a trend accelerated, no doubt, by the

\textsuperscript{118} Catherine Bauer Wurster, letter to J.T. Bill, 30 Dec 1952.
execution of redevelopment-related building demolitions. As the overall LMA population declined, so too did the aggregate number of LMA residents working on Sacramento-area farms. Providing them with a place to live could have arrested this decline.\textsuperscript{120}

Whatever the effects of slum clearance on the LMA labor pool, wider trends in agricultural hiring practices influenced area farmers’ decisions to seek labor from outside skid row. Trice claimed to be the first to interview farmers to determine their hiring preferences and needs and their disposition toward skid row workers. According to Trice, while area farmers had historically drawn a significant number of laborers from Second Street and environs, farmers claimed this practice declined in the postwar era due to what farmers considered the diminished quality of the LMA labor force.\textsuperscript{121}

As was the case in other postwar American skid rows, the LMA housed a shrinking and increasingly aged, infirm, and disabled population. In the years since the 1951 demographic survey of the LMA, many of the younger men had aged or left the neighborhood, leaving behind a larger proportion of “retired or unemployable” men in the area. Farmers noted, in Trice’s words, a declining “calibre [sic] and number” of farm workers meant that men often came from outside the LMA to assist in planting and harvesting. Trice suggested that other observers, including employment agencies and agricultural organizations, considered some major planting and harvesting tasks to be beyond the abilities of typical LMA residents. “[B]ack-breaking stoop labor” required agility, strength, and endurance, while “tree labor” took all three of these plus “a clear head,” not to mention a degree of training to master pruning. Even those laborers not

\textsuperscript{120} Andrew H. Trice, \textit{Present and Future Requirements for Agricultural Labor} 5-7.

\textsuperscript{121} Andrew H. Trice, \textit{Present and Future Requirements for Agricultural Labor}, 2, 5.
incapacitated by alcohol were often “old, ill, and disinterested [sic].” In addition to that, able-bodied migrant labor was “tending to bypass Sacramento, Yolo, and Solano counties in favor of farming areas where pay is better and the crops easier to harvest.”

Accounts from farming areas outside Sacramento appear to illuminate Sacramento area farmers’ disillusionment with the state of a once reliable pool of unattached male skid row farm workers. W. Kenneth Norris, representative of a peach growers’ organization from nearby Modesto, addressed a 1960 commission of the State Legislature investigating problems related to single male transients. Norris claimed that, unlike in years past, skid row residents were “neither willing or [sic] qualified to perform agricultural work.” Norris believed this unwillingness was evident in an unsuccessful drive to fill 1,854 vacancies for Stanislaus County’s tomato harvest. According to Norris, day-haul hiring placed only 126 men, presumably from Modesto’s skid row, in the open positions. He bristled at an anonymous complaint that “hundreds of workers are left on the street from failure by growers to use the day-haul.” Rather, the problem, as Norris saw it, was that the men of skid row lacked the physical and moral qualities required to carry out taxing field labor, such as stooping for hours to harvest tomatoes. At least one of the commissioners shared Norris’ skepticism regarding the abilities and habits of skid row farm workers. State Senator Alan Short elaborated on Norris’s objections, claiming that “alcoholic” workers often worked “only long enough to get money to buy a bottle”

before requesting transportation home or instead continuing work in the field inebriated.

Norris agreed that, in the county’s peach orchards, this was a “tremendous problem.”

Farmers unwilling to draw from skid row labor pools found able workers from a variety of sources. Permanent, year-round workers typically came from the vicinity of the farm on which they worked, according to many of Trice’s respondents. Farmers also claimed they drew “supplemental” seasonal workers from the pool of migrant Mexican nationals who had been officially invited into the country since World War Two. Public Law 78, a 1951 extension of the Bracero Program, allowed farmers to employ Mexican farm workers, as long as employers made sufficient efforts to hire domestic workers first. Although farmers objected to Public Law 78’s strengthened protections for Mexican workers, they generally applauded the bill for allowing them to continue to use foreign labor at the exclusion of American skid row men.

