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Skid Row, Gallery Row and the space in between: cultural revitalisation and its impacts on two Los Angeles neighbourhoods

As a means for neighbourhood improvement, cultural urban revitalisation seeks to draw business growth and investment by attracting a creative class of young urban professionals. Though criticisms abound that these strategies benefit the wealthy and displace low-income communities, there is little research focusing on how the efforts of social actors can shape or resist this process. The purpose of this study is to offer a micro-level look at the spatial and political contestations and negotiations that occur amongst a variety of community organisations and individuals in two adjacent neighbourhoods in downtown Los Angeles undergoing revitalisation. By approaching 'revitalisation' as an arena where different neighbourhood groups can compete to achieve their goals, it argues that we scrutinise prevailing notions of gentrification and seek to understand the values and actions of stakeholders involved in order to enable more equitable outcomes of urban revitalisation.

Keywords: community, culture, development, gentrification, planning, revitalisation, urban

Introduction

In the last decades, many cities of the Global North have used cultural revitalisation strategies as a means for neighbourhood improvement. Such strategies can take different forms such as promoting a neighbourhood's ethnic heritage, establishing a cultural or arts district or developing cultural and community centres or local museums, amongst others. Largely influenced by Richard Florida's theory of the 'creative class' (2002), the purpose of such projects is often to attract human capital, business growth and investment. While some scholars find that neighbourhoods and cities with high levels of cultural amenities grow faster (Glaeser and Saiz, 2003), others argue that cultural revitalisation strategies can also lead to gentrification and displacement of some groups (Ley, 2003). Of course, how such strategies affect different neighbourhoods may also depend on their specific socio-cultural and economic context and the power of local social actors seeking to shape the urban environment (Guterbock, 1980). The purpose of this study is to take a close look at these micro-level interactions and the spatial and political contestations and negotiations that occurred amongst a variety of actors during the process of cultural revitalisation in two adjacent neighbourhoods of downtown Los Angeles.

More specifically, the study explores how the cultural revitalisation in the Gallery Row neighbourhood of downtown Los Angeles is affecting the adjacent Skid Row

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neighbourhood. It seeks to address the following questions. (1) How do local actors intervene to shape the process of neighbourhood revitalisation? (2) What are the spatial and/or political contestations that result from such interventions? (3) Is cultural revitalisation a 'zero-sum game', always benefiting wealthy gentrifiers at the expense of disadvantaged denizens?

The paper unfolds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the literature on cultural urban revitalisation and gentrification, giving particular emphasis to what it tells us about the social actors of gentrification. Next, it describes the context of the two study neighbourhoods and explains the research methods followed. Then, it reports on an ethnographic study that closely followed the actions and interactions of different local stakeholders in the two neighbourhoods. The concluding section responds to the research questions and explains how revitalisation takes place in a socio-physical arena where the actions and attitudes of individuals often affect outcomes.

Cultural urban revitalisation and gentrification: brief literature review

Over the last decades, culture has become an essential ingredient in the economic development strategies of many cities. In part, this is the result of the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, local responses to globalisation and emerging environmental and lifestyle trends attracting a certain type of urban professional (Evans, 2004). Early work by Sharon Zukin (1982; 1996) has documented the emerging tastes and preferences of a new class of urban dwellers, desiring an 'authentic' urban experience characterised by cultural and economic diversity. This has informed the practices of planners and private investors in instilling notions of culture in the built environment. Additionally, public officials and private developers have been influenced by the more recent writings of Richard Florida (2002), who argued that, in order to achieve employment and population growth, cities should develop a culture of openness and cosmopolitanism that attracts workers of the 'creative class'. Attracting such individuals requires that cities cultivate urban neighbourhoods with clusters of small-scale music and performing arts venues, art galleries and trendy nightclubs, as well as create opportunities for collaboration between arts organisations and private enterprise. These 'cultural quarters' (Roodhouse, 2009) act as a focus for cultural and artistic activities and thus create a social environment that 'mobilize[s] people's creative capital, which in turn leads to the ability to innovate, create new business, attract other companies and ultimately create new wealth and prosperity' (Florida, 2005, 53). Thus, notions of culture have been used as a marketing tool by developers and public sector officials for the packaging of urban neighbourhoods.

While some scholars emphasise the aesthetic improvements, neighbourhood marketing and associated economic growth and jobs that such cultural development strategies can produce (Wood and Landry, 2008), others are concerned that they lead to increased property values, neighbourhood gentrification and eventual displacement of long-standing neighbourhood groups (Zuk et al., 2015). By promoting a particular urban aesthetic and lifestyle, developers and cities hope to attract white middle-class urban dwellers and revitalise neglected neighbourhoods (Zukin, 1982; Smith, 1992; 1996; Ley, 1996; Markusen, 2006). But criticism abounds that this new urban imperative – the race to attract the creative class – is simply an extension of neoliberal urban politics under a new guise and creates a discourse that glosses over the social, cultural and economic realities of post-Fordism (Scott, 2002; 2006; Peck, 2005; McCann, 2007; Wilson and Keil, 2008; O’Callaghan, 2010; Catungal et al., 2009). Additionally, critics charge that building the ‘creative city’ contributes to gentrification and displacement of lower-income populations, including some of those in the lower economic scales of the creative class (e.g. artists) on which this strategy depends (Ley, 2003). Ironically, several studies also show that such neighbourhood transformations may lead to a loss of the space’s distinctive identity, which may have attracted creative individuals in the first place (Binnie et al., 2006; Zukin 1982).

