

# Los Angeles Times

## Dismantling L.A.'s 'Walled City'

Hong Kong tore down its squalid Walled City in the 1990s and built affordable housing for squatters. Los Angeles must do the same.

By Joel John Roberts  
September 27, 2006

Years ago I ventured into the Walled City, an infamous block of metropolitan high-rise decay in Kowloon, in the heart of Hong Kong. I felt like Alice falling into an urban rabbit hole.

A majority of the 50,000 residents who live on a mere 6.5 acres rarely saw the sun. Some narrow streets led to nowhere. Surrounded by a modern metropolis, the decayed turf was owned by the Chinese government during the time Hong Kong was ruled by Britain. With no clear political control, it was a lawless land ruled by gangs and drug dealers.

Today, Los Angeles' skid row reminds me of the beginnings of the Walled City, once the most densely populated piece of land in the world. Ours is likely the most densely populated area of homelessness in the United States, with 10,000 homeless people within 50 square blocks. Community leaders are fighting about when and where laws can be enforced within skid row. Enforce laws during the day, but provide a legal reprieve at night? Law enforcement officials say their hands are tied, so more and more squatter tents are springing up.

A jurisdiction with little or no police presence attracts criminal behavior that brews lawlessness. Could skid row become our version of a lawless, homeless haven, a walled city within a metropolis? The foundational

elements have already been laid – confusing laws that tie the hands of law enforcement, growing squatter encampments, jurisdictional leaders fighting about what to do and surrounding municipalities that are happy that this area – not theirs – is bearing the brunt of the homeless problem.

But there is hope.

By 1994, Hong Kong's Walled City was no more. Community leaders realized that it had become an international embarrassment to an otherwise world-renowned tourist attraction. So they dismantled the enclave even as advocates fought to save it. The government spent nearly half a billion dollars to provide affordable housing for squatters.

With smart, sound solutions – such as providing L.A.'s squatters with a place to live – everything else falls into place. The police can instill law and order, businesses can attract customers, residents are able to feel safe and people who now languish on our streets have a place to call home.

Only when our community leaders can agree that the real solution to this societal plague called homelessness is providing decent and affordable housing for everyone will L.A.'s version of a walled city be no more.