

SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOTELS, HISTORIC PRESERVATION,  
AND THE FATE OF SEATTLE'S SKID ROAD

A Thesis

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by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis concerns the social history of the Skid Road/Pioneer Square—central Seattle’s oldest neighborhood and the city’s historic laborer’s district—as well as the implications of historic preservation activities there during the 1960s and 1970s. The gradual rehabilitation of the Skid Road’s built environment as a middle-class destination neighborhood signaled a significant break from its down-and-out history and urban “grit,” characterized by the presence of workingman’s hotels and poor, near-homeless residents. The thesis describes and contextualizes this type of cheap lodging house (more recently known as single room occupancy hotel, or SRO) and surrounding laborers’ district during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Skid Road was a necessary space for Seattle’s temporary residents, although largely opposed to bourgeois social norms. SROs continued to characterize the Skid Road as it experienced disinvestment in subsequent decades, and they contributed to discourses of the neighborhood as trashed urban space. The thesis describes the Skid Road’s early preservation and gentrification, which sped the elimination of the existing cheap hotel stock. The discussion subsequently explores the tension between two distinct but at times overlapping ideologies regarding the neighborhood’s authentic character: that the Skid Road was defined by its architectural character, and that it was defined by a social environment fostered by its historic workingman’s hotels. Pulling from archival sources and existing urban histories, and adopting the metaphor of grit, the thesis suggests that the dominant preservation discourses in the Skid Road largely have overlooked the area’s historically significant role providing housing and other spaces for many of the city’s most vulnerable residents.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathon Rusch is a fourth- or fifth-generation South Dakotan, depending on how you look at it. He was born and brought up in Vermillion, alongside a twin brother, Mark. As a youngster, he and his family took frequent car trips through, out of, and back into the Midwestern hinterlands, sometimes for his father's long-term project documenting South Dakota's courthouses. Jon graduated from Vermillion High School, and in 2006 he received a B.A., with highest honors, from the University of Minnesota. In 2010, after a few aimless years that occasionally proved valuable, he entered Cornell University's graduate program in historic preservation planning. He is an Eagle Scout, a committed bicyclist, a collector of the most mundane postcards, and a fan of old rock and roll.

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I was aided in this project by a number of folks: Katelyn Wright helped with suggestions and connections in Seattle, as well as provided good cheer and a few free drinks; Genna Nashem oriented me to Pioneer Square early on in the process; Carolyn Marr at the Museum of History and Industry was as helpful as possible during the freak snowstorm that shut down Seattle while I tried to research. Historic Preservation Planning Alumni, Inc. supported my trip to the Northwest through a Barclay Jones Grant, and I was fortunate to get it. Rhiannon and Carter Fox deserve plenty of thanks for letting me stay with them, and especially for putting up with me when I was housebound. And more thanks go to noble Winston, whom I took on some wonderful walks along Lake Washington in the snow.

I thank my family for their support. This may not be a sentiment expressed often, but I owe my parents so much for bringing me up in South Dakota. I'm proud to be from

there. Thanks for travelling with us, and for playing oldies in the car. It all made me who I am—which is, I think, a good thing.

I'll always value the good friends I have made in Vermillion, Minneapolis, and Ithaca. I plan to tell them more in person, because I don't want to subject them to reading my thesis acknowledgements.

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Finally, my brother Mark has been my truest and most valued friend. There is no way that I can describe all of the ways that he has helped me, seeing me through good times and narrow straits. I can only hope that I will be able to reciprocate everything in turn.

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## INTRODUCTION

### BUILDING ON THE RUINS OF THE BURNT DISTRICT

Seattle is a city ruined and remade by fire. Flames were sparked by hot glue in a cabinet shop on June 6, 1889, and spread through the entire business district, ultimately eliminating nearly all of the building stock of the city's core. More than thirty blocks, some sixty acres, were burned down to the mudflats.<sup>1</sup> Like the fires that consumed large portions of central Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Baltimore, and other American towns and cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Great Seattle Fire obliterated most of the city's earliest built fabric—and, as a result, allowed engineers and architects to refashion the city according to a more contemporary urban vision.

One year before the fire, Seattle was a remote but growing outpost of roughly 30,000 inhabitants. The city's center lay along the eastern edge of Elliott Bay, a deep inlet of Puget Sound. A small collection of grandiose commercial buildings had been built during the boom of the previous decade. Surrounding them were scores of wood frame houses, which led up the steep hills ringing the bay and into the dense, towering evergreen forests that blanketed the region. As Seattle pushed upward and outward, the trees were felled, milled, and shipped by sea. The expanding city also stretched into the bay, on tidal flats that were filled with sawdust. This was stinking, marginal land adjacent to the formal business district, and it attracted disreputable establishments of gambling, drinking, and prostitution. But much of this urban landscape was lost during the fire. Residents were left

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Sale, *Seattle: Past to Present* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), 50.



with the ruins of their city's commercial, residential, and industrial past (*Image 1*), which they soon removed in order to make way for the foundations of the new Seattle that would rise from the cinders almost immediately.<sup>2</sup>



Image 1: Ruins of the Occidental Hotel, a landmark of Seattle's pre-fire commercial core  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, BAB39

The area in ruins was known as the “burnt district,” but it was quickly rebuilt. For decades after it was known as the Skid Road, a name adopted from early Seattle's prominent log track that led downhill to the waterfront. Felled timber was “skidded” down to reach the city's first sawmill, and the corridor became the northern boundary of the laborers' district that shared its name. (The Skid Road was used as a somewhat pejorative name for the neighborhood during its period of severe disinvestment in the mid-twentieth century. More recently the area was rebranded as Pioneer Square; this name originally

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Karl Ochsner and Dennis Alan Andersen, *Distant Corner: Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H.H. Richardson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3.

referred to the area immediately surrounding a wedge of public space at the intersection of the central city's two street grids. This small park, as well as the adjacent Pioneer Building, commemorated the city's first settlers and entrepreneurs. Because of these associations, the name Pioneer Square came to denote the entire district beginning around 1960, as redevelopment advocates increasingly recognized the area as significant to the city's heritage.)<sup>3</sup>

Rebuilding after the fire had both infrastructural and architectural dimensions. Undoubtedly, practical improvements were necessary to address problems that had disrupted life in old Seattle. In the years after the fire, engineers raised the central district's streets and sidewalks about one story above the uncertain ground. A new municipal sewage system snaked through the "underground" spaces below the sidewalks. And to minimize the chances of a catastrophic fire devastating the city once more, new ordinances required buildings in the urban center to be built largely of brick or stone. But the architects responsible for designing Seattle's new masonry commercial blocks introduced the city to new architectural idioms in addition to new materials: the burnt district disappeared underneath rows of heavily-massed blocks with grandly-arched Richardsonian Romanesque facades. The building boom that followed the Great Fire was meant to substantiate Seattle's position as a growing regional economic center with a built environment that matched those of industrial American cities to the east.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this thesis, Pioneer Square and the Skid Road will be used interchangeably, with Pioneer Square appearing more frequently in later chapters that describe the postwar period. "Skid row" is a general term that was adapted from the Skid Road, and it can refer to any laborers' district in the United States—as both a noun ("The Main Stem is Chicago's skid row") and an adjective ("Anderson lived among Chicago's skid row hotels").

<sup>4</sup> Ochsner and Andersen, *Distant Corner*, 57-65.

But Seattle in the late nineteenth century was the product of the economic and social realities of its outpost status, and despite its rising national position, the city gained a reputation as a rough and tumble place. Its economy depended on the labor and cash of the laborers and struggling opportunists, predominantly white males, who worked at its harbor and mills. They passed through the city between commitments at surrounding logging camps and coal mines, or else arrived in the late 1890s en route to the Yukon and Alaska on gold-seeking expeditions. The city's first wave of rebuilding, between 1889 and 1893, filled the single neighborhood of the Skid Road: urban life and economies of all kinds—formal and informal, involving multiple social classes and ethnic groups—took place side by side. Perhaps to a greater extent than in many young American cities of the same period, Seattle's rise resulted from the strengths of both its reputable and disreputable economic sectors.

The current urban landscape of the Skid Road/Pioneer Square reflects the interchange between these contrasting but cooperative sides of the city's past. This is apparent in the district's numerous workingman's hotels, a historically essential but now largely neglected form of temporary housing for poor laborers and the unemployed in industrial-era American cities. (More recently, the name single room occupancy hotel, or SRO, has referred to this type of cheap lodging house. This thesis will use both names, although SROs will primarily describe these establishments following the First World War.) In the context of the American Northwest's early extraction economies, workingman's hotels played a critical role in the experiences of the transient miners, loggers, and other laborers who sought accommodations in the city between work seasons.

As in other American cities of the late nineteenth century, Seattle's varied hotels created a dual register of urban social and economic life. Workingman's hotels stood within blocks of luxury hotels. Newly constructed brick, stone, and terra cotta buildings housed commercial activities at the street level and rooms to rent on the floors above. Dry goods stores, offices, banks, and restaurants stood adjacent to a residential landscape that housed some of the city's ill-famed activities: alcohol consumption, card games, lewd dancing, prostitution. Laborers concentrated here not only for affordable lodging and proximity to employment, but also in order to access environments that provided familiar cultural practices and gratified their class-based tastes for leisure. (Progressive reformers viewed the marginal lodging houses as an affront against those things the suburbanizing bourgeoisie valued most about their own single-family homes, including permanence and ownership, cleanliness and order, hygiene, space, and access to nature.)<sup>5</sup> Seattle was characterized not only by its new architecture, but also by its heightened sense of social juxtaposition among contrasting classes. Pioneer Square's commercial blocks and residential hotels comprise the built heritage of the city's diverse labor pools at the turn of the twentieth century, and of the culture of impermanence and informality that largely defined the district in the wake of the Great Fire.