The aforementioned studies examine the ‘supply-side’ of gentrification: how capital flows are used to redress, market and brand certain neighbourhoods as cultural or ‘creative’ hubs, making them more exclusive and unavailable to certain resident groups. Supply-side actors are federal, state or local governments that initiate conditions for gentrification through public investment and policies, as well as private developers who purchase and redevelop properties in such neighbourhoods.

However, the gentrification literature reveals that there is also a ‘demand-side’ to gentrification, namely the flows of higher income/higher education people, who move into gritty urban neighbourhoods because they find them attractive or ‘authentic’. Scholars who noted this trend early on claimed that it was a result of the mass migration ‘back to the city’, thereby creating new demand for cities to invest in urban renovation (Laska and Spain, 1980). Overall, more studies on gentrification have focused on the macro-forces of capital flows than the micro-forces of social flows. Indeed, fewer studies have analysed the social actors in gentrification processes, the motivations of gentrifiers and their reasons behind their decision to move into a neighbourhood (Ley, 1994; Brown-Saracino, 2009). Some ethnographic studies have examined upper- and middle-class, primarily white, newcomers to inner-city neighbourhoods. These studies have observed inter-racial/ethnic gentrification, where white households move into long-standing minority neighbourhoods (Caulfield, 1994; Ley, 1996; 2003). Some more recent studies have also examined middle-class black households settling into predominantly low-income black neighbourhoods (Taylor, 2002; Boyd, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Hyra, 2008; Pattillo, 2008; Moore, 2009).

Other scholars have noted that the relationship between gentrifier and gentrified and perceptions of neighbourhood improvement are far more nuanced (Cybriwksi, 1978). In her book *A Neighborhood that Never Changes: Gentrification, Social Preservation, and the Search for Authenticity* (2009), sociologist Brown-Saracino identifies three different types of social actors that while often grouped under the same label as ‘gentrifiers’ exhibit very different attitudes and behaviours. *Urban pioneers* are the classic representation of the gentry (upscale, highly educated and residentially mobile), perhaps best known from Neil Smith’s (1996) critical writings on ‘the revanchist city’. Urban pioneers move into gritty neighbourhoods as part of a long-term investment strategy, seeking to extract economic benefits from their gentrification through rising property values. *Social homesteaders* are individuals who are aware (and sometimes concerned) of their role in an area’s gentrification, but take no action to change it. Lastly, *social preservationists* are individuals who move into neighbourhoods but actively work to minimise displacement risks for long-time residents.

As Brown-Saracino explains, while urban pioneers, social homesteaders and social preservationists may fit the mould of what is typically characterised as the urban gentry, what distinguishes them is their relationship and attitude towards the long-standing residents of the neighbourhoods they move into. Unlike the indifference or passivity of the first two categories, the values of social preservationists motivate them to try and preserve existing social and cultural ecologies because it is these elements that have first attracted them to the neighbourhood. Additionally, ‘those who articulate the social preservation ideology engage in a set of political, symbolic and private practices to maintain the authenticity of their place of residence, primarily by working to prevent old-timers’ displacement’ (Brown-Saracino, 2009, 9).

Brown-Saracino’s categories indicate the need for a more nuanced analysis of the attitudes and actions of the social actors in the gentrification processes. This paper focuses particularly on the topic – the actions, interactions and practices of gentrifiers and existing residents in two downtown Los Angeles neighbourhoods.

The context and the method

Skid Row and Gallery Row

Often referred to as a ‘dual-city’ for its spatial and social segregation (Loukaitou-Sideris and Gilbert, 2000), downtown Los Angeles contains both a flashy financial district as well as a Skid Row area of dilapidated streets and warehouses that is home to one of the largest concentrations of homeless in the USA. As seen in Figure 1, Gallery Row – a linear district with many new art galleries, bars and restaurants – lies directly west of Skid Row, sharing Main Street as a common border.



Figure 1 Gallery Row, which lies directly west of Skid Row, sharing Main Street as a common border

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Skid Row was the final stop on the transatlantic railroad, housing a migrant labour force. To accommodate this transient population, single-room occupancy hotels, shelters and inexpensive retail stores opened in the 1920s and 1930s. However, by the 1960s, the area's labour force was slowly being replaced by homeless men, often alcoholic and unemployed (Stuart, 2011). The transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy in the 1970s led to the de-industrialisation of the Los Angeles economy and the further proliferation of homelessness (Wolch and Dear, 1994).

In 1976, Los Angeles city planners created a 'Containment Plan', which relocated affordable housing and social services from elsewhere in the region to Skid Row, effectively concentrating the homeless population in one limited downtown area (Haas and Heskin, 1981; Goetz, 1992). Today, Skid Row occupies approximately 50 square blocks and has about 12,000 to 14,000 inhabitants, 75 per cent of whom are African American (LACAN, 2010). As shown in Table 1, while the total numbers of sheltered homeless has risen in recent years, fewer and fewer are forced to live on the streets. This is probably due to the efforts of the many not-for-profit shelters and missions in Skid Row. In 2007, Wolch et al. (2007) found approximately 70 not-for-profit organisations in Skid Row and about 3,300 beds for adults and families. Nevertheless, despite attempts by the City, business groups and not-for-profit organisations to deconcentrate this 'service dependent ghetto', some argue that the outcome of such collaborations has largely been to criminalise the poor (Reese et al, 2006), or otherwise revert to poverty management by increasing the size and number of shelters (DeVerteuil, 2006). That both the number of shelters and the number of homeless individuals have increased seems to justify the last assertion. In fact, the challenges of Skid Row

have recently attracted renowned architects, whose affordable housing complexes seek to ease the housing burden in the area but also elevate its status with the presence of new and innovative building designs (Holland, 2014). In this sense, poverty management becomes an opportunity for cultural revitalisation.