In spite of skid row’s reputation for poorly trained, unhealthy, and undisciplined workers, the existence of ready supplies of reliable labor elsewhere, and farmers’ declining willingness to hire from the LMA, Trice remained convinced that a reconstituted LMA would serve area farmers’ labor needs “for years into the future.” He suggested that rebuilding the LMA for 1,000 residents would be on a scale that was “valid” and even “conservative,” at least in the short term. Trice endorsed a model like the ones proposed by Neutra and Alexander and Bauer and McEntire, which resembled a


balanced skid row neighborhood with many of the residential, commercial, and social elements of the existing LMA. Such a community would have served both “employable and unemployable” residents.126

SRA’s final report on the LMA proposal came in 1959. McEntire synthesized several reports from the preceding eight years into a measured recommendation to build the 1,000 resident community, potentially as the seed for a larger one. The two-block residential and commercial complex Dreyfuss & Blackford designed was to be built at a site selected by the Citizens Labor Center Committee, located near the intersection of North Twelfth and North B streets, just southwest of the Dos Rios Homes public housing project. Conceived with the potential to expand onto as many as ten adjacent city blocks, the site met the requirements indicated by SRA’s consultants and constituents: the North Twelfth Street location was situated near the CBD; included enough vacant and unimproved land to accommodate as many as 5,000 single men; was available at a sufficiently low price; could be zoned for the land uses necessary for the project; and did not raise significant opposition from potential residents or community advocates.127

In spite of McEntire’s endorsement, in late 1959 the plan to rebuild the LMA fell apart. According to Ken Lastufka, whose master’s thesis on redevelopment in Sacramento includes two pages on the LMA saga, two likely factors led SRA to scuttle the plan: the declining use of skid row agricultural labor and the lack of private investors for the project.128 Indeed, as detailed above, the declining attachment of skid row workers

---
126 Trice, Present and Future Requirements for Agricultural Labor, 37-38.
127 Davis McEntire, Relocation Plan: Slum Area Labor Market, Sacramento. (Sacramento: Redevelopment Agency of the City of Sacramento), 36-38.
128 Lastufka. “Redevelopment of Sacramento’s West End,” 83-84.
to the agricultural sector was a prominent theme in various reports on the LMA that SRA issued in the mid-to-late 1950s. However, the decline of domestic agricultural labor was likely only an indirect factor in the unraveling of the LMA plans. Even in the face of its consultants’ serious doubts that the LMA remained a significant contributor to the area’s farm labor pool, SRA remained committed to the plan to rebuild the LMA, at least through 1959.

The shrinking demand for LMA agricultural labor indirectly influenced the second factor Lastufka identifies, the lack of private financial backing. It is not difficult to imagine that investors would have been wary of the project if they believed a decreasing number of farm laborers would have made up a significant portion of the planned community’s tenants. Whatever the reasons for investors’ lack of interest, it was the absence of private funding that killed SRA’s plans. As Bauer noted in 1952 and McEntire pointed out in 1959, federal subsidies did not cover the expense of building and operating the project. Without a federal subsidy for the project, SRA was reliant on private developers to fund the project.¹²⁹

By 1959, only limited federal mortgage supports—and no outright construction subsidies—were available to prospective private builders for the project. Davis reported that finding a non-profit corporation to build and operate the project was SRA’s best option. Unlike a private, for-profit investor, a non-profit operation qualified for federal mortgage subsidies that would have increased the project’s financial viability. However,

neither for-profit nor non-profit investors stepped forward. Speaking to the *Sacramento Union* in October 1959, SRA’s Jerome Lipp complained of this lack of interested investors. Although SRA estimated the likely return on the project to be nine percent annually, potential investors declined the opportunity because the transient tendencies of the intended residents added to the project’s uncertain viability. Lipp said of the transients, “You go down [to the LMA] and ask them if they would be interested in a single men’s center, and they say, ‘Sure.’ You go down there the next day, and they’re in Stockton.”

The failure of nine years of planning for a rebuilt LMA contributed to a limping death by attrition for the existing skid row that straddled Second Street. Through the 1960s redevelopment and the construction of Interstate 5 incrementally cut away at the LMA until all that had not been demolished was a two-block area that would later make up most of Old Sacramento. As many of the men who had made their homes in the vicinity of Second Street scattered to other blighted and yet-to-be-redeveloped neighborhoods or to new cities, the population of what was left of the LMA became smaller, older, and poorer.