The workingman's hotel, then, was a fundamental resource in Seattle's zones for social others. By the midpoint of the twentieth century, the Skid Road yet contained many operating hotels, but larger industrial transformations in the Northwest had dramatically modified the character of the district. Resource extraction and urban manufacturing slowed after the First World War, lessening the number of laborers who migrated through the city

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 201-232.

and required temporary lodging. But cheap hotels still brought in crowds of unemployed, single men whose labor was not needed anywhere. Many of them were former unskilled laborers who had enjoyed the region's earlier boom years, but who now were aging out of the workforce. And after the Second World War, what manufacturing remained relocated into the spreading suburban fringe, leaving the historic core to accumulate the city's unwanted elements. The hotels of the Skid Road signified poor safety and morality, and many city residents and business leaders viewed Seattle's historic urban core with suspicion and fear. Associated with alcoholism, idleness, mental illness, physical decay, and collapse, the neighborhood stood squarely in the realm of urban blight.

Buildings that once served as low-cost residential hotels remain ubiquitous throughout Pioneer Square, although one could not be expected to distinguish them now that much of the collage of commercial signage that once identified them—painted brick facades and projecting electric lights advertising room prices and amenities—has faded or been removed. To many of us, the urban realities that workingman's hotels represented to generations of immigrants and the poor are now concealed from view.

As a result of the city's early historic preservation movement during the 1960s and 1970s, former hotels and surrounding buildings were rehabilitated into galleries, studios, offices, boutiques, and up-market housing. This development reflects the passage of time and the constant transformations of the city's uses and forms. But seen from a critical viewpoint, the adaptive reuse of workingman's hotels in the Skid Road expresses some long-lasting misunderstandings of inexpensive, impermanent housing. According to cultural geographer Paul Groth, the experiences and needs of SRO dwellers have been "culturally invisible" because these people lack social power, and because their residential

paradigm so drastically differs from policy makers'.<sup>6</sup> One can argue that by rehabilitating low-cost residential hotels, advocates of the mainstream historic preservation movement have been complicit in further misguided attempts at urban social reform. Of course, it is hardly a clear-cut debate: in Seattle, dramatic and unexpected events quickened the pace of urban change, and debates simmered among property owners, planners, architects, and preservationists regarding gentrification and the future of low-cost housing in the Skid Road. While some suggested that old SROs be preserved in order to maintain the district's somewhat rough social character, their attempts were mostly unsuccessful in the face of a large-scale middle-class transformation.

This thesis explores the fates of the Skid Road's workingman's hotels in order to pose questions regarding the social history of twentieth-century cities, historic preservation outside of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, and contested notions of urban "authenticity." The significance of the neighborhood to Seattle's history is widely recognized; Pioneer Square has long been listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places and Seattle's local landmarks registry. Workingman's hotels, however, get scant attention within the neighborhood's historical narratives, despite their prevalence. The story of central Seattle's former SROs points to a root question within historic preservation: how is the preservation of buildings' material fabric related to intangible social conditions that have defined its history? Is the presence of poverty a character-defining feature that should be considered alongside architectural rehabilitation? In short, should planners address down-and-out social conditions—sometimes referred to as urban "grit"—as a preservation issue?

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The term grit is interesting in this context because it can call to mind the writings of nineteenth-century architectural critic John Ruskin. Ruskin's first book, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, was a touchstone of the Gothic Revival movement in the United Kingdom but has had a broad influence on preservation thinking since his lifetime. Ruskin revered historic architecture in those instances when it displayed the traces left by use and the passage of time. In "The Lamp of Memory," he effusively described the spiritual dimensions of a building's age: its patina is evidence of its survival across time, located "in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity."<sup>7</sup> Preservationists have recognized Ruskin by his material "anti-scrape" approach,<sup>8</sup> warning against restorations that remove additions and finishes a building has accumulated over time. But Ruskin aimed higher, describing the metaphysical conditions that contribute to what he evocatively referred to as the "golden stain of time:"

[I]t is not until a building has assumed this character, till it has been entrusted with the fame, and hallowed by the deeds of men, till its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death, that its existence, more lasting as it is than that of the natural objects of the world around it, can be gifted with even so much as these possess of language and of life.<sup>9</sup>

I cannot hope to match Ruskin's zeal or devotion to these ideas, but I want to use this passage as a starting point in order to suggest a "grit" that is at once material and social, defined by an opposition to middle- and upper-class standards of urban living. In addition to the Skid Road's "hallowed" qualities—the architectural evidence of its post-fire

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<sup>7</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley, 1854), 177.

<sup>8</sup> The term was coined by William Morris, in harmony with Ruskin's writings; see Sir John Summerson, "Ruskin, Morris, and the 'Anti-Scrape' Philosophy," in *Readings in Historic Preservation: Why? What? How?*, ed. Norman Williams et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 177.

rise and Gold Rush boom—the neighborhood gained evidence of what might be called “suffering” over the course of its development: its down-and-out social history, the poverty of its residents, and the steady loss of investment through the middle of the twentieth century. This form of grit, then, resided in buildings’ physical changes, which occurred during their operations as SROs and often were brought on by deferred maintenance that hindered cleaning and repairs. But grit was also found in the social lives and daily routines of hotel residents, who filled commercial and public spaces throughout the district. Some outsiders associated their presence there with alcoholism, rough behavior, and physical threat, supported by the hotels and other institutions that catered to their needs. These connotations were not accepted universally, but the Skid Road has always signified elements of social “otherness.” A central question that emerges from this discussion is, would efforts to preserve Pioneer Square’s down-and-out social characteristics amount to an anti-scrape strategy?

### ***Approach of study***

Broadly speaking, this project draws its approach from the social history of architecture and urbanism. Hence, it will situate downtown Seattle’s social relations in terms of spatiality (physical distribution) and materiality (built forms). The thesis will describe these social relations—here, predominantly expressed by class differences—as they have been reflected AND refashioned through the city’s built environment. Urban historian Joseph Heathcott, for one, has called this a dialogic approach, which presumes that “members of social classes seek to inscribe values into spatial forms, and that spatial



forms in turn shape and organize class relations.”<sup>10</sup> Observers can employ this easily in the Skid Road: here, labor conditions created the need for particular housing responses, and the presence of cheap hotels long fostered a marginalized urban community and entrenched social divisions between those inside of the historic laborers’ district and those outside of it.

The following analysis will be guided by works from disciplines such as vernacular architecture and cultural landscape studies. The contribution of these two fields is, most simply, their attention to the “common” components of the built environment that have been designed, built, or inhabited by “common” people. At present, they overlap through a shared interest in what the limitless places in the United States and beyond can tell us about the dynamics of cultural life. Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Collins Cromley, for instance, have written that vernacular architecture has come to employ a “context-based” approach, meaning it addresses “the particular *kind of community* under investigation rather than a set of specific qualities or characteristics of the buildings themselves.”<sup>11</sup> And Paul Groth succinctly states that “ordinary landscapes are important archives of social experience and cultural meaning.”<sup>12</sup> Employing this perspective, I aim to use the residential landscape of the Skid Road as a lens through which to view social relations in central Seattle during several temporal contexts.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Heathcott, “Reading the Accidental Archive: Architecture, Ephemeria, and Landscape as Evidence of an Urban Public Culture,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 41 (2007): 241.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Carter and Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *Invitation to Vernacular Architecture: A Guide to the Study of Ordinary Buildings and Landscapes* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Groth, “Frameworks for Cultural Landscape Study,” in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4.

This thesis will pull from the primary and secondary historical resources that have documented the changing functions of the Skid Road since its construction. Information on its spatial development and social currents springs from a range of primary archival materials: newspapers, photographs, maps, city directories, planning reports, and sociological studies based in field research. These are threaded together by more general scholarly and professional accounts of the development of Pioneer Square, with occasional theoretical considerations from scholars who study broad patterns of urban change in the United States.

My methodological focus on analyzing archival resources, many of them digitized and available online, provided a wealth of information that helped explain the forms, functions, and discourses of the Skid Road leading up to its transformation in the 1960s and 1970s. Other approaches could have contributed additional insights to this discussion. More intense fieldwork in the neighborhood, for instance, might have allowed for greater firsthand exploration of the spaces and materials of the buildings, and also for me to interact more closely with the communities who are the subject of this thesis, and who still inhabit the area. While I was able to spend some time in the Skid Road, I was restricted by a few factors: I came to Seattle while I was still in an early stage of the project and was yet formulating my questions; the interiors of many of the old hotels and other Skid Road buildings are inaccessible to the public; I had only so much time to spend in Seattle, and even that was limited beyond what I had originally planned. As a result, the thesis veers strongly in an academic direction. Even though the topic is often the social and physical textures of grit, the discussion may lack a visceral engagement with reality of the Skid

Road. In spite of that, I believe I am still able to raise significant issues that aid our understanding of the neighborhood as *place*, as it is and as it has been.

I will quickly offer a roadmap that explains how the thesis will reach the point at which it considers those questions. The first chapter is a typological study that explores workingman's hotels within the historical context of the hospitality-based hotel for upper and middle classes, as well as in relation to skid rows as national trends in the United States. Beginning by illustrating the development of the hotel institution, and then continuing to explore the characteristics of cheap lodging houses, it positions the workingman's hotel as an oppositional housing type that has been associated with alienation, impermanence, lower-class tastes, and vice. Overall, this chapter describes the workingman's hotel as a cultural symbol: one whose existence and built form responded to the economic and social realities of the nineteenth-century United States, but one that also invited largely negative perceptions of the urban neighborhoods in which they stood.

The second chapter describes the urban developments of the Skid Road as the context for the workingman's hotels that housed Seattle's laborers. Applying the discussions of the first chapter to the broader city, this chapter describes the post-fire development of central Seattle in relation to its transient and immigrant laborers. The historically class- and gender-based residential landscapes of this part of downtown Seattle prior to the 1920s will receive attention as particular urban environments that continued to characterize the neighborhood during the following several decades.

The third chapter covers the development of the Skid Road amidst changes in the regional economy following the First World War. After previously reliable industries faltered, Seattle's SROs absorbed jobless residents, transitioning the neighborhood from a

laborers' zone to a zone of unemployment, physical deterioration, and social distress. While facing its own particular problems, such as the forced removal of Japanese-American hotel owners to internment camps in 1942, the Skid Road became characteristic of many blighted (or "trashed") areas in American central cities during the postwar period, as middle- and upper-class Seattleites withdrew into the expanding suburban periphery.