Table 1 Homelessness in Skid Row, Greater Los Angeles, 2005–2011

	2005	2007	2009	2011
Sheltered	1,944 (53%)	3,334 (65%)	2,973 (78%)	3,377 (78%)
Unsheltered	1,674 (46%)	1,797 (35%)	829 (22%)	939 (22%)
Totals	3,618	5,131	3,802	4,316

Source: United Way Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count, 2011; 2013.

In spite of Skid Row's continued existence, the rest of downtown Los Angeles has undergone rapid changes, which have led to some displacement of low-income populations and businesses and even the shrinkage of Skid Row, which was encroached by new development (Marshall, 2015). In 1999, an adaptive reuse ordinance was passed, which allowed commercial buildings to be converted into residential lofts. The ordinance was in part the result of the efforts of a few property owners in the area, who were aware that groups of struggling artists were squatting in the abandoned warehouses and empty commercial lofts (Young Turks, 2013). Responding to a burgeoning underground arts scene, these property owners sought to create accommodation for the squatters as well as the soon-to-arrive artists and art lovers. The new residents, mostly artists who came to occupy the converted commercial and industrial buildings, soon organised an 'Art Walk' to help sell their work and market the neighbourhood as an artistic hub.¹ The Downtown Art Walk coordinated artists to open their studios and galleries to the public on the same night every month, often providing drinks and music, and encouraged attendees to walk from space to space. At a time when most Angelenos still avoided this downtown area because of its reputation for being dangerous and dilapidated, the event helped transform it into a vibrant corridor of cultural activity and public life.

Eventually, a handful of community leaders started a 'Gallery Row Organisation' as a committee within the existing downtown Neighborhood Council and received approval from the City Council to designate the few square blocks where Art Walk took place as its own district. This new organisation helped attract new development into the area taking advantage of tax relief and other business incentives available in

1 While long-time residents state that the first official Art Walk took place in 2005, many noted that Art Walk was inspired by more informal gatherings of artists that had been taking place years before.

the Federal Empowerment Zone,² as well as specific grant programs targeting new businesses opening up in historic storefronts.³ But with the arrival of new chain stores and upscale restaurants in the mid-2000s, rent prices skyrocketed, as illustrated in Table 2. This despite the fact that vacancies in the area increased, as shown in Table 3, because of the significant addition of new units as well as the economic recession and mortgage crisis that hit Southern California.

Table 2 Median rent in downtown Los Angeles neighbourhoods, 2000–2011

Neighbourhood	Median rent (2000)	Median rent (2007–2011)	Percentage change
Gallery Row	\$275	\$1,325	382%
Skid Row (North)	\$254	\$428	69%
Skid Row (South)	\$275	\$363	32%
LA County	\$643	\$1,088	69%
LA City	\$603	\$1,033	71%

Source: US Census Bureau.

Table 3 Vacant units in downtown Los Angeles neighbourhoods, 2000–2011

Neighbourhood	Vacant units (2000)	Vacant units (2007–2011)
Gallery Row	622	1,107
Skid Row	332	540

Source: US Census Bureau.

According to its organisers, by 2008, Art Walk was attracting over 20,000 visitors (authors' interviews). As the crowds increased, new businesses moved into the area to capitalise on the event, and Art Walk participants began to spend more time in cocktail bars and eateries than in the galleries. As noted by a number of real-estate agents, inquiries for apartments are the highest the week after Art Walk (authors' interviews). Between 2000 and 2007, the residential population of both Gallery Row and Skid Row grew (Table 4). Between 2007 and 2011, however, while the population of Gallery Row continued to grow, it decreased in Skid Row. This is most likely explained by the

² A Federal Empowerment Zone is a federal designation created to stimulate economic development in distressed urban areas by creating incentives for employers within these areas to hire locals and create jobs for people with employment barriers.

³ The Gallery Row Organization created a document that packaged all these incentives together and presented it to potential business developers, as well as the city council.

increasing conversion of single-room occupancy (SRO) housing in the area – often the most affordable housing option for those struggling with homelessness – into market-rate apartments.

Table 4 Population in downtown Los Angeles neighbourhoods, 2000–2011

Neighbourhood	2000 population	2007 population	2011 population
Gallery Row	3,739	4,152	5,821
Skid Row	8,472	9,208	7,396

Source: US Census Bureau.

The popularity of Gallery Row led to the establishment of new public–private partnerships between the city, business organisations and property owners, including the Historic Downtown Business Improvement District, the Downtown Art Walk (as an official not-for-profit organisation) and council member José Huizar’s ‘Bringing Back Broadway’ initiative. These associations have been very influential in drawing in additional ‘creative office space’ for website developers, mobile app companies and other technology start-ups. This had a significant economic impact on Gallery Row, as shown in Figures 2 and 3, where employment nearly doubled in less than a decade. According to the *2013 Downtown LA Demographic Survey*, 26 per cent of residents in downtown Los Angeles earn more than \$150,000, which represents a 6 per cent increase from 2011. Table 5 demonstrates how the influx of new residents affected the housing market. We can see that the increase in affordable units (5.2 per cent) falls quite short of the increase in downtown’s residential population (15.1 per cent).

Table 5 Residential units in downtown Los Angeles, 2008–2011¹

Residential Units	2008 (4th quarter)	2011 (2nd quarter)	Percentage change 2008–2010
Market rate	15,524	17,823	14.8%
Affordable	10,487	11,038	5.2%
Total units	26,011	28,861	11.0%
Residential population	39,537	45,518	15.1%

¹ This refers to the area between the 101 Freeway and the 10 Freeway to the north and south, and the Los Angeles River and the 110 Freeway to the east and west.

Source: Downtown Center Business Improvement District, ‘Downtown Los Angeles demographic study’, <https://www.downtownla.com/about-us/publications/annual-reports-quarterly-newsletters>.