---

130 Davis McEntire, *Relocation Plan*, 34-35.
Chapter 5

SKID ROW DEATHWATCH

In the mid-1960s, skid rows in most major American cities were in marked decline, even when compared with the relative stagnation they faced in the 1950s.\(^\text{133}\) Contemporary observers noted that slum clearance and urban renewal programs had cleared much of skid row of its buildings—and people.\(^\text{134}\) Often, such territorial losses led skid row men to disperse and colonize new areas of a city, effectively creating smaller satellite skid row neighborhoods.\(^\text{135}\) In addition, in the economic boom times of the early Cold War Era many men who in previous eras might have lived on skid row found relatively well-paid jobs and lived in better neighborhoods. This left behind “only the ‘hard core’ derelicts and unemployables.”\(^\text{136}\) These phenomena, combined with the loss of a significant number of temporary labor opportunities previously available to skid row men, created physically smaller skid row environments peopled with increasingly disproportionate numbers of elderly and physically and psychologically disabled men dependent on pensions, welfare, and charity.\(^\text{137}\)

In the decade after SRA abandoned its LMA reconstruction plan in 1959, American urban reformers and redevelopers adopted a consistent skid row elimination strategy that aimed, as sociologist Ronald J. Miller puts it, “essentially to demolish the

\(^{135}\) Howard M. Bahr, “The Gradual Disappearance of Skid Row,” 44.
\(^{137}\) Miller, The Demolition of Skid Row, 11.
area and flood the residents with wanted or unwanted [social] services.”

Miller links the introduction of the social services component of skid row redevelopment with War on Poverty-era urban policies that expanded state intervention in city life. According to Miller, however, by the early 1980s, the extension of services to what skid row populations remained had proceeded less quickly than planners initially had hoped. While skid row residents accessed a number of city, county, and private social services in the 1950s and early 1960s, there is no indication in the available sources that the appropriate agencies and organizations in Sacramento implemented these in the LMA as a coordinated, long-term program for the eradication of skid row. Instead, SRA continued a plan of demolition and inconsistent assisted relocation without the benefit of a concerted social services strategy or, in many cases, with little thought of providing new homes for displaced residents.

The Beginning of the End

As redevelopment proceeded in the West End, the LMA became a smaller, poorer, older, less healthy, and more physically isolated place. By 1963, only eight of the roughly twenty-four blocks originally designated as the LMA continued to house typical skid row populations and institutions. The other sixteen blocks, or so, sat vacant or housed parking lots and new commercial and office buildings. These empty parcels

---

138 Miller, The Demolition of Skid Row, 12.
139 Miller, The Demolition of Skid Row, 12.
140 Lastufka. “Redevelopment of Sacramento’s West End,” 82, 85, 88
and new buildings hemmed in a neighborhood comprised of an increasingly desperate population whose lodgings centered on the constricted Second Street corridor between I and L streets.

Slum clearance reduced the single male population of the West End drastically. In 1950 the LMA population was 3,600.\textsuperscript{143} Between then and 1963 it fell to 1,400. Of these holdouts, forty percent were aged sixty-five or older and about one-third each drew incomes from employment, old age pensions, and a combination of welfare and disability and unemployment insurance, respectively. Four charity missions remained in operation; they served 750 free meals each typical winter day. This marked an increase of approximately sixty-two percent since 1957, despite a significant decline in the single male population of the West End.\textsuperscript{144}

A result of the high level of poverty, crime, and health problems was that the LMA population had a relatively high incidence of interaction with the social, safety, and health services of the city and county. As of 1963, the shrunken LMA was home to only one percent of the city’s total population, but accounted for six percent of county welfare cases, twenty-six percent of the County Sherriff’s arrests, eighty-two percent of "drunk and vagrancy arrests" by the Sacramento Police Department, and forty-one percent of tuberculosis cases admitted to the Weimar Medical Center, a sanitarium located in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The estimated combined cost to these agencies was $2.5 million.

\textsuperscript{143} Wise, \textit{Survey of Business in Sacramento’s West End}, 1.
annually.\textsuperscript{145} In addition to these services, other public and private services were available, including alcohol rehabilitation halfway houses and County Hospital care.\textsuperscript{146}

Despite the single male population’s high incidence of contact with local government services, these men were relatively unlikely to receive relocation assistance from SRA. The agency’s relocation efforts in this period disproportionately favored West End families over individuals living in the same area. While only forty-six percent of single residents living in the Capitol Mall Project and Capitol Mall Extension Project areas received relocation assistance from SRA, families living in the same areas received help at a rate of eighty-five percent. Often, SRA denied men relocation assistance because of their unclear residency status. Transient men who slept in Sacramento only intermittently were not eligible for assistance under SRA’s residents-only relocation plan.\textsuperscript{147} In addition to that, SRA exhibited an apparent enthusiasm for relocating individuals, usually single men, to locations outside Sacramento County. The agency did so at nearly five times the rate it did for West End families.\textsuperscript{148}