The fourth chapter continues the chronological narrative and describes the city's early grassroots preservation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which ultimately refashioned Pioneer Square as a gentrified, somewhat edgy urban environment. Influential figures and agencies in the movement will be introduced, along with landmark projects and proposals that re-envisioned the neighborhood's public spaces and buildings, including its many SROs. While some projects recommended affordable housing, the majority contained artists' studios, boutiques, and other establishments that suited middle-class consumer and tourist tastes.

The fifth chapter analyzes how different advocates involved in Pioneer Square's rehabilitation understood the goals and social implications of the preservation movement. It highlights two general positions, which made largely competing claims regarding the neighborhood's "authentic" state. According to the first, the neighborhood was defined by its late-nineteenth-century architecture, which had favorable lifestyle connotations to incoming privileged owners and users. This perspective, aided by real estate pressures and code changes, guided the rehabilitation of the neighborhood's shuttering SROs. According to the second position, the neighborhood was defined by its "grit," particularly as expressed by the presence of poor residents. Sympathetic property owners proposed affordable housing options to keep some hotel occupants in place within the neighborhood—although

these advocates were also involved in other, traditional rehabilitation projects that privileged architectural character over social character.

The conclusion briefly describes further developments that have emerged after Pioneer Square underwent its initial transformation. Has Pioneer Square, now regarded as an important preservation success story, continued as a largely gentrified neighborhood? What elements of “grit” remain, and are they considered to be defining characteristics of the area’s identity? The thesis will end with short thoughts on the complications of grit, and suggestions on further work that must be done on SRO preservation. With any luck, more questions will be raised than answered.

To summarize, this thesis will explore the development and social dynamics of Seattle’s laborers’ district and skid row, from its initial boom through its mid-twentieth-century decline and its dramatic transformation into a middle-class consumer-oriented neighborhood, aided by the burgeoning preservation movement. The district’s workingman’s hotels will receive particular attention. Out of the neighborhood’s building types, these hotels maintained geographic predominance during their first several decades. But more importantly, they housed residents who did not conform to the modes of bourgeois urban living. The resulting “grit” made plain the spatial dimensions of the city’s class divisions, as much during the late nineteenth century as during the middle of the twentieth. But as Pioneer Square was rehabilitated, and as investment returned, how did the neighborhood’s down-and-out dynamics factor into its preservation? Preservation activities revealed separate notions of the neighborhood’s authentic qualities as place. Fundamentally, would the Skid Road become a *different place* entirely without its hotels and their residents—and what did Seattle stand to gain by retaining them?

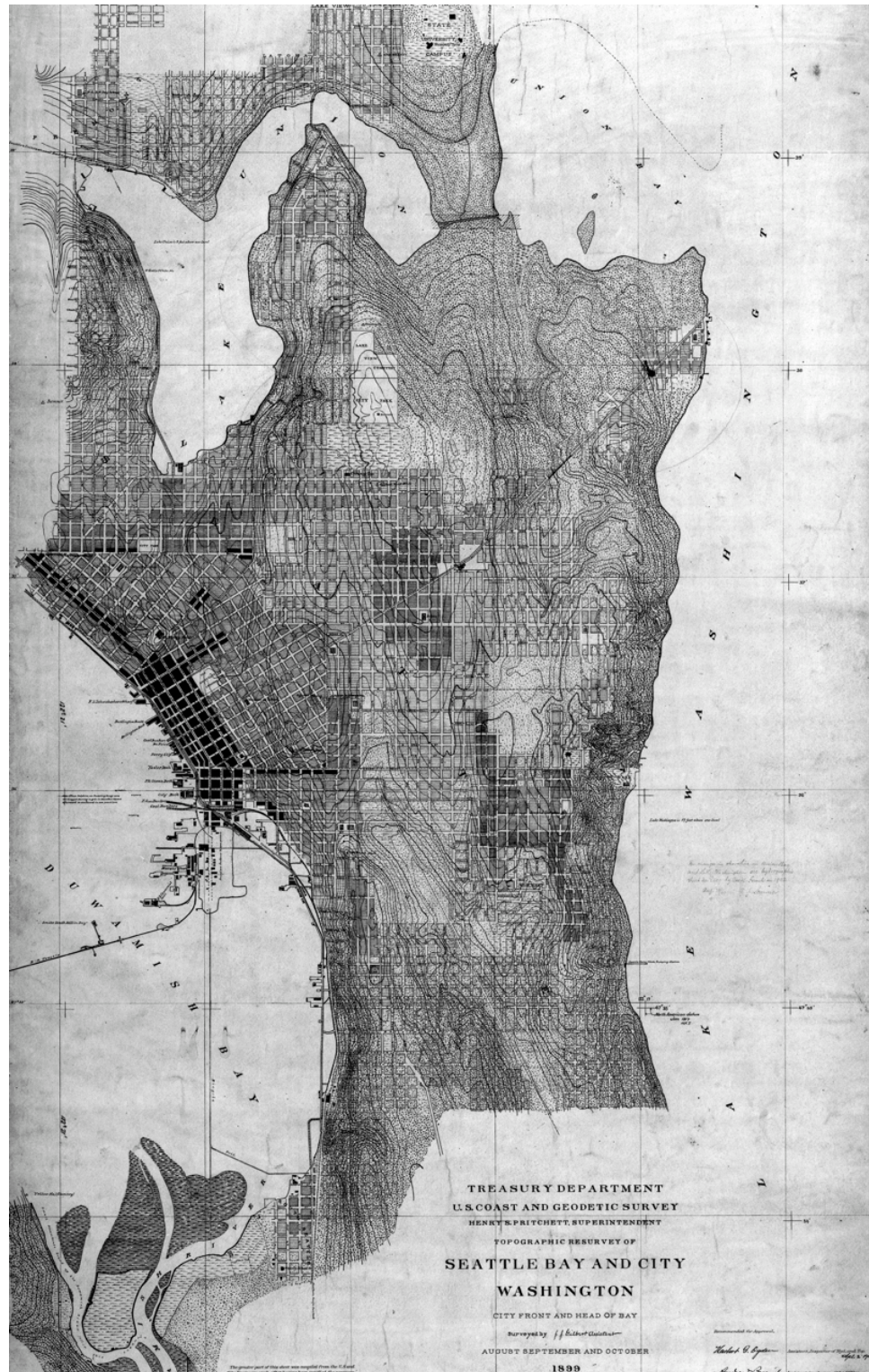


Image 2: 1899 survey map of Seattle; the Skid Road district at this time comprised the southernmost nine blocks of the city's core, represented in black. Yesler Way is visible as the dividing line between street grids; the docks extend south into Elliott Bay.

Source: United States Coast & Geodetic Survey Topographic Sheet T-2421, *Seattle Bay and City, Washington*

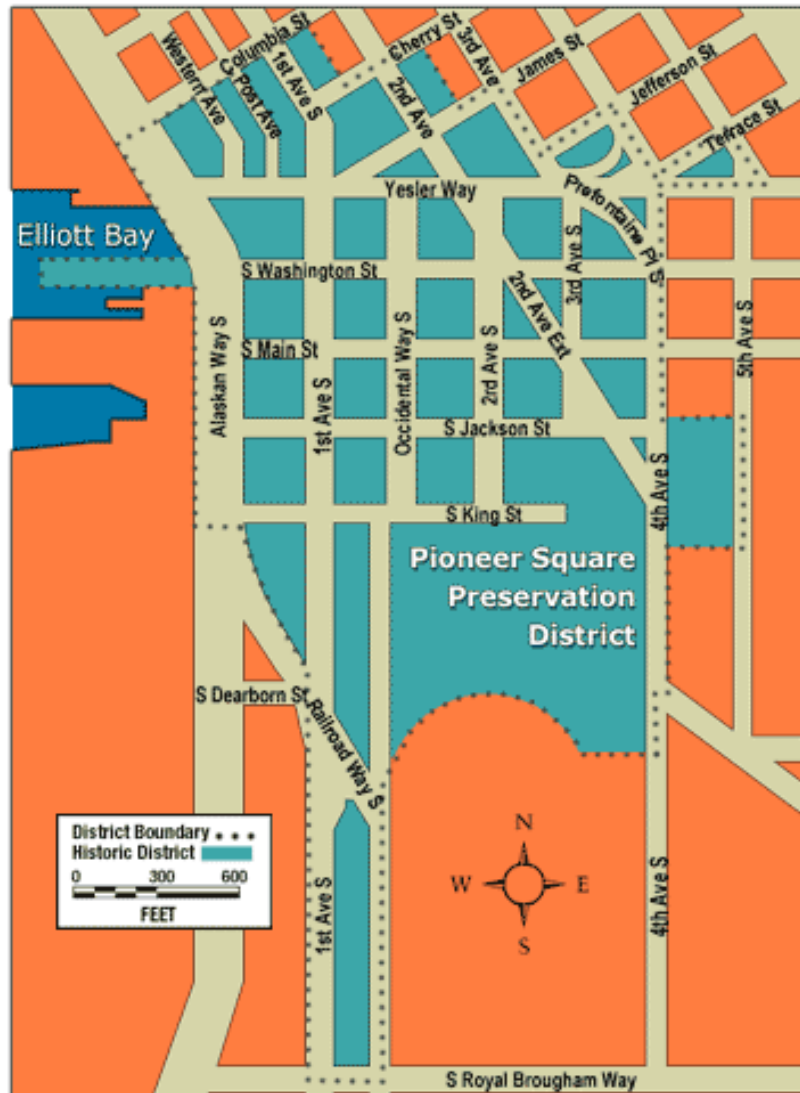


Image 3: Street and boundary map of the current-day Pioneer Square Preservation District  
Source: City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

## CHAPTER I

### WORKINGMAN'S HOTELS AND SKID ROWS IN CONTEXT

The cheaply appointed lodging houses that rose along the streets of central Seattle near the turn of the twentieth century belong to a familiar American tradition, the hotel, a typology that had reached its hundredth year soon after the city's great fire. During that century, the United States saw the boundaries of its territory push west, past the Mississippi River to reach the Pacific Coast. The monumental expansion of the nation's borders, networks of commerce, and industrial infrastructure propelled transportation innovations—notably, the great systems of turnpikes, canals, and railroads. The institution of the hotel was introduced in the United States in response to the subsequent mobilization of goods, capital, and labor, and its innumerable examples became common features of the nation's built environment. Setting the stage for later sections on the case of Seattle, this chapter explores the origins and growth of the hotel typology in the United States, emphasizing its various forms that accommodated the social classes that were created through nineteenth-century capitalism. Of particular interest, of course, are the lowest-cost hotels intended for the rootless and marginally employed. This discussion will explain the predominance of workingman's hotels throughout the marginalized laborers' districts now known as skid rows. It will also mention social anxieties related to the (un)suitability of non-permanent housing. This overview will begin to account for the fraught path of Seattle's workingman's hotels as they have undergone transformations through the past century.