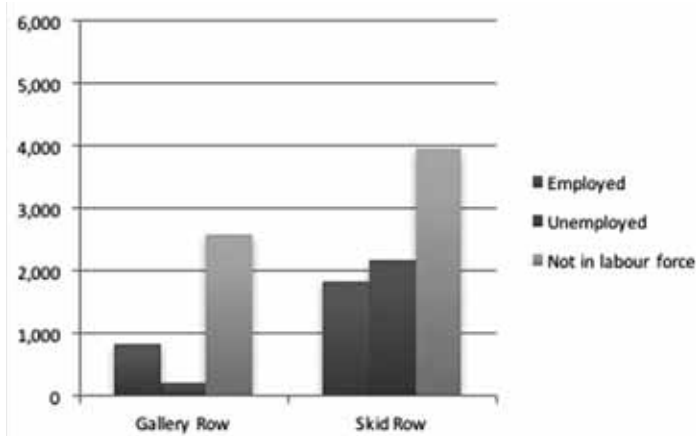


Figure 2 Labour force in Gallery Row and Skid Row, 2000
Source: US Census Bureau

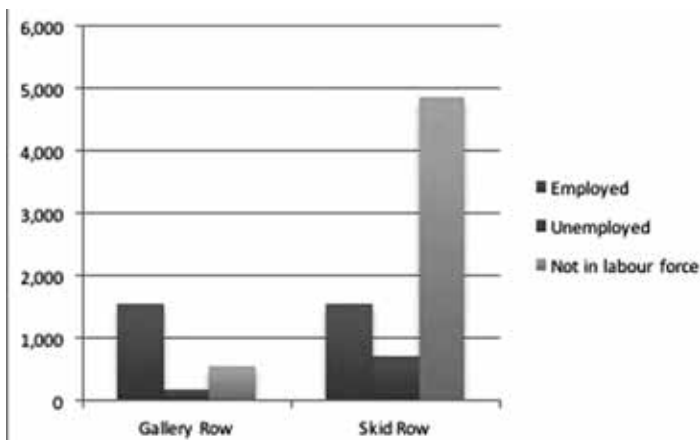


Figure 3 Labour force in Gallery Row and Skid Row, 2008
Source: US Census Bureau

The data summarised in the tables and graphs indicate that the story of Gallery Row is similar to that of other artist-led processes of urban revitalisation, like SOHO in New York or Wicker Park in Chicago. Namely, Art Walk and Gallery Row were ultimately used by city planners and private developers to brand this part of downtown Los Angeles and attract a gentrifying class of artists and other ‘creative professions’. However, if we describe gentrification only based on the previous quantitative metrics, we limit our ability to understand how this process was perceived and experienced by individuals on the ground and identify some operations that shaped neighbourhood outcomes. The purpose of the ethnographic study that is detailed next is to give a more nuanced analysis of the social actors and their actions in these processes.

Methods

From January to June 2013, we conducted an ethnographic study of Skid Row and Gallery Row. Since this is only one case study, the findings are not generalisable or representative of other neighbourhoods. Rather, we aimed to understand the effect and meaning of urban revitalisation through the lived realities and motivations of individuals in one locality. The majority of this research was carried out through participant-observation of the first author who volunteered to work with two community organisations in the area – the Downtown Art Walk and Historic Downtown Business Improvement District. Additionally, we conducted over 50 semi-structured interviews with various local and external actors. Local actors were residents, business owners, homeless advocates and representatives of community institutions (Neighborhood Council, social services and other community organisations). External actors included developers and investors/mortgage lenders, planning department and council district staff and representatives from homeless advocacy organisations (Tables 6 and 7). About one-quarter of the individuals we spoke to were either homeless or have struggled with homelessness.

Table 6 Local actors in downtown Los Angeles

Residents	long-standing/new arrival artists/non-artists homeless/housed owners/renters
Homeless advocates	long-standing/new arrival artists/non-artists homeless/housed
Businesses	long-standing/new arrival artists/non-artist proprietors/employees
Institutional	Neighbourhood Council Community organisations Social Service providers

Table 7 External actors in downtown Los Angeles

governmental actors	developers
investors	city-wide, state-wide or nationwide homeless advocacy organisations

To gain greater access to local actors, the first author began to work as a volunteer at the Downtown Art Walk and the Historic Downtown Business Improvement District in January 2013. Both organisations were aware of the study's research agenda and were willing to participate. They served as key entrance points into the social and political world of the neighbourhood, enabling further meetings, discussions and interviews with the major actors in Gallery Row's revitalisation efforts and with many other artists, residents and gallery owners in the area. Working for the Historic Downtown Business Improvement District allowed access to neighbourhood property owners and proprietors of small businesses, such as bars, restaurants, shops and other retail spaces. The Historic Downtown Business Improvement District staff also served as sources of information about the latest news in the neighbourhood such as building developments, business openings or local political battles. Interviewees were asked to recommend other important actors for additional interviews. Based upon the frequency with which a particular individual's name was suggested we were able to identify those social actors with high levels of involvement or influence. Following the tradition of critical sociologists (Burawoy, 1998a), our intention was not to achieve a representative sample size but rather to attain a level of embeddedness in the field that could give us access to data that would otherwise be unattainable through more positivist modes of data-gathering. Sampling was concluded upon reaching a level of 'saturation' (Small, 2009), or the point at which respondents in subsequent interviews no longer led to further refining or evaluating of the processes examined.