The Second Street corridor sat in a state of suspension in the early 1960s. As the ultimate plan was to redevelop Second and Front streets between the I Street Bridge and Capitol Mall as Old Sacramento, this section of the city staved off evacuation longer than many of the earliest redevelopment project areas. Many buildings were even spared, thanks to their historical significance. As a result, Sacramento’s most notorious slum

\textsuperscript{148} Ken Lastufka. “Redevelopment of Sacramento’s West End,” 85-86.
survived in what was soon to be Old Sacramento, but did so with the recognition that this was a temporary arrangement.

The Community Welfare Council of the Greater Sacramento Area (CWC) suggested in a 1964 report that provisions would be available for the remaining single male LMA population for an estimated two to three years. Recognizing the deteriorated conditions there, CWC suggested the construction and establishment of temporary amenities to improve life on skid row. These included a “Men’s Service Center” for “men who wish to work and improve their condition,” a facility for the treatment of alcoholism, and a city park to be built on a vacant Second Street lot and proposed to contain an indoor meeting place for use in cold weather. CWC recommended the park because the incidence of men loitering on the neighborhood’s sidewalks had become pronounced. 149

Pulling the Plug

The physical isolation of skid row from the rest of the city increased with the construction of Interstate 5 beginning in 1965. Sacramentans had debated the freeway’s location for several years. City leaders and proponents of redevelopment generally preferred a route that paralleled the Sacramento River and ran generally along Second or Third Street. Historic preservationists and neighborhood groups favored a Yolo County Route that would have placed the freeway on the west side of the river, sparing the city’s original commercial district. 150

149 Community Welfare Council of the Greater Sacramento Area, Single Man in the West End, 2.
After the city council and mayoral election of 1961, supporters of the Sacramento County route held the decisive upper hand, winning the mayorality and seven of eight council seats.\textsuperscript{151} Preservationists continued their fight and landed a limited victory, forcing planners to alter a route slated for the blocks between Second and Third streets for most of the length of the old city limits. The revision included a “bulge” that allowed for the maintenance, construction, or reconstruction of buildings on the western half of the block between Second, Third, K and L streets and most of the western half of the block between Second, Third, J, and K streets.\textsuperscript{152} The section of the city that was eventually bounded by the new interstate, the I Street Bridge, Capitol Mall, and the Sacramento River became Old Sacramento. The conversion of skid row into Old Sacramento was a piecemeal process that, although master-planned by SRA officials and consultants, was carried out largely by individual property owners for several years, stretching into the 1970s.\textsuperscript{153} During this conversion, a declining population maintained the skid row presence on and near Second Street.

In 1966, incidentally the year that Old Sacramento was added to the National Register of Historic Places, local film maker Richard Simpson spent three months interviewing and filming residents of what remained of the LMA. The product of this effort was \textit{The Marshes of Two Street}, a twenty-nine minute documentary produced by local Public Broadcasting Service affiliate KVIE. At the picture’s outset, an unseen narrator speaks over images of skid row squalor, intoning a variation of what was by then

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{152} Prince, “A Past for the Present,” 18-20.
\end{itemize}
the typical narrative of West End decline. In short, as the “first merchants” of the old Embarcadero gained new wealth, they moved the commercial core several blocks to the east, abandoning the riverfront and “the clang and smell of labor,” which Simpson locates on “Two Street.” Simpson’s low-budget, black and white production captures Second Street at what was nearly its nadir. He depicts a diminished skid row sitting in the shadow of Interstate 5, which was then under construction. In front of the crumbling or shuttered buildings, middle-aged men congregate, drinking on the stoops and sidewalks as inebriates lie passed out on the same walkways. Simpson’s interviews only add to the air of desperation.154

Throughout the film, unnamed subjects describe the state of the LMA in 1966, in which labor played a decreasingly important role and crime was on the rise. One interviewee declares, “This skid row here in Sacramento is the worst place in the world.” Muggings appear to have spiked, at least in the view of two of Simpson’s interviewees. “Now there’s too many jackrollers down here,” explained one man, observing that any LMA resident outside after nine o’clock at night was at risk of being robbed and assaulted—or, if he was without valuables to surrender, merely assaulted.155

