

My diploma project partner, Matilda Wallsten and I travelled to Los Angeles, California to research our site, Skidrow – located in downtown LA, the densest and largest population of unsheltered homeless individuals in the United States.

Our workspace during our research was Lehrer Architects, located west of downtown. Michael Lehrer, president of Lehrer Architects has completed two projects in the heart of Skidrow, the James M. Wood Community Center and the Drop-In Center. We sat with Michael for an interview of his understanding of the area and his current involvement. Although we had the workspace, most of our time was spent in the 54-block radius of Skidrow. There was a constant flux of fear and comfort throughout the duration of the trip, varying from day to day and dependent on our company when we were with in the area. To better understand the area and the affiliated groups – we spent a large share of time meeting with existing organizations and their executives, permanent staff, and volunteers. Our first meeting was (via skype) was with social anthropologist, Jeffrey Schoenberg – who has over ten years of fieldwork with the homeless in San Francisco, CA.

Our next meeting was with Marc Casanova from Homeless Healthcare Los Angeles (HHCLA) and 3 caseworkers who are staffed at the HHCLA Syringe Exchange. We continued to meet with HHCLA throughout the 3 weeks and even got the opportunity to interview a few of the homeless clients of HHCLA. Further into the trip – we met with experience designer, Jinsoo An who lives on one of the main streets running through Skidrow. We were able to sit down with him in his studio for approximately an hour and ask of his experience the past 2 years living in the neighborhood. Across the street from Jinsoo was MADE Café, ran by the Downtown Women’s Shelter. The café became our spot to sit for a quick coffee in the area in between meetings. The café also sold gift items, where the proceeds go directly to the shelter. A block over from Jinsoo is the Union Rescue Mission, where we met with staff member Michael who gave us a tour of the facilities in the mission.

Following, we met with Linear City Developers’ partner Yuval Bar-Zemer who gave his opinion on resolving the homelessness issue in Los Angeles. The following day we drove throughout different neighborhoods in LA County with street artist, Skid Robot. He has been trying to bring the homeless issue to the public eye through his art the past twenty months and has significantly caught the attention of media. He also showed us his collaboration projects with Tiny House builder, Elvis Summer. We were able to meet some of his new friends living on the streets and they shared how his art has affected their lives.

In 2014, the architecture offices of Michael Maltzan built a new Skidrow Housing Trust (SRHT) apartment, Star Apartments. We got a tour of the building by a member of SRHT of why this 100-unit building was so successful. To understand different viewpoints of the area, we met twice with OFC Deon Joseph, who has been working in Skidrow for the past 17 years at the Los Angeles Police Department (located across the street from Star Apartments).

We continuously drove through the neighborhood carefully capturing videos where people’s faces are at a distance to understand the different qualities in the 54 blocks and the transition between Skidrow and it’s adjacent neighborhoods. We got involved in different events that took place weekly in Skidrow, such as Love LA – a church for the homeless, providing a meal after each service. We also took part in Skidrow Clean-up, a weekly private initiative taking the grime off the streets with brooms and dustpans to better the neighborhood environment. We attended lectures and utilized the LA Public Library for resources.

The study trip was an overall enriching and overwhelming experience, seeing Los Angeles in a very different light.



*Sidewalks in Skidrow*



*Tiny House, Elvis Summers | Mural, Skid Robot*



*Gregory, Homeless Veteran in Skidrow*