Additionally, the first author regularly attended the weekly Neighborhood Council meetings and several of the Council's smaller committee meetings.⁴ It was through the Neighborhood Council that he met several community organisers, who live in and around Skid Row, and who invited him to attend meetings of local activist organisations, such as the *Los Angeles Community Action Network* (LACAN), a watchdog and advocacy group that assists and mobilises those dealing with poverty and *Trees on San Pedro*, an organisation that seeks to improve and beautify the built environment of Skid Row. Through these organisations the first author was able to interview other residents in the area (both homeless and with homes). Finally, we regularly followed local newspapers, blogs and social media outlets to stay up to date on what was happening around the neighbourhoods.

The time and location of each interview depended on the preferences of the interviewee. At times, interviews were held at the interviewees' offices, galleries or stores. Interviews with community activists often took place in their homes, and for those who were homeless the interview was held at a local café. The interviews lasted 30 to

4 Neighborhood Councils are city-certified local groups made up of people who live, work, own property or have some other connection to a neighbourhood. Council Board Members are elected or selected to their position by the neighbourhoods themselves. For more information on the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council System, see <http://empowerla.org>.

45 minutes, were semi-structured, with mostly open-ended questions. Their objective was to gather a collective history of the neighbourhood and its rapid change from the points of view of different stakeholders better to understand how different groups influenced and were influenced by the neighbourhood's revitalisation. Rather than using a script, interviews began by openly asking respondents to express their views about neighbourhood revitalisation and its impacts on old and new residents and to articulate opportunities, concerns and challenges. Among the topics discussed were homelessness in downtown and what was to be done about it, gentrification in Gallery Row and its effects, and the role of art and artists in downtown.

The qualitative data gathered during interviews was recorded and analysed through hand-coding and the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998b; Merriam, 2009). Unlike grounded theory approaches to qualitative research, the extended case method requires that researchers conduct qualitative analysis with the intention of testing, or elaborating upon, existing theoretical frameworks. Brown-Saracino's aforementioned typology of social actors served as a guide for the qualitative analysis of this study. However, because our study interviewed gentrifiers as well as the gentrified, the intention was not to try and place respondents within Brown-Saracino's typology. An initial round of coding sought to identify perspectives on: (a) how respondents are affected by neighbourhood revitalisation; (b) how they feel these changes are affecting the community more generally; and (c) if, how and in what ways they are acting to resist or in any way shape these outcomes, both real and imagined. Another round of coding helped further to determine patterns in the data, and factual claims were always cross-checked by either archival research or asking other respondents the same question.

Our ethnographic approach was characterised by a number of weaknesses. For one, while we sought to interview representatives from many different categories of stakeholders, because our interview subjects were not randomly sampled, they may not compose a representative grouping of stakeholders and residents in the two neighbourhoods. Second, some possible biases may have arisen from the fact that our research involved volunteering part-time as employees at two organisations, which required developing and maintaining relationships with several of our interviewees. We sought to minimise this bias by carefully fact-checking all statements of fact made by interviewees and also making sure to interview a wide cross-section of neighbourhood actors. Lastly, a sole case study does not allow generalisation, even more so because of the distinctive context and reputation of the Skid Row neighbourhood.

The process of analysing the interviews revealed the complexity of the social landscape in the two neighbourhoods. After conducting a discourse analysis, we attempted to chart the positionality of the various actors affecting the area's revitalisation. As shown in Tables 6 and 7, a simple categorisation was not possible, given that occupations, motivations and actions of individuals placed them in multiple groupings.

For example, one neighbourhood council member and new resident of downtown Los Angeles is also homeless and has founded his own community organisation, which seeks to mobilise Skid Row residents in local politics. In another instance, we interviewed a long-standing artist, who is also an employee at a social services agency. Such individuals challenged the commonly perceived dichotomy of gentrifier versus gentrified. The multifariousness of these individuals led to another observation: seemingly opposed actors would at times collaborate in pursuit of a common agenda. These findings are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The ‘space in-between’

With some notable exceptions (for example, Freeman, 2006), most scholars identify gentrification as a zero-sum game, where gentrifiers win, while existing residents lose as they are faced with increasing rents and the threat of displacement. In the case of Skid Row and Gallery Row, however, our fieldwork demonstrated that reality is more nuanced: local politics and social interactions responded to and shaped the process of revitalisation and, to some extent, mediated the effects of gentrification. On the basis of this finding, we would argue that in certain cases the actions of one group may not always negatively affect the fates of the other. Rather, a ‘space in-between’ may emerge that allows room for new political engagement, a blending of different strategies of revitalisation and possibilities of forming partnerships for social preservation. Each of these will be discussed in turn and how they might allow urban planners activists and residents to imagine new potentialities for urban revitalisation.

New space for political engagement

Because of its spatial proximity, Gallery Row’s revitalisation has brought increasing public attention to the poor conditions of Skid Row. In fact, between 2004 and 2014, 162 articles about Skid Row have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* (Deener et al., 2013). According to our interviewees, the Skid Row community has taken advantage of this new awareness by mobilising themselves in the local political sphere. At the time of our research, there were four individuals on the Executive Board of the local Neighborhood Council (which includes a total of 15 members), who advocated on behalf of Skid Row. All four were either homeless or had experienced homelessness in the past.