Another resident noted the decline of commerce and employment on the Second Street corridor. Many men were reduced to scavenging empty wine bottles and selling them to an LMA junk yard located in a nearby alley. This scavenging reportedly earned a return of twenty cents per 100 bottles, which might translate to “a chunk of rent,” or, more likely, a bottle of wine. The interviewee continued, offering a wistful and nuanced

155 The Marshes of Two Street. Directed by Richard Simpson.
take, “I can look out now and see on this sunny day, there’s no business here. Everything is boarded up from redevelopment. But I hope that someday, for the future generation, for the younger people, there’ll be a good, desirable place to walk on the street without being molested at any time.” Another man simply said, “I think the majority of people want jobs.” But one African American resident complained that the lack of jobs for LMA residents, or at least for the black residents, owed to competition with Mexican nationals, who were now “all over the place.” Taken on their own, these individuals’ complaints and observations offer only fleeting glimpses of the travails of “Two Street” in the waning days of skid row. But taken as a whole, Simpson’s interviews illustrate a collective frustration with a deteriorated neighborhood that had largely lost its function in Sacramento’s economy.156

Local historian Steven Avella observes that the West End had a dual image in Sacramento’s collective consciousness. On the one hand, Sacramentans viewed the area between the State Capitol building and the Sacramento River as a “cauldron of urban pathologies,” while on the other hand, an alternative view highlighted its role as a necessary home for the city’s down and out.157 This more positive alternate view fights its way through the grit and bitterness that define Simpson’s film. However, this positivity is usually tempered by an interviewee’s complaints—usually in the same breath as the initial praise for the skid row lifestyle—or the viewer’s likely conclusion that, in spite of the occasional glimmer of positivity, skid row residents found life in the LMA to be fairly miserable. Still, some of Simpson’s informants celebrate the comradeship that

156 The Marshes of Two Street. Directed by Richard Simpson.
157 Steven M. Avella, Sacramento: Indomitable City, 127.
grew from shared dire straits. One man contrasted the continuing presence of jackrollers with his belief that “everybody [on skid row] shares.” A woman Simpson interviews, who claimed always to have had a bottle of wine in her purse, observed that in her time in the LMA she never wanted for a drinking companion. Another man had little to say of the reciprocity of life there, but celebrated the independence he felt the LMA afforded him. “I don’t have to worry about nothing anymore,” he confessed. “I have to live a cheap life, but I can live it the way I want.”

The culture of reciprocity evident was part of a skid row culture that remained evident in the mid-1960s, in spite of the worsening conditions on Second Street, and which probably had its roots in a century of tramping and hobo life. Sacramento State College student David Siersdale spent the first five months of 1966 documenting the culture of skid row. Siersdale interviewed thirty-five residents of the Del Monte Hotel, a low-rent establishment on I Street between Front and Second streets. By Siersdale’s account, the hotel was located on one of two remaining blocks that comprised the “once more-extensive skid row.” What Siersdale found was that, even in the absence of familial relationships, skid row residents formed meaningful, if sometimes short-lived, relationships through social and economic interpersonal connections.

While Siersdale pays attention to the sometimes predatory and violent nature of skid row circa 1966, he is careful to construct an image of economic cooperation among residents that was built on a foundation of earned trust. This “generosity motif” made up

---

158. The Marshes of Two Street. Directed by Richard Simpson.  
the “dominant” character of skid row relations, even if there was an alternative “intra-community exploitation motif.” Reciprocity took place within a variety of social group types that were mostly centered on the particular dormitory or hotel in which the group members resided. In varying degrees, these social groups shared food and other resources with other members—and at times non-members deemed worthy of assistance—on the ostensible basis of equal contributions per member over an unspecified time period. But even exploitative residents, such as jackrollers, were generally viewed as legitimate members of the skid row community, although residents of skid row tended to regard out-of-towners who practiced this with little respect. Still, per Siersdale’s analysis, the major organizing principle of skid row social units was reciprocal generosity.160

As historian Todd DePastino sees it, skid row reciprocity put the lie to the era’s dominant sociological explanations of skid row’s culture, which emphasized the subculture’s supposedly antisocial features. Academic and popular perceptions held that, in DePastino’s words, “skid row was a perverse holdout against the modernizing forces of the age,” especially the ascendant forces of consumerism and the nuclear family. A man’s single-ness in particular raised suspicions, inciting accusations of “immatur[ity],” “irresponsib[ility],” and “perversion.”161 Whatever the personal and social problems of skid row, its people did not live without meaningful social ties.