### ***The lodging house within the hotel tradition***

Until well into the second half of the twentieth century, the workingman's hotel was the defining residential type used by the laboring inhabitants of Seattle's Skid Road. Similar neighborhoods in other American cities (namely New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco) also filled with these hotels, which packed laborers and other poor residents into a hive of small rooms, with minimal comforts. Historians, urban policy makers, journalists, and sociologists have used a number of other names for them, including single room occupancy hotels. These establishments extended the operating principles of the upper- and middle-class hotel to laboring classes. In the midst of a range of new, related forms of urban accommodation in the nineteenth century, workingman's hotels were a specialized response to the conditions of the unskilled labor market of the United States, which encouraged transience and demanded affordability.

Only the first of these considerations was addressed when the hotel institution first arrived on the American scene in the late eighteenth century. The earliest hotels were designed, constructed, marketed, and priced with the upper classes in mind. For these elites, the hotel heralded an acceptable alternative to the public house, an establishment that had provided temporary lodgings to the middle and lower classes throughout Britain's North American colonies and the very early United States. The public house offered modest lodging rooms as well as food and drink, although drinking in fact may have achieved highest priority.<sup>13</sup> Often converted from other building types, public houses had no shared architectural qualities to announce themselves to passing travelers. If anything, they had in common their small size: they offered fewer than ten rooms, each housing a few guests at a

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 31-32.

time. Sharing beds was also not uncommon. Each public house's hearth room, where travelers consumed food and beverages, was cramped and could have housed beds when not otherwise in use. Middle-class guests likely would have begrudged the overcrowding (requiring very tight quarters with members of lower social classes) and the unpredictable quality of beds and food.<sup>14</sup>

The uppermost American social classes had been able to travel comfortably enough without relying on public houses: they mined their family, religious, and fraternal connections to lodge at the houses of those who shared their social standing. But the earliest American hotels were something entirely new: the first privately owned, temporary accommodations intended for economically comfortable Americans. These institutions isolated the privileged classes and were oases of refined taste along the uncertain road; in so doing they sidestepped the suspect accommodations of the public house. The vast difference was apparent through their architecture. The first hotel was Washington, D.C.'s Union Public Hotel, a three-story pedimented building whose Georgian style and considerable size launched it well above the doubtful respectability of the public house. Standing a full three stories tall and 120 feet across, with many dozens of bedrooms and several public rooms at ground level, it was the largest privately-owned building in the city at the time it was built, in 1793. The following year, the City Hotel rose along Broadway in New York City: also immense, it contained 137 rooms (*Image 4*). Many of them were reserved for individuals, a further innovation on the public house that signaled the hotel as a new, socially legitimate space of comfort and semi-privacy outside of the home.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24.



Image 4: Watercolor of New York's City Hotel based on an illustration in the 1848 city directory, copied by Abram Hosier  
Source: New-York Historical Society

Such early hotels were greeted enthusiastically by reputable American businessmen and merchants, whose involvement in the early nation's commercial networks sent them on the road more and more often. Recent turnpike and canal construction, transportation innovations (such as the steam engine and ultimately the railroad), and a migrating frontier expanded the market boundaries for agricultural and manufactured goods through the country's interior. This economic environment of mobility promoted an unfamiliar condition among the middle and upper classes: itinerancy.<sup>16</sup> The movement of people, goods, and capital intensified after the opening of the Erie Canal in the mid-1820s. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, farmers moved produce to eastern markets from the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-48.

growing Midwest; merchants brought manufactured and imported goods west; cotton came from plantations in the South.<sup>17</sup> The country's quickly evolving transportation infrastructure reconfigured the geography of accommodation, as small outposts with public houses were skipped over by travelers now able to get from one market center to another in the course of a single day. By 1840, proper hotels could be found in most of the United States' forty largest cities, evidence that each was engaged within the country's network of marketplaces.<sup>18</sup>

Within these first decades, the hotel typology was malleable to functions apart from lodgings, as well as to customers who were not among the wealthy. For the early elite hotel patrons, interior spaces served as stages for social theater that created opportunities for socializing and displaying fashions.<sup>19</sup> And historian Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, drawing on Jürgen Habermas's pioneering theorization of civil society's public sphere, has argued that the American hotel and its public gathering spaces served roughly equivalent roles to the eighteenth-century European coffee house and salon, where members of the bourgeoisie gathered for critical debates on the actions of the state.<sup>20</sup> American hotels, which served as the nodes of far-flung networks of capital and commercial goods, were potential sites of exchange for the opinions of a diverse set of travelers. While the uppermost tier of hotels certainly welcomed only white property-owning elites, those who stood on lower rungs of the social ladder increasingly found they could enter the meeting

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<sup>17</sup> Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 101-121.

<sup>18</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 55-56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 260-261.

spaces on the street levels of many hotels in order to conduct their affairs.<sup>21</sup> This form of the public sphere, as Sandoval-Strausz points out, depended less on class-granted literacy and critical reasoning abilities than on unanticipated, sensory encounters between guests and local residents whenever they gathered in the public areas of hotels to “select precinct captains, enjoy a few rounds of drinks, hear lectures, or plan protests.”<sup>22</sup>

The commercial, social, political, and intellectual relationships that were fostered among travelling guests and local populaces characterized hotels’ increasingly dynamic roles within American cities through the middle of the nineteenth century. Their fundamental premise—privately operated, multi-unit establishments providing temporary privileges to private domestic spaces—found wide new markets. The highly respectable hotels for elites gave way to more modest establishments for the middling classes, who could not afford room and board rates of \$2 or \$2.50 per night.<sup>23</sup> As tourism and industry grew in the United States, many more Americans of moderate means had reason to take to the road. Proprietors of mid-market hotels mimicked the comforts of luxury hotels in order to appeal to the middle class’s aspirational tastes and desire for respectability—at around half the price of their up-market competitors. (Once American middle-class families began to travel, safety and presumed decency were among their principal concerns.) Facades showed markedly less ornament and were likely clad in brick rather than stone; furnishings were more cheaply constructed and surrounded by less expressive décor; guests’ rooms were simply smaller.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

But even considering their more modest spaces, American hotels for middle-class patrons shared luxury hotels' protective qualities: they yet sheltered their guests from close contact with members of the lower classes, as well as any physical manifestations of poverty and poor taste that might have been encountered in the public house. Both varieties legitimized a state of transience that, during the Colonial period, had widely been perceived as characteristic of the itinerant, the poor, and those who preyed on others.<sup>25</sup> Hotels created what amounted to satellite domestic spaces for their lodgers: travelers were not truly away from home—and strange places were not so strange after all—if they could expect their new surroundings to be agreeable to their levels of taste.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, American hotels were successful enough in creating home-like spaces that members of the middle and upper classes began to live in them for extended periods, rather than occupy private residences.<sup>26</sup> These pioneers upended the expectation that hotel guests would be only temporary, and they reflected a growing market for what later would be called residential hotels: establishments built specifically for long-term residents, billed by the week, month, or year. Despite the intense cultural value that nineteenth-century Americans ascribed to individual homes, whether detached residences or row houses, crowded hotel life had its appeal. Some residential hotels were cheaper than renting or owning a more traditional dwelling, on account of the efficient, replicated use of space that characterized the hotel model. In addition, some middle- or upper-class housewives lobbied to move their families to hotels in order to sidestep the responsibilities of domestic labor: hotel staff handled cooking and laundering centrally. The ensuing popularity of residential hotels was attributable to

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 38.

residents' lifestyle choices *and* financial needs. As the markets for individual homes in American cities heated up through the middle of the nineteenth century, the residential hotel was adapted as a new multi-unit domestic building type, the apartment. Shared spaces and services were eliminated, as units contained their own parlors and kitchens to replicate the private spaces of the bourgeois home.<sup>27</sup>

Several residential options, then, were available to urban dwellers with means, offering different configurations of private and communal spaces and responsibilities. Urban neighborhoods in the United States filled with densely stacked multi-unit buildings. But lodging in well-appointed hotels and apartments remained a privilege out of the reach for many workers, and class stratification necessitated further permutations of the residential hotel. The storied tenement appeared in industrializing American cities during the 1830s. Essentially a cheaply appointed apartment building for poor immigrants and the expanding working class, the tenement consisted of self-contained domestic units (equipped with kitchens) that were then taxed by inadequate maintenance, overcrowding, and poor sanitary conditions.<sup>28</sup> One alternative for single individuals later in the nineteenth century was the rooming house, a form of residential hotel that provided private, modestly furnished bedrooms along with shared meals and public rooms. The semi-permanent skilled workers (both male and female) who concentrated in rooming houses—including craftsmen, office workers, and salespeople—were widely seen as proximate to the middle classes, but their insecure employment prevented them from firmly entering those ranks. Most often rented in monthly durations, their lodgings safely housed their various possessions and represented their aspirations for social decency and acceptance, through

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<sup>27</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 263-279.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 278-279.

minimal but acceptable furnishings and a willingness to submit to a code of conduct and a form of supervision *in loco parentis*.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Lodging houses and skid row environments***

The preceding overview of multi-unit residences in nineteenth-century American cities briefly shows the adaptations to the hotel model that aimed to meet the various housing needs of a range of urban social classes. The most down at heels class consisted of itinerant, unskilled laborers involved in manufacturing, the railroads, farming, and resource extraction. They could ill afford the rates of rooming houses; their unsteady and geographically varied work required lodging for short periods, perhaps a night or a week at a time. This group, just skirting homelessness, or even occasionally flirting with it, lived in yet a more basic kind of accommodation: the lodging house, a broad category that includes the workingman's hotel. Amidst the broad tradition of multi-unit residential building types in the nineteenth-century United States, the cheap lodging house was characterized by a particular set of attributes. Like travelers in proper hotels, lodging house patrons stayed for short periods of time, often no longer than a week. Yet lodging houses connoted the threats of modern American urban life that the mid-market and upmarket hotels hoped to hold at bay: unsanitary conditions, proximity to strangers, moral deviance, and constantly shifting populations. Lodging houses qualify as a subtype of residential hotels, as they served as their residents' only homes and provided few private amenities within individual rooms. Yet in contrast to other hotels intended for privileged customers, lodging houses seldom contained shared spaces for eating and socializing. Lodging houses were unique among the

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<sup>29</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 90-109.



new nineteenth-century American dwelling types in that they offered minimal services and facilities to accommodate permanent (or at least extended) states of impermanence.