In interviews, these individuals argued that it was imperative for them to participate in local politics in order to balance downtown’s business interests with the needs of the low-income and homeless population at Skid Row. Additionally, they also serve on specific Council committees, such as land use and economic development, so that they are further able to push a more ‘Skid Row-friendly agenda’ (downtown Neighborhood Council members, communication with authors). As one Skid Row

advocate on the Neighborhood Council put it, 'it's like the Matrix. You have to enter the Matrix to change the real world'.⁵ At the same time, they are all motivated by a renewed sense of possibility in Skid Row, given that Gallery Row's revitalisation has brought Skid Row to the forefront of public debate:

'Pretty much you can trace anything back to two groups downtown (in reference to big business interests and city hall). My vision is to create a third circle ... to represent the poverty and low-income interests. Because, really, there hasn't been anybody to try and unify them so it's been fractured, and being fractured it's been unable to amount to serious opposition to fighting the city and big business. By integrating ourselves [into the Neighborhood Council system], we can refine our arguments, and then they have to listen to us'. (Skid Row advocate on the neighbourhood council, communication with authors)

Despite the increasing presence of Skid Row interests on local committees, there remain significant power imbalances between Skid Row advocates and development and real estate actors wishing to revitalise these more gritty downtown neighbourhoods. While a number of homeless or formerly homeless individuals serve as active members or actively monitor the work of the Neighborhood Council, the Business Improvement District and other downtown groups, their lack of political capital prevents them from affecting long-term neighbourhood changes. As some of the non-homeless members of the Neighborhood Council and Business Improvement District noted, while the participation of Skid Row advocates is valued for the sake of representative democratic participation, their opinions and actions are largely irrelevant to the future of the area.

In contrast, other members of the Neighborhood Council have strong connections with developers, City Council members and business associations and leverage these relationships in order to facilitate certain projects. For example, the President of the Neighborhood Council, with strong connections to the Central City Association and the Council District Office representing the Gallery Row area, spoke in favour of a zoning variance for a large-scale commercial project close to Skid Row at a City Council public hearing. While she did not speak on behalf of the Neighborhood Council, her political capital gave her voice more weight than that of the Neighborhood Council as a whole, who, despite submitting a formal letter of opposition, were unable to stop the project from being approved.

5 We use the broad term 'Skid Row advocate on the Neighborhood Council' to describe anyone with a position in the downtown neighbourhood council who actively and consistently fights for the needs and interests of the homeless and low-income population downtown. However, on the Neighborhood Council Executive Board there is an official position for 'Central City East', the official name for the Skid Row area, as well as a position for 'Homeless representative'. Then there are also representatives of several Skid Row social service providers. While each technically represents different constituencies, their interests often overlap.



Figure 4 Protest against alcohol permit application by Main Street eatery.
Source: Mayor of Skid Row Photography

Despite these power imbalances, the political involvement of Skid Row advocates in the Neighborhood Council and other events is bringing some results. For example, Skid Row advocates have used the Council's by-laws to stop some offending development. According to the Neighborhood Council by-laws, there are strict procedural requirements for how the Council makes decisions. For example, according to the so-called Brown Act, the time, location and agenda of all Council and Council Committee meetings must be announced 72 hours in advance. There have been instances where Skid Row advocates on the Neighborhood Council have acted as whistle-blowers, identifying unfair practices by various Neighborhood Council members. After having submitted numerous complaints, one Skid Row advocate managed to secure a moderator from the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. This was important, since in subsequent Executive Board meetings, the presence of the moderator helped the Skid Row advocates to monitor compliance with the Brown Act and even push back votes that were technically being brought to motion prematurely (Skid Row advocate on the neighbourhood council, communication with authors).

Given their numbers, the capacity of Skid Row advocates to lobby and build a constituency has grown, allowing them to sway actions of the Council in order to

defend the interests of their community. For example, in March 2013, a proposal for a bar and restaurant on the ground floor of a new low-income housing complex appeared before the Neighborhood Council. Despite the fact that the city's zoning administrator had approved a conditional use permit for the restaurant, a group of Skid Row advocates on the Neighborhood Council were able to mobilise people in the neighbourhood (Figure 4) and ultimately have the decision appealed by withholding a recommendation for the alcohol licence (Vaillancourt, 2013). They claimed that such a decision would contradict the mission of the landlord, Skid Row Housing Trust, which primarily builds supportive housing for the homeless and includes services such as addiction treatment. Additionally, the location of the new housing complex is commonly known as a place where Skid Row residents meet and hang out on the pavement. Skid Row residents who socialise on the pavement are often targeted by the police, harassed or told to leave. Another concern, therefore, was that this new restaurant, catering to the upper-middle-class demographic of Gallery Row, would give the police an additional prerogative to relocate the social life of Skid Row residents. The declined motion represented a victory for the Skid Row community.

This contestation over urban space elucidates the metaphor of the neighbourhood as an 'arena' where actors can pursue and negotiate different strategies of revitalisation. The initially proposed retail business met the criteria of a creative class strategy, as it sought to attract an urban gentry through the creation of particular cultural amenities (in this case, a trendy bar/restaurant). The Skid Row advocates opposed this on the grounds that an establishment serving alcohol would be inappropriate since many Skid Row residents are struggling to overcome alcoholism and drug abuse. Instead, they pushed for the installation of retail that was both suitable and affordable for their community (in the end, an ice cream shop opened). In this sense, they were not against revitalisation in and of itself, but rather opposed to certain strategies of revitalisation that did not adequately address their needs.

What the above examples demonstrate is that despite the power imbalances between different stakeholders, the political involvement of Skid Row residents and advocates, in some instances, allows them to affect certain outcomes. These individuals are not gentrifying newcomers to the area, but rather long-time residents who have been mobilised by the neighbourhood changes and have inserted themselves into new spaces of political engagement. Thus, associating revitalisation with the systematic displacement of low-income population ignores such instances of contestation where marginalised groups and their advocates may act to shape the process of revitalisation to achieve more equitable outcomes.