Half a decade after Simpson and Siersdale made their documentary visits to the LMA, the culmination of SRA’s slow-rolling evacuation and demolition of skid row was
finally in sight. Sacramento State College anthropology graduate student Kurt Hanselmann reconnoitered the dying neighborhood, interviewing the few transients and pensioners who remained on “Two Street.” Hanselmann’s 1971 master’s thesis describes life among the LMA holdouts as “a highly unimaginative new ‘old town’” encroached on their neighborhood.162 Corner markets and at least one gospel mission continued to operate there. Hotels and other lodging options were becoming scarce, however, and the neighborhood’s last dormitory had closed permanently. A public toilet and washroom served shelterless residents of Second Street without access to such amenities. Hanselmann noted that the contingent of his interview subjects remained employed in local agriculture, but his overall picture of the neighborhood is one of growing deprivation.163

SRA finalized the acquisition of the skid row parcels that made up Old Sacramento and began the historic district’s first building projects in the late 1960s. Between 1969, when rehabilitation work began on the Morse Building at the southeast corner of Second and L streets, and 1971, the year Hanselmann submitted his completed thesis, “Two Street” was home to an incongruous mix of aspiration and desperation. On the one hand, building Old Sacramento was a two-fold act of reclamation. Not only did the City reassert its roots to its seminal late-nineteenth century self, it also took back Second Street from the winos and other derelicts who, through the 1950s and 1960s, apparently sapped the area of its economic vitality. On the other hand, many skid row residents who remained faced bad, if not worsening, conditions, not to mention a future

in which there were likely few certainties other than that their neighborhood would soon cease to exist.\textsuperscript{164}

In the fall of 1971, demolition crews went to work removing concrete sidewalks on Second Street to prepare for the installation of wooden boardwalks and gaslights meant to convey to the district’s eventual tourist throng a nineteenth century ambience. A lighthearted \textit{Sacramento Bee} account wondered at the “unexpected” discovery of an existing, decades-old boardwalk of the type on which preservation architects modeled the new walkways.\textsuperscript{165} The piece seemed to represent public excitement for the coming of Old Sacramento.

If construction crews and journalists hand dug deeper, they would have uncovered a parallel story in the sidewalks. At the time of Hanselmann’s visits to the area, many skid row residents found themselves—whether by economic circumstance, the condemnation of skid row lodging places, or both—not only figuratively on the streets, but, in some cases, beneath them. As Old Sacramento building demolitions progressed, crews exposed the area’s original ground-level sidewalks, located approximately one story below the existing sidewalks.\textsuperscript{166} Enterprising down-and-outers took shelter in the

\textsuperscript{166} Gold Rush pioneers founded Sacramento on the banks of the flood-prone river that gave the city its name. After over a decade of destructive inundations, city leaders devised a plan to mitigate the destructive force of seasonal floods. Rather than relocating the settlement to higher ground, Sacramentans elevated much of the city along J and K streets. The City filled its streets with earth to a height of approximately one story, but left the sidewalks at the original ground level. Raising the sidewalks and building entrances to a level even with the elevated roadways was the responsibility of property owners. In general, they installed sidewalks that bridged the gap between their buildings and the edge of the road. The sidewalks were left unfilled and, in many locations remained so into the twentieth century. Source: Heather Lavezzo Downey, “The Force of Nature and the Power of Man: Historic Walking Tours of Old Sacramento’s Underground and Hollow Sidewalks,” (M.A. Thesis, California State University, Sacramento, 2010), 1-2, 113-114.
“underground sidewalks,” building “nests,” as Hanselmann put it, from old newspapers and other refuse. In the wake of the closure of skid row’s last dormitory, such nesting was an alternative to paying for scarce lodging, sleeping exposed in the so-called “weed hotel,” or taking a nightly, ten-mile shuttle ride to the existing county homeless shelter.\textsuperscript{167}