This mix of characteristics carried forward the tradition of the public house and tavern—the establishments that previously had housed sailors, transients, and other poor Americans. Public houses did persist in the nineteenth century. Sandoval-Strausz, for instance, points to an early scene of 1851's *Moby-Dick* in which two sailors were forced to share a bed in the Spouter-Inn, on the Massachusetts coast.<sup>30</sup> But the lodging house translated these minimal, cramped accommodations through the fundamental hotel model: a purpose-built block of many near-identical rooms, managed centrally and available for flexible periods of time. Surprisingly, major scholarly works on lodging houses in the United States do not specify when and where the first examples were built. Some of the earliest, no doubt, were located in Chicago, which by the 1870s was the node of a vast web of railroad lines that moved laborers between the Northeast's manufacturing belt and the agricultural lands of the Upper Midwest and South. According to one historical account, Chicago's Main Stem neighborhood was considered the "national capital of Hobohemia."<sup>31</sup> Similar establishments had risen along the Bowery in New York City near the beginning of the Civil War, in order to house sailors and shipbuilders who found work at the shipyards on the lower East River.<sup>32</sup> Based on these contexts, it is likely that the lodging house appeared as an identifiable institution in American cities during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. One hypothesis is that in this period of national expansion—in terms of

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<sup>30</sup> Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Hoch and Robert A. Slayton, *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Ferrara, *The Bowery: A History of Grit, Graft and Grandeur* (Charleston: History Press, 2011), 37-39.

territory, transportation networks, unskilled work forces, and production and consumption patterns—the density of the hotel model became appropriate to accommodate growing numbers of temporary laborers required in manufacturing, resource extraction, and agriculture.

This provides an economic explanation for lodging houses. Urban planner Charles Hoch and historian Robert Slayton have suggested a client-based definition that is appropriate as much to the twentieth century as to the nineteenth: “All these buildings housed one kind of resident—poor, transient working people—who moved back and forth within a self-defined poverty scale seeking dignity and autonomy.”<sup>33</sup> The lodging house has been a private-sector solution to the lack of inexpensive housing for urban laborers. Private rooms and meals—two lures of moderate- and high-priced hotels on the “American plan”—were available in only a few cheap lodging houses. Accommodations in the low-cost hotel marketplace have allowed guests the very basic choice of a bed, cot, canvas hammock, or even a dry patch of floor—placed cheek by jowl alongside others precisely like it, filled with other poor and weary working men (and occasionally women) in similar financial straits.<sup>34</sup>

The clusters of cheap lodging houses in or adjacent to the downtowns of cities such as Seattle became a hallmark of skid rows. That name originated in the American Northwest (as the following chapter will explain) before being adopted to denote similar areas in cities across the United States. And while the lodging house is not unique to skid rows—it has served an equally important role in poor ethnic neighborhoods—the two have long been linked in observers’ minds. This is so much the case that one definition dating from the 1960s characterizes skid rows simply by their built environments, only implying

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<sup>33</sup> Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 140-144.

their social environments: it refers to “a district in the city where there is a concentration of sub-standard hotels and rooming houses charging very low rates and catering primarily to men with low incomes.”<sup>35</sup> Paul Groth contends that a better definition for skid row is a “single-laborer’s zone,”<sup>36</sup> which emphasizes its social community. This discussion will show that this kind of urban area has been reliant on a specific class of laborers, which held a place there through the presence of cheap lodging houses.

Members of upper classes have long maligned these areas, believing them to be filthy, threatening, and brimming with vice. The reputations of skid rows were well established by the 1920s, when their characteristics were identified and codified in the early work of American urban sociology. In 1930, University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess integrated them into his canonical (if highly simplistic) concentric ring model of the American city, labeling them “zones in transition.” In doing so, he catalogued their lower material and moral status within the social hierarchy of urban sectors:

[...] with a factory district for its inner belt and an outer ring of retrogressing neighborhoods, of first-settlement immigrant colonies, of rooming-house districts, of homeless-men areas, of rooming-house districts, of resorts of gambling, bootlegging, sexual vice, and of breeding-places of crime.<sup>37</sup>

And impressions largely did not improve in subsequent decades. In the middle of the twentieth century, the slowing of central urban manufacturing and the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients were just two factors that put many vulnerable urban residents into even more treacherous straits, swelling the ranks of the

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<sup>35</sup> Donald J. Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Groth, “Third and Howard: Skid Row and the Limits of Architecture,” in *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, ed. Zeynep Çelik et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest W. Burgess, “The Value of Sociological Community Studies for the Work of Social Agencies,” *Social Forces* 8 (1930), 483.

near-homeless who sought cheap nightly lodging.<sup>38</sup> As one major sociological study of skid rows in the 1960s plainly stated, “The ‘normal’ population would refuse to live in the housing occupied by these men. Here the incidence of disease, neglect, and cruel living conditions is far higher than in almost any other district of our large cities.”<sup>39</sup> The prejudices skid rows have encountered throughout the twentieth century have been sustained precisely because of their concentrated lodging houses. Due to their poor, impermanent residents and often sub-standard facilities (*Image 5*), this non-traditional form of housing has consistently been emblematic of social and moral decline. Still, the

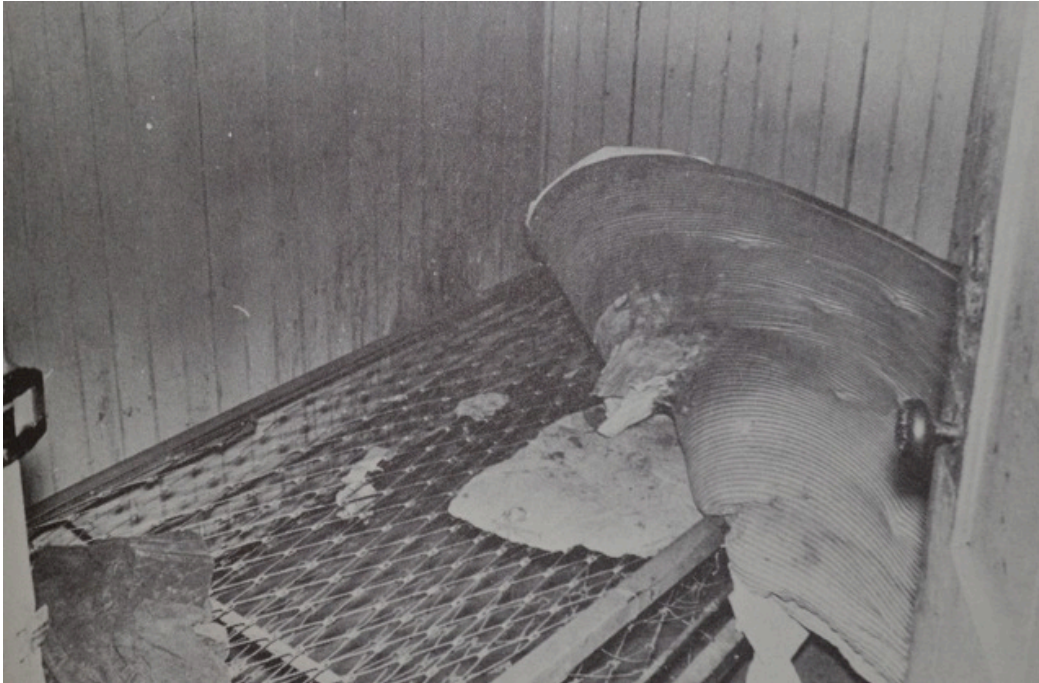


Image 5: Photograph documenting the poor conditions of a Chicago SRO, from a major 1963 sociology study of skid rows. Its caption reads, “The mattress: no beauty and little rest. Note the vomit marks on the walls. This was taken in one of the more poorly operated hotels and the photographer contracted bedbugs.”  
Source: Donald Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities*

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<sup>38</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 270-273.

<sup>39</sup> Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities*, 2-4.

persistence of this institution, as well as the enduring socio-spatial forces that have supported it, suggests the lodging house has a considerable but overlooked significance within the hotel tradition—and more broadly, within American residential history.

### ***The urban laboring classes***

Before describing the various forms of cheap lodging houses, I want to discuss their first wave of residents, whose particular class-based attributes brought a consistency to the built environments of skid rows in American cities toward the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Groth's proposed phrase "single-laborer's zone" includes two of the characteristics that defined the residents: their apparent independence from intimate relationships, and their class status as largely unskilled workers. Two further characteristics were equally as important: that they were mostly male, and that many lacked the ability or the desire to stay in one place for long. The geographic and metaphorical heart of the laborers' district was commonly the city's train station: lacking firm economic roots, the district's resident laborers arrived in town and left again relatively rapidly after failing to find a job, or having ridden out their work camps' off-season, or having wrapped up short-term stints in nearby factories or on the docks. They secured their work (if they had any) through informal employment arrangements in manufacturing, the railroads, shipyards, and resource extraction.<sup>41</sup> If they wanted work, they often had no

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<sup>40</sup> The profile of typical hotel residents shifted in the 1920s and 1930s, towards unemployed or pensioning men who sought indefinite stays. Their presence defined the skid rows in the mid-twentieth century—but the earlier generation of transient laborers will receive attention here because cheap hotels were first built for them. Chapter 3 details Seattle's Skid Road after 1920.

