



Design: The Greening of Skid Row

By Wolf Von Eckardt Monday, July 19, 1982

Los Angeles builds a controversial park for derelicts

Like most inner-city open space, the new 15,000-sq.-ft. Skid Row Park, just east of downtown Los Angeles, is littered with drunks and derelicts. But no one minds. The place was designed for them. The designers of the park, a Los Angeles firm called POD, Inc. (Process Oriented Design), have won an award from the American Society of Landscape Architects for their thoughtful and straightforward approach to a tough urban problem—combining a community park with a haven for bums.

The problem was posed by the local Community Redevelopment Agency as part of its attempt to restore downtown economic health by bravely attacking Skid Row, a nearby slum of roughly 10,000 to 15,000 people that is a sort of sunlit version of Charles Dickens' London. The \$25 million plan called for making the slum more livable with new housing, rehabilitation, social programs and two parks. Skid Row bums, the theory went, could be dissuaded from wandering downtown by being given patches of grass and benches to sleep on, a shelter for keeping dry, toilets, and freedom from harassment by police and teen-age gangs.

The "bum haven" concept was pioneered in 1980 by the Sixth Street People's Park in the South of Market section of San Francisco, but Wino Park, as it is locally known, is hardly a community asset. Skid Row Park is—or at least promises to be. Graffiti on a wall and sprawling drunks are never a pleasant sight. But despite them, youngsters in Skid Row Park use the basketball court, and smaller children play in the sandbox. Most of the neighborhood—illegal Mexican immigrants, destitute

transients, the elderly and other community residents—seem to take equal pride in the place. It is their park.

To plan Skid Row Park, POD held two workshops. In the first, some 45 community residents, social workers, bums and police officers roughed out designs with such makeshift materials as paper cups, ice cream sticks and colored paper. In the second, a similar group scrutinized POD's preliminary proposal and suggested refinements.

POD's special problems were to provide for peaceful coexistence between neighborhood children and bums and to make the place safe, easy to maintain and reasonably vandalproof. This meant that almost everything in the park would have to be clearly seen from the street. It also meant that play areas would have to be separate from the sitting and lounging areas. The shelters would be gazebos furnished with concrete tables and chairs. The benches would be made of metal. There would be bright lights at night. POD's design accomplishment is that none of this looks defensive or institutional. Indeed, it looks like a park most people would want.

But it remains fiercely controversial. Community leaders say more children will use it once the bums have their proposed second haven. Police complain that the park has done little to draw derelicts away from downtown or reduce crime. Some downtown businessmen maintain that derelicts do not deserve a haven anyway. Says Todd Bennitt, 33, the designer in charge of the project at POD, "The jury is still out."

Park User George Green, 56, however, has made up his mind. Says he: "This is a good place to sit and watch all the nuts in the world." —By Wolf Von Eckardt. Reported by Steven Holmes/Los Angeles

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