In the end, a majority of the single men of the West End scattered to the wind, so to speak. Ken Lastufka details the dispersal of the West End’s single male population as a consequence of West End demolitions between 1950 and 1970. Within Census Tract #7, an area that corresponded roughly to the boundary of the LMA, the population of single men fell from an already diminished 1,944 in 1960 to 172 in 1970. Victims of an SRA procedure that Lastufka describes as “far from adequate or proper,” most of these men received no assistance from SRA and were forced to secure inexpensive lodging elsewhere without the assistance many West End families received. SRA justified its policy by citing its finding that the fifty-four percent of the single male population of the West End the agency declined to assist were transients not eligible for relocation assistance. Large numbers of these men relocated to either J Street between 5\textsuperscript{th} and 13\textsuperscript{th} streets or 12\textsuperscript{th} Street between C and H streets.\textsuperscript{168} In the eyes of one observer, this created “an even bigger skid row in the downtown area.”\textsuperscript{169}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{168} Lastufka, “Redevelopment of Sacramento’s West End,” 82, 85, 88.
\textsuperscript{169} Dan Ferrell, “New Skid Row May Be Developing As Single Men Drift from West End,” \textit{Sacramento Bee} 15 Sep 1968, quoted in Lastufka.\textit{“Redevelopment of Sacramento’s West End,”} 88.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Sacramento’s skid row met a halting, ambiguous end in the early 1970s. The city gradually repurposed the LMA’s physical space following a phased demolition that obliterated most of the neighborhood’s buildings. Those phases that eliminated skid row territory east of Second Street happened relatively quickly, if not cleanly. Large swaths of that section of the old LMA were mostly cleared between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s and are still occupied by projects dating to the 1960s and early 1970s. Interstate 5, the Downtown Plaza shopping mall, and a Chinese cultural center each sit on multiple blocks of the former LMA. The sliver of the LMA west of Second Street, on the other hand, experienced a long twilight. Ultimately targeted by historic preservationists for a sort of neutron bomb redevelopment that slowly cleared out the people but spared many of the buildings, this three-block section of the city limped on as a gradual process of preservation and rebuilding took place starting in the late 1960s. A transitional period in which the incipient Old Sacramento and a dying skid row coexisted extended until 1970 or 1971.

The people of skid row endured a tumultuous twenty years or so. In the early phases of redevelopment, a number of men temporarily dodged SRA’s program of condemnation and demolition by relocating within the LMA not yet demolished. In the end, however, everybody was required to leave skid row. True to the pattern Howard Bahr observed in the late 1960s, many LMA residents reestablished themselves in two smaller pockets of skid row-type populations along J and Twelfth streets. Others fled to
locations outside the city, and even Sacramento County altogether. While many of the people survived redevelopment, the classic skid row—spatially segregated, home to native institutions, peopled almost exclusively by single men, and studied intensively by sociologists and urban planners—did not.

In the proposals and studies the City Planning Commission and SRA produced in the 1950s is a unique alternate reality in which Sacramento’s skid row rose anew. Each of the City’s plans to reconstitute the LMA included provisions for recreating the most important elements of skid row. There were cramped lodgings, access to temporary jobs, and accommodations for bars, restaurants, charities, card rooms, and other institutions catering to poor single men. In the case of SRA’s 1953 and 1959 proposals, the new communities were capable of expanding to accommodate as many as a few thousand men in dense, geographically contiguous neighborhoods at the city’s edge. Most important from the planners’ perspective, the new skid row would take on the old one’s economic function, supplying low-wage workers to local agriculture and industry. It was a tidy plan.

The reality was messier, of course. A conspiracy of events prevented the construction of a new skid row. Changing practices in agricultural hiring altered skid row’s relationship to the local economy. Redevelopment policies favored the relocation of displaced families over that of displaced single persons and did not offer subsidies for a project of the type the city envisioned. After SRA abandoned its plans, the agency approached the matter of relocation in the manner that many cities did; it largely left skid row people to fend for themselves as their neighborhoods fell to the wrecking ball.
Mostly men of little means, Sacramento’s skid row people found new homes where they could. Meanwhile, downtown Sacramento expanded its geographic reach and reclaimed the West End.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Housing Authority of the City of Sacramento and Housing Authority of the County of Sacramento. *First Annual Report, 1941*. Sacramento, 1941.


Capitol Mall and Riverfront Redevelopment Area Project No. 3. Sacramento, 1957.


Secondary Sources


Gioielli, Robert. “‘We Must Destroy You to Save You’: Highway Construction and the City as Modern Commons,” *Radical History Review* 109, (Winter 2011): 62-82.