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 149.

option but to accept jobs with unbearable conditions and exploitative management. Infamous large-scale examples included the Chicago stockyards, but small factories could be equally as unpleasant. As the typical laborer lacked local family or roots, the cheerless working conditions resulted in extremely high turnover rates among urban industrial workforces: it has been estimated that at the turn of the twentieth century, industrial cities on the East Coast replaced half their local unskilled workers every decade.<sup>42</sup>

The social category that has come to encompass this lifestyle of work and migration is the hobo, which has now an American cultural emblem. Depending on one's use of the term, hobos comprised the bulk of cheap lodging house residents in the United States. Nels Anderson, the Chicago School sociologist who had once worked as a transient laborer, speculated that in the early 1920s, two-thirds of Chicago's marginal hotel residents at any given time were hobos, amounting to between 300,000 and 500,000 who passed through the city in a year.<sup>43</sup>

Numerous other lodging-house patrons could be classified differently: for instance, semi-permanent residents who remained marginally employed in a single city. But the hobo and his mobile lifestyle are helpful in considering the lodging house in the context of the hotel tradition. Earlier hotel types had developed in response to the mobilization of merchants and manufacturers within the early United States' expanding markets, but the lodging house signified the growing need for transient work at the opposite end of the social class spectrum. The lodging house's comparatively few amenities and low architectural standards adapted the hotel's basic premise as a home away from home to

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<sup>42</sup> Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 3.

accommodate a group who had no homes in the traditional sense and whose means could not stretch to cover other forms of lodging. According to this account, the contrasting luxury hotels and lodging houses broadly represent two sides of the same coin: they respectively housed those who profited from American transportation and manufacturing economies and then those who followed wherever flows of capital and jobs led, doing the dirty work and reaping meager benefits.

### ***The many forms of the lodging house***

But what specific shapes did the lodging house take, then, and historically what would one have been like as a place? Subsequent chapters will describe the local context and conditions of the Skid Road, which originated under somewhat different circumstances than the laborers' districts of contemporaneous cities.<sup>44</sup> Still, it will prove useful towards developing a simple but clear base model to describe the physical fabric and social qualities that characterized skid rows in cities throughout the United States—including Seattle—during the first decades of the twentieth century.

From the first development of laborers' districts in the second half of the nineteenth century, the cheap lodging house took several forms. The range of economic circumstances found among the residents of a skid row—steadily employed but poorly paid, or seasonally without work, or simply unemployed all of the time—was reflected in the varied facilities, furnishings, and prices available to them. For the same basic amenity—the provision of a place to sleep—lodgers had a set of options in front of them that cost as much as half a

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<sup>44</sup> Kusmer, *Down & Out, On the Road*, 147.

dollar or as little as a few cents.<sup>45</sup> Some lodging houses offered all levels of accommodation within the same establishment: rooms, cubicles, and flops could coexist across different floors of the same building. With this strategy, hotel developers aimed to ensure high occupancy rates in the midst of shifting flows of seasonal workforces.<sup>46</sup> Those who could afford to pay the higher rates often would, in order to avoid the frightening conditions of the inexpensive alternatives. Jacob Riis, in a frequently cited comment from *How the Other Half Lives*, described New York's marginal housing in the following way: "There is a wider gap between the 'hotel'—they are all hotels—that charges a quarter and the one that furnishes a bed for a dime than between the bridal suite and the every-day hall bedroom of the ordinary hostelry."<sup>47</sup> The social hierarchy among the poor reached from the destitute and handicapped up to skilled craftsmen who could not yet afford to move to rooming houses in more respectable neighborhoods, and they all found their respective places within the lodging house spectrum. The lodging house district, then, imitated the wider class ladder in which its residents always stood on the bottom rung.

The most desirable accommodations were known as workingman's hotels, the form of lodging house that was found most often in Seattle's Skid Road. Among inexpensive accommodations, these most closely resembled the bourgeois hotel model. They held great appeal to lodgers because they offered an amenity that was rare in the lodging district: privacy. For the cost of between forty and seventy cents a night (in around 1920), a lodger rented an individual room no larger than ten feet by ten feet, but that was lit by its own window and included a modest bed or cot, a chair, and (for the fortunate) a dresser. The

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-153.

<sup>46</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 69.



quality of the room's furnishings, however, was a gamble. The middle classes would have found the facilities of the workingman's hotel skeletal by their standards. Residents had to share one bathroom per floor, which contained simple toilets and washbasins.<sup>48</sup> Still, the clientele of each of these hotels recognized their comforts relative to the cheaper cages and flops in which previously they may have held at least a short tenure. Some who lodged here may have aspired to respectable tastes: Nels Anderson noted that they "wear collars and creased trousers,"<sup>49</sup> which suggests their hopefulness to move into more decent accommodations if afforded the opportunity.

For laborers who could not afford forty cents a night, the next most preferable option was a "cage" or "crib" in a cubicle hotel, costing fifteen or twenty-five cents per night. The unsettling monikers for rooms at these establishments were apt: they resembled prisons as much as rented accommodations. Each floor of the hotel had been built as a large open room (as warehouse space, in some cases) but had been divided by wood partition walls into as many as one or two hundred cramped sleeping chambers, each measuring no larger than five feet across and seven feet deep. Ceilings could be as high as fourteen feet, but the partition walls rose only partway. The remaining gap of three or more feet was bridged by wire meshing—hence a "cage"—that allowed air to pass through but prevented neighboring occupants from climbing over to steal clothing or other possessions.<sup>50</sup> Crib hotels were arranged in this way so that they did not have to abide by more restrictive building codes meant for hotels with fully enclosed rooms.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 141-143.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 47-48.

<sup>51</sup> I.L. Nascher, *The Wretches of Povertyville: A Sociological Study of the Bowery* (Chicago: Joseph J. Lanzit, 1909), 72.

The cubicle hotel eroded whatever minimal bourgeois standards remained in the workingman's hotel. The claustrophobic crib could not fit more than a bed, and perhaps a chair; the cage's pretense of privacy held only until a neighbor peered over the partition or attempted to pinch items despite the mesh screen. The ratio of toilets to lodgers was meager.<sup>52</sup> The majority of cubicles had no external windows (*Image 6*), and the conditions in many of these hotels were dark, stale, and fetid. Natural light from the ends of the floor did little to penetrate the heart of the cubicle bank, and some cribs constructed at the end of the nineteenth century were lit primarily by a single fifteen-watt light bulb suspended from the ceiling. But worse still were the matters of air and heat.<sup>53</sup> In some cities, lodgers were not permitted any control over windows and ventilation at all—while in others, the responsibility for the floor's environment fell to those fortunate enough to claim cribs near the windows, who let in air only as it suited them. In cold weather, windows were thus frequently kept shut at all times, blocking any fresh air from circulating. Hotel owners frequently ignored municipal laws that set requirements for the quality of bedding and number of stoves and toilets. The cold or heat and the filth were some of many threats crib occupants faced, which also included lice and vermin, tuberculosis and other diseases, and fire.<sup>54</sup> In spite of it all, cubicle hotels at least claimed to offer their lodgers something close to private space, where the protections of simple wood walls were material manifestations of a degree of dignity all but absent in lesser lodging houses.

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<sup>52</sup> Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 47.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

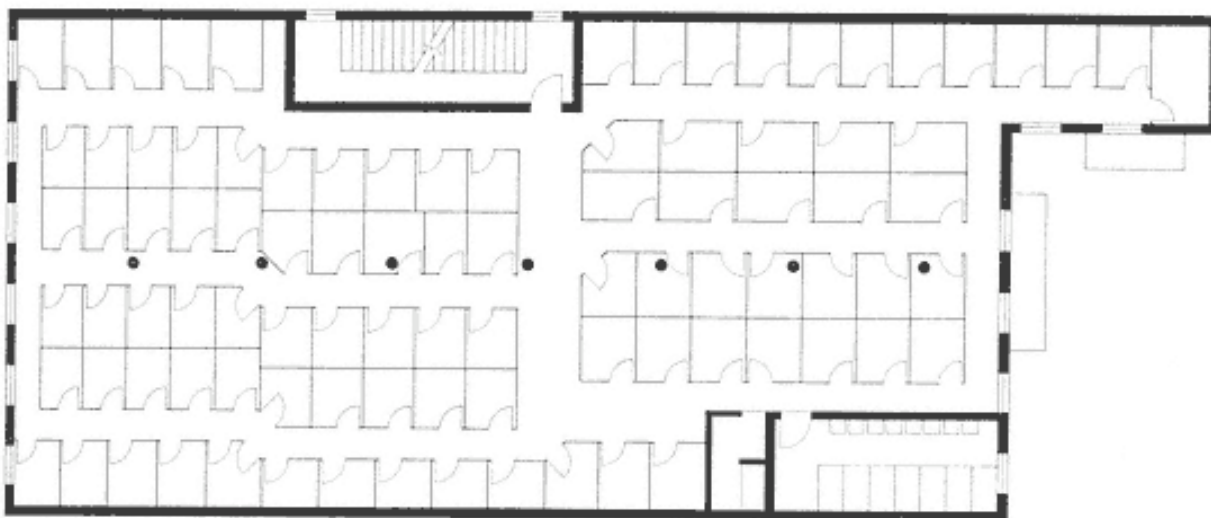


Image 6: Plan of a large cubicle lodging house, based on the Kenton Hotel on the Bowery  
Source: Groth, *Living Downtown*

The lowest form of proper lodging house was the dormitory-style hotel, known by many as the flophouse—although it too had tiers of accommodation catering to the destitute and the *severely* destitute. These facilities amounted to cubicle hotels without partition walls or any pretense of privacy: large, open, and frequently filthy rooms lined with several windows were packed full with people who “flopped” down to sleep. Poorly constructed beds with soiled mattresses or only blankets were crammed together. As many as two hundred people might sleep in one space, regardless of laws in some cities requiring two feet of clear space beside each bed. A lodger claimed a bed for ten or fifteen cents a night.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally, rooms were installed with recurring wood bunks fitted with strips of canvas slung between posts (*Image 7*). Documenting the Bowery in the 1880s, Jacob Riis described the atmosphere of one of these lodging houses:

On cold winter nights, when every bunk had its tenant, I have stood in such a lodging-room more than once, and listening to [...] the slow creaking of the

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<sup>55</sup> Hoch and Slayton, *New Homeless and Old*, 50.

beams under their restless weight, imagined myself on shipboard and experienced the very real nausea of sea-sickness.<sup>56</sup>



Image 7: Photograph of a canvas hammock flophouse in New York City, c. 1890

Source: Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*

But these were not yet the most unattractive cheap lodging houses. Many flophouses had neither beds nor bunks, but instead offered large, entirely unfurnished rooms in which any available space on the dry floor could be rented for the price of two to five cents per night. This model, at the lowest limit of hospitality, stripped the hotel contract to its essential operating standard: the provision of a place to sleep. Just as in all other hotels, this class of flophouse served as a haven from the uncertain elements and the road—but even so, it upended the expectations that ruled bourgeois hotel life. In the absence of mattresses and canvas hammocks, lodgers had to provide their own bedding if they wished to protect their bodies against the cool air and soiled floor: they did so using the material culture of the street, such as newspapers, their overcoats, and other articles of clothing

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<sup>56</sup> Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 72.

they could spare.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the only comfort here was that, unlike in the cubicle hotels, heat and air circulated unimpeded by partition walls. They served a class of people whose only alternatives were to claim unprotected scraps of space in theaters, hallways, tenement basements, or on the street itself.<sup>58</sup> For them, the prospect of relatively dry and warm space was enough to overcome qualms about the bugs, vermin, filth, discomfort, and other dangers they confronted in the flophouse. This barebones type of lodging house offered the minimum accommodations for the truly in need.