Partnerships for social preservation

A concurrent result of this political engagement has been the forming of new partnerships that transcend racial or socio-economic boundaries and to a certain extent link the fates of Skid Row and Gallery Row. Many of the community organisers on Skid Row have also begun to collaborate with what they refer to as ‘loft dwellers’, recognising that there can be issues of mutual concern between them. As one organiser mentioned, ‘it’s the city that is gentrifying the area, not the loft dwellers. If they come here and see the condition of Skid Row and they see how the city is treating us, we can reach out to them and bring them on our side’ (Skid Row community organiser, communication with authors). These partnerships have resulted in the founding of several new not-for-profit organisations, as well as increased lobbying efforts to improve the area for the homeless denizens by keeping parks in Skid Row open later and installing new public bathrooms and waste bins.

The founder of one not-for-profit organisation that seeks to beautify Skid Row by planting pavement trees explained that the extreme neglect of public space, sanitation and public safety in Skid Row are now issues of mutual concern for an increasingly mixed population. As she explained:

‘I started an organisation ... and I’ve organised with several of the loft owners here. I’m interested in planting and maintaining more trees in the Skid Row and I’m interested in enhancement and support of our two parks. I’m interested in the conditions on the street, installing benches and public art ... and those are things that the community wants, homeless and housed.’ (Skid Row community organiser)

Such a statement parallels the guiding philosophy of the ‘social preservationist’ described by Brown-Saracino (2009), in that some of the neighbourhoods’ newcomers are aware of their role in gentrification and yet actively seek to mediate its effects by taking action to defend the interests of long-term residents. Through these partnerships with ‘social preservationists’, Skid Row residents and social activists have been able to organise community events such as beautification projects and public forums. For example, at a small meeting called by Skid Row community organisers with the city attorney regarding pavement use, a group of Skid Row community activists used the diversity of their constituency to highlight and strengthen their cause: As a Skid Row community organiser emphasised:

‘It’s me, a tent sleeper next to me, someone else that lives in the historic core [of downtown Los Angeles] but still in an SRO building and just other folks from the community that are long-term Skid Row residents, doing positive things ... so us speaking as a community, it’s sort of this motley crew and you know, this is Skid Row, you’ve got tent sleepers and loft dwellers all together. So listen to us, *all* of us.’ (Skid Row Community organiser)

Some of the meetings we attended included both homeless and 'loft people'. Discussions in these meetings indicated that both parties associated themselves with the larger community, which includes Skid Row. Such collaboration between social preservationists and long-term residents of Skid Row and their advocates challenges prevailing notions of a zero-sum game, where the gentrifiers wish to wipe out the problematic aspect of the existing socio-physical context. While not all new residents may agree with them, the new lobbying efforts and grass-roots organisations that have emerged from this willing collaboration are actively imagining and creating a new kind of revitalisation in downtown LA in which Skid Row is part of the picture, the homeless are housed and residents both new and old have a right to remain a part of the community:

'Don't believe the negative hype about this place. I claim Skid Row proudly ... there's some other loft people that do too. But I claim it, and that's why I connect with a lot of the other grass roots organisations here, because they claim it also.' (loft dweller, communication with authors)

'When you talk about revitalizing downtown LA, I don't care how many billion-dollar projects you do, you've got to address the Skid Row factors. Because, if they are talking about attracting international tourism, people all over the world know about Skid Row, and they're not gonna come downtown because they're scared of the homeless ... so, we have the same common denominator ... because as Skid Row cleans up, so does the image of downtown Los Angeles. And the business sector, it's a better sell for them ... so while they may not like our style, they like the results.' (Skid Row community organiser, communication with authors)

As the last quote indicates, to 'clean up' the area, which in this context refers to local efforts at increasing the number of trees, providing better street sanitation and creating accessible green and open space for residents, will ultimately address the needs of everyone, from the low-income residents to tourists. Indeed, for these individuals operating 'in-between' Gallery Row and Skid Row, revitalisation does not necessarily have to result in the ugly aspects of gentrification. While it is true that social preservationists have a lot less at stake than those long-term residents in danger of being displaced, their participation in efforts to improve the area demonstrates to the local political establishment that unfettered development has wide – rather than narrow – opposition within the community. Whether revitalisation leads to displacement and neglects or improves the lives of certain members of the community is influenced by their collective action.

Progressive-entrepreneurial revitalisation

Given that Gallery Row and specifically the monthly Art Walk event have brought the larger Los Angeles community to the doorstep of Skid Row, several artists and activists have used the emergence of this public spectacle as a medium through which to project new narratives about their community. Indeed, for much of the recent history, the media have perpetuated the negative image of Skid Row. Even some not-for-profit social service providers, despite their efforts to help ‘end’ or ‘reduce’ homelessness, have at times perpetuated a damaging and limiting image of Skid Row:

It’s filthy. Sad. Dangerous. Heartbreaking. Depressing and destructive. It is an area of the city dominated by flop houses, welfare hotels, drug dealing and crime. (website of mission in Skid Row)⁶

However, by conceiving the revitalising neighbourhood as an arena, certain outcomes of revitalisation – namely, cultural production and consumption – can also be exploited by marginalised groups for social and economic benefit. As Gallery Row continues to draw visitors to the downtown area, some artists and creative leaders in Skid Row have been using art and performance to engage with new audiences and reframe their image in the public eye. In stark contrast to the ‘creative class’ strategies that revitalised Gallery Row, such efforts can be considered as ‘progressive strategies’ of cultural revitalisation (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). Indeed, previous studies have shown how, by attaching a community’s common heritage and social history to productive modes of development, cultural urban revitalisation can improve the image of marginalised populations and attract investment in the community (Hamnet and Shoal, 2003; Wherry, 2011). In this sense, cultural urban revitalisation can also act as a motor, or forum, for previously marginalised groups to gain economic and cultural capital.