### ***On the streets of the single-laborer's zone***

But lodgers, of course, had to suffer in their cheap hotels only overnight—until somewhere else opened where they could afford to go. Night turning to day activated the district's streets (at least their reputable establishments), whose social life and businesses compensated for the hotels' few comforts. Here was the single-laborer's zone's public commons, as well as its commercial concourse.

The simple architecture of the lodging house facades reflected the conditions within. Many were clad in plain brick and showed undistinguished ornamentation limited to projecting cornices, lintels, or stringcourses; the windows that perforated the upper stories were modest in size, corresponding to the minimal rooms within. But as with most masonry commercial blocks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ground floor was visually open to the street through their large storefront windows that flaunted their wares (*Image 8*). The permeability of the buildings' facades at street level matched their role within the lifeways of the cheap lodging house district's residents: the

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<sup>57</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 31-33.

<sup>58</sup> Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road*, 153.

businesses served as public space extending in from the street, where lodgers congregated. While more expensive hotels had lobbies, restaurants, and other meeting spaces, lodging houses did not: every day they spilled their residents into the surrounding neighborhoods to work, or just to kill time. Because lodging houses offered so few amenities, nearby businesses picked up the slack.



Image 8: Hotels and street-level businesses in Minneapolis's Gateway District  
Source: Minnesota Historical Society, MH5.9 MP2.1 r228

To put this in domestic terms: the goods and services that were provided by surrounding businesses reflected the amenities of the typical bourgeois home (or the apartment house and tenement). The street confused commercial and residential spheres by providing lodgers with accessible spaces for food, hygiene, and socializing, performing the roles of the personal kitchen, bath, and parlor.<sup>59</sup> Cheap restaurants were ubiquitous, promising ten- or fifteen-cent “Home Cooking” to the virtually homeless.<sup>60</sup> Groth estimates that during the 1920s, a cautious and frugal lodger in the single-laborer’s zone could afford

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<sup>59</sup> Groth, “Third and Howard,” 29.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 34.

three meals for a total of thirty cents a day.<sup>61</sup> (Nels Anderson wrote of the Chicago restaurants, “[T]he food is coarse and poor and the service rough and ready.”)<sup>62</sup>

Recreational establishments comprised much of what else lined the streets: taverns, gambling houses, brothels. Especially prior to the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1920, the social and pleasure economies of American laborers’ districts boomed: their residents, largely untethered by the commitments of traditional family life, took advantage of the licit and illicit activities that were available immediately outside their doors. In the many nearby bars and pool halls, they found places to sit in comparatively clean facilities and enjoy a welcoming social environment. And whereas the educated classes’ political and intellectual discussions took place in the lobbies of the luxury hotels, lodging house residents developed their own dispersed forms of public spheres wherever they congregated throughout their neighborhood, whether in restaurants, saloons, or city parks.

Here and there one would find clusters of private and public employment agencies, landmarks that attracted crowds of hobos every day. Many laborers depended on them to find short-term employment, returning to the city every time their short-term hinterlands jobs ended in order to sign up for new opportunities. An employer such as a railroad company would send word of their need for unskilled help, which the agency advertised in its front windows first thing in the morning.<sup>63</sup> While federal agencies charged no fees, they attracted fewer job seekers because they maintained records of applicants, and they kept tabs on those they recruited. Most private agencies charged fees to employers and to

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<sup>61</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 155.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Groth, “Third and Howard,” 26-27.

applicants, yet they were popular because they did not prevent laborers from leaving their work on a whim and moving along to different work elsewhere.<sup>64</sup>

Outfitters and second-hand stores sold cheap clothing for lodging house residents to wear in their working and non-working lives. Outfitters specialized in new but cheap garments intended to be soiled in the factory or in the farm fields—“[B]oots, Levis, heavy shirts, and gloves for distant work camps”<sup>65</sup>—while the used clothing for sale in the second-hand stores were old-fashioned but clean, expressing obsolete middle-class tastes in men’s fashion. According to Nels Anderson’s account, any laborer who bought and then flaunted his suit or coat on himself was “making an effort to get out of his class.”<sup>66</sup>

The final landmarks in these districts were religious missions and other charity agencies that responded to the needs of laborers on a not-for-profit basis. They provided some of the same services as lodging houses, restaurants, and other private establishments, and without cost. The missions expected, however, that laborers would take part in revival services, contribute to prayer, and consider relentless appeals to reform and repent. The Salvation Army provided the model for the services of many similar institutions, which offered clothes, room to sleep, and meals of soup and bread. Secular welfare institutions also commonly provided food and employment services to the most destitute inhabitants of a laborers’ district. Despite the visibility and longevity of these charity establishments, it was reported that many of the unemployed and periodically employed in skid rows resented any efforts to change their habits and character. Others converted in times of need

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<sup>64</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 109-117.

<sup>65</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 155.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *The Hobo*, 35.



and then slipped back to “sinful” habits after they left the missions.<sup>67</sup> This points to a complex landscape of commerce, pleasure, and welfare on American skid rows through the early twentieth century.

### ***Conclusion: The anxieties of the lodging house***

This chapter has attempted to set cheap lodging houses in the context of nineteenth-century American cities and their associated industries. This amounted to a large-scale shift that mobilized members of all social classes. While luxury and middle-class hotels sheltered their guests from the threatening uncertainties of unfamiliar territory,<sup>68</sup> the most marginal hotels came to represent those very threats to society at large. These hotels signified the perceived harmful conditions of city life that had first been suggested by academic discussions in nineteenth-century Europe. To refer to one significant example: German sociologist Georg Simmel argued in his 1903 work “The Metropolis and Mental Life” that the restructuring of agrarian societies into industrial, urban societies broke apart the tightly-knit, familial relationships among peasants—who, it was thought, had previously been able to shield themselves “against neighboring, strange, or in some way antagonistic circles.”<sup>69</sup> As Simmel and others argued, one of the fundamental

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-262.

<sup>68</sup> Luxury and middle-class hotels, however, protected their guests only so far: members of their staffs were composed of members of lesser classes who invariably interacted with guests. But staff roles were stratified to minimize social tension. Those who interacted most directly with guests, such as managers and head clerks, were often middle-class Protestant males. Waiters and bellhops, who held clearly subservient roles, might be black or Irish males. Females, however, were frequently chambermaids who spent time in guests’ rooms, and Sandoval-Strausz suggests they received many accusations of theft because of their lower class positions. See *Hotel*, 179-184.

<sup>69</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Metropolis: Values in Conflict*, ed. C.E. Elias Jr. et al. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1964), 40.

characteristics of the modern city was its endless expanse of social unfamiliarity. While he found that this environment could allow a certain degree of personal liberation, Simmel expressed concern that in modern cities, “we frequently do not even know by sight those who have been our neighbors for years.”<sup>70</sup> His mention of neighbors is particularly significant in the discussion of hotels, since they amplified one paradox of urban modernity: physical proximity often correlated with social distance.

Here, the residents (almost exclusively single men) would not have shown the trappings of pre-modern kinship relations. Their daily routines—occurring in the lodging house, in the factory, and on the streets—were enmeshed among “strangers.” (The earlier mention of active public spheres in lodging house districts, however, dispels the presumption that the residents of workingman’s hotels and other lodging houses were always strangers.) But lodging houses concentrated their residents with little or no private space, with few personal possessions, and with high rates of transience; their lodgers subsequently received and reflected wider anxieties about the condition of urban alienation.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, social disintegration was conflated with crime and moral dysfunction. For social reformers and others who believed that the society of lodging house districts was filled only with estrangement, the lack of kinship bonds left nothing that enforced positive standards of behavior. In 1927, when Ernest Burgess characterized the “zone in transition” in American cities, he described it as a “purgatory of lost souls.”<sup>72</sup> The cheap lodging houses of the Bowery were referred to as “nurseries of crime” by the head of New York’s secret

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 222-230.

<sup>72</sup> Ernest W. Burgess, “The Growth of the City: An Introduction to a Research Project,” in *The City*, by Robert E. Park et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 56.

police.<sup>73</sup> This discourse was largely based in class prejudices, but it found ample ammunition for its claims of immorality in the form and program of the lodging house. Their residents—along with their guests and whatever activities they indulged in—often could not be monitored: frequently without formal lobbies and attentive staff, lodging houses presented few obstacles for alleged deviants to come and go undetected. Of course, this was most true of the establishments where residents had some level of privacy, namely the workingman's and cubicle hotels. Here, it was conceivable that cocaine and heroin users hid out, thieves conspired, and lodgers brought home prostitutes without attracting great notice. In fact, some hotels were proper brothels, whose clients were recruited from the saloons at street level. Homosexual behavior, frequently documented among hobos in hinterland work camps, also took place among the city's almost exclusively male laborers. The establishments' lack of entry controls, in addition to their proximity to drinking, gambling, and other entertainment establishments, allowed the possibility of moral deviancies that may have been nearly unthinkable in bourgeois suburban homes.<sup>74</sup>

This divided moral geography was both supported and complicated by the fact that skid rows served middle-class as well as lower-class audiences. Practicing what is now known as "slumming," privileged urban residents located spaces in ethnic and working-class districts in which they felt liberated from the social expectations of their class backgrounds. This phenomenon was well documented in the Bowery in New York City. In its saloons, stores, dance halls, and brothels, rigid class divisions were eased; visitors, often men, could encounter members of "lower" or less privileged classes and racial groups, with whom they might "engage in ribald behavior otherwise inconceivable in their own social

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Groth, *Living Downtown*, 220.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-218.

worlds.”<sup>75</sup> These encounters were often sexual, involving female prostitutes or same-sex partners who clearly did not fit within middle-class norms for courtship and marriage.