For example, the LAMP Community, a housing provider and continuing care centre for the homeless and mentally ill, emphasises art and culture as a means for rehabilitation and community building. On Art Walk nights, LAMP opens a pop-up gallery that showcases the work of their resident artists (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). This pop-up gallery, which directly borders Gallery Row, allows them to draw in some of the event’s foot traffic. Inside, Art Walk visitors not only have a chance to view the art, but talk directly with the artists about their work and their lives.

Additionally, the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a grass-roots art and performance organisation, organises public theatre performances and workshops that draw from the personal experiences of residents on Skid Row (Figure 6), which they advertise on Art Walk nights and through the local media. With these performances they are able to document the development of Skid Row as a neighbourhood in transformation and foster local pride in the community.⁷

6 See http://web.archive.org/web/20150326113259/http://www.fjm.org/our_work/on_skid_row.html.

7 During one film and performance festival, they labelled Skid Row ‘The Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere’. See <http://www.lapovertydept.org/biggest-recovery-community-anywhere/index.php>.



Figure 5.1 On Art Walk nights, LAMP opens a pop-up gallery that showcases the work of their resident artists
Source: Author



Figure 5.2 On Art Walk nights, LAMP opens a pop-up gallery that showcases the work of their resident artists
Source: Author



Figure 6 Public theatre performances and workshops on Skid Row
Source: LA Poverty Department

Figure 7 Reel Recovery Film Festival poster
Source: LA Poverty Department



The Los Angeles Poverty Department also worked with filmmaker Thomas Napper to show his documentary *Lost Angels: Skid Row is My Home* (2010) as part of the Reel Recovery Film Festival in Skid Row (Figure 7). The film presents the lives of eight homeless people in Skid Row, using their stories to question gentrification, police abuse, as well as the city of Los Angeles' mental health safety net. The film allowed Skid Row residents to clarify some of the misconceptions people have about the area, while also presenting its human side.⁸ The screenings we attended were nearly full, populated by residents from all around Los Angeles, including members of the downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, who spoke at length, after the film ended, about the need to 'complete the story' of downtown with the social history of Skid Row.

Just as Wilson and Keil (2008) argue that real creativity in the contemporary city comes from the low-income and marginalised poor, who constantly find innovative ways to adapt to or transform the urban environment, the resourcefulness and resolve of these individuals on Skid Row requires a reimagining of what kinds of neighbourhood improvement projects constitute urban revitalisation. At the same time, the mobilisation of local resources to meet the needs of the community, while also promoting the area to tourists and visitors, possibly represents a fourth typology of cultural urban revitalisation strategies that blends progressive, entrepreneurial and creative class strategies, more equally distributing the cultural pie (see Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007 for a discussion of the three aforementioned cultural strategies). In this sense, certain arts and cultural programming can give new power to the voices of the under-represented, while still attracting outside visitors and cultural consumption to the revitalising neighbourhood. Cultivating such revitalisation strategies requires that activists and urban planners operate in the 'space in-between', engage local identities and help liberate their creative capacities.

Conclusion

We conclude by returning to address our three research questions, stated in the introduction. The case of cultural urbanisation in Gallery Row seems to indicate that even in a deeply marginalised community (such as the one in Skid Row), local actors can intervene and have the potential to affect and mitigate some of the effects of gentrification. At times, such intervention may result in political or spatial contestation and may demand the mobilisation of community forces and activism to counteract displacement of the neighbourhood's physical and social context. At other times, intervention may require finding and enhancing the 'space-in-between', through political engagement and the formation of strategic partnerships and collaborations between new and long-standing residents (Figure 8). Indeed, 'social preservationists' can serve an important role by joining forces with long-time residents and initiating progressive or

8 See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/06/lost-angels-film-puts-hum_n_2253613.html.



Figure 8 Locating the space in-between

even ‘progressive-entrepreneurial’ revitalisation strategies. In such cases, instead of being a zero-sum game that always dooms low-income communities, revitalisation may offer some advantages to both gentrifiers and long-time residents and result in more equitable outcomes.

In our case study, members of Skid Row showed the capacity to use strategies of revitalisation to prevent projects of gentrification and employ arts and culture to reframe damaging narratives that inhibit community development. We use this as an example of how it may be mistaken to perceive even the most disadvantaged neighbourhood as a powerless victim lacking agency and determination to prevent displacement. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the ‘space in-between’, characterised earlier as a kind of arena where social actors can challenge elite interests in revitalisation projects, is also fraught with power imbalances and controlled by local politics. Such power imbalances can lead, and have led, to population displacement and the geographical shrinkage and containment of Skid Row in a smaller area. As Slate (2006) reminds us, displacement and spatial struggles over territory are often a key component of gentrification. We cannot expect grassroots collaborations always to be able to counteract on their own larger political interests and powerful real estate forces. Planning considerations and initiatives for affordable housing development, housing preservation and local economic development must be also pursued by public officials in order to ensure that strategies of cultural urban revitalisation have more equitable outcomes.

Admittedly, more cases studies are needed for the development of generalisable conclusions. However, based on the findings of our own case study, we suspect that the story of gentrification is a nuanced one. There are more than two categories of actors and the simple binaries of gentrifiers/gentrified or winners/losers do not capture interactions leading to various outcomes. Rather than polarise the communities they are working in such ways, it is important that planners and policymakers

invested in cultural urban revitalisation locate the 'space in-between', for it is a space where they can engage with multiple stakeholders on issues of common concern. Furthermore, we suggest that gentrification scholars must approach the revitalising neighbourhood as a constant arena of political and spatial negotiation and as a series of phenomena experienced, perceived and reacted to differently by different stakeholder groups. In other words, we call for a social imagination that reassigns power, agency and legitimacy to citizens as actors in their own right, not simply as objects in the 'creative city'.

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