To put this briefly, lodging house districts never supported the protective bourgeois domestic standards that were expressed in middle- and upper-class homes and hotels. Laborers’ zones earned suspicion because of who their lodgers were—poor workers, the unemployed, and in some cases proper criminals—and what they were perceived to be doing within the walls of cheap lodging houses. All this was compounded by the proximity these central districts shared to railroad hubs and polluting urban industries. As the twentieth century rolled forward, some of the same qualities continued to stain the reputations of laborer’s zones, leaving a kind of cultural residue that ultimately earned the name “grit.” The following chapters will begin to explore the details of this process in the context of Seattle: the workingman’s hotels in the Skid Road created opportunities and problems for the city that ultimately complicated efforts to preserve the neighborhood as a site of urban authenticity.

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<sup>75</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 37. See also Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

## CHAPTER II

### HOTEL LIFE AND SEATTLE'S EARLY LABORERS' DISTRICT

Revisionist histories of Seattle have popularized a rough and tumble image of the city that begins nearly as early as Anglo-Americans' first efforts to settle on Duwamish land. These accounts, notably Murray Morgan's *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle*, describe a corrupt and seedy quality that was one of the city's fundamental historical conditions. In 1852, a handful of white settlers belonging to the Denny Party—whom traditional histories have cast as the city's founders—relocated from a nearby camp to the eastern shore of what is now known as Puget Sound's Elliott Bay, a site surrounded by steep hills blanketed in fir trees. An Ohioan named Henry Yesler arrived shortly afterwards to establish a steam-powered sawmill; he was persuaded to locate on the waterfront of the new colony, where deep water ensured a good anchorage, and the slopes made it easy for lumbermen to slide felled trees across rows of greased logs to the new mill—the original Skid Road.<sup>76</sup> It subsequently became a major street in the city center, Yesler Way, which served as the northern boundary of the neighborhood also called the Skid Road: Seattle's early commercial core, laborers' district, and wild and woolly zone. As the city first developed, however, much of what lay south of the Skid Road was an open expanse of saturated mud tidal flats. These were soon filled in using sawdust from Yesler's mill, as the growing demand for lumber to be milled and shipped by sea to San Francisco created the need for more workers—along with the places to house, feed, and entertain them. The flats

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<sup>76</sup> Murray Morgan, *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 24-29.

provided an unsteady foundation for a new sector of this young city that gradually rose from the mud (*Image 9*).

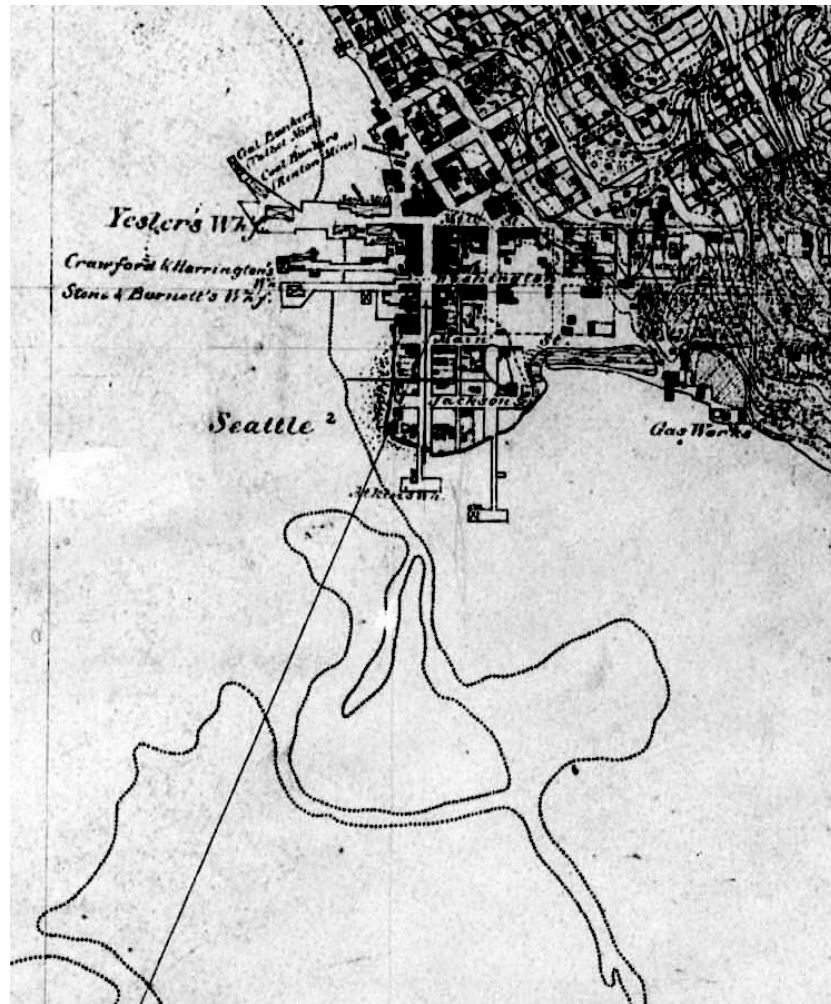


Image 9: Detail of 1875 survey map of Duwamish Bay, showing Seattle's early grids that intersected at the Skid Road. Much of what lay south of it had been filled in from mud flats. One block below the Skid Road is Washington Street, with Main Street to the south and Jackson Street near the neighborhood's south end at the time. Commercial Avenue (present-day First Avenue South), running from north to south, is nearest the wharf. Source: United States Coast & Geodetic Survey Topographic Sheet T-1406, *Duwamish Bay (part of), Washington Territory*

From the beginning, the district that expanded south of the Skid Road was something of a red light district, home to its earliest informal economies. Here stood Seattle's first brothel, the Illahee—a regional landmark whose prostitutes were both Native

women and professionals imported from San Francisco. The lumber economy had attracted a labor force of footloose men: only around one fourth of the area's population consisted of females, the majority of whom were married. Early on, the laborers were recognized as a moral threat to the community, and in 1864, the first Territorial University president chartered a ship to bring back respectable women from the American Northeast in order to neutralize the bachelors' wayward sexual desires.<sup>77</sup> The part of the city south of Yesler Way was a landscape of vice, whose moral depravity might be said to have been reflected in the sensory qualities of its physical setting: the sawdust that had been dumped onto the mudflats bubbled restlessly and released rank gasses as it decomposed, so that one popular nickname for the district was the Lava Beds.<sup>78</sup>

By the 1880s, Seattle was recognized as the far Northwest's economic and population capital, although it was still a remote outpost. During that decade, the city expanded from 3,500 residents to roughly 43,000.<sup>79</sup> In addition to the regional lumber industry, coal mining was underway near Renton, ten miles to the southeast and connected to Seattle's waterfront by freight rail. Coal relied heavily on Chinese immigrant laborers, many of whom had worked on the railroad campaigns to the south the previous decade. Their enclave took root on the dubious infilled land of the Lava Beds on Washington Street, one block south of the Skid Road.<sup>80</sup> Seattle operated as a "nature's metropolis," to borrow

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<sup>77</sup> Mildred Andrews, Karin Link, and Marc Blackburn, *Pioneer Square: Seattle's Oldest Neighborhood* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 28-29.

<sup>78</sup> Morgan, *Skid Road*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> Doug Chin, *Seattle's International District: The Making of a Pan-Asian American Community* (Seattle: International Examiner Press, 2001), 13-17.

William Cronon's well-known term for nineteenth-century Chicago:<sup>81</sup> labor and resources funneled through the city from its hinterlands, fueling an economy that supported various social classes who shared a dependence on the extraction and sale of the region's lumber and coal. The economic benefits of these enterprises, however, not surprisingly were distributed unequally between the industry owners and managers, and the miners, lumber workers, and millers.

The fruits of the region's economic growth reached ever-wider marketplaces in San Francisco, western Canada, and the Alaska Territory. One visible result was that the changing built environment of Seattle's core (much of it doomed to perish by fire in 1889) strove to conform to the architectural styles of other contemporary cities. Architects and financiers in the early 1880s made the city's economic legitimacy manifest by replicating the Second-Empire modernism of Napoleon III's Paris: Seattle's major building projects of the decade were drenched in ornament, veneered in stucco, and crowned with mansard roofs—a significant change from the modest wood facades of Seattle's earlier commercial core, whose plainness had only emphasized its outpost status.<sup>82</sup>

But Seattle's architecture embodied economic contrasts. The most impressive new buildings rose along Yesler Way (*Image 10*), anchoring the city's commercial core on the Skid Road dividing line. While legitimate stores, hotels, and restaurants bled south onto the Lava Beds, immediately surrounding them were the ligaments of the regional economy: the city's railroad arteries, packing plants, and docks. And here were the laborers involved at the lowest stages of production, as well as the simple saloons, workingman's hotels, and

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<sup>81</sup> William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

<sup>82</sup> Ochsner and Andersen, *Distant Corner*, 28-34.



brothels that catered to their needs.<sup>83</sup> From this early point, some residents appealed to the police to close down the red light district. According to Morgan Murray, however, others saw the area as a necessary evil that attracted patrons from around the region and spurred the city's economic growth.<sup>84</sup>



Image 10: 1888 photograph of Yesler Way by Arthur Churchill Warner, showing the Occidental Hotel at center

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, WAR0188

### ***Rebuilding the Skid Road***

In 1889, the Great Fire quickly erased the built evidence of central Seattle's wide social disparities. Over the course of one day, the area that some had imagined to be Paris on Puget Sound collapsed into the smoldering burnt district, with its signature institutions in ruins (*refer again to Image 1*). The fire devastated central Seattle. The engine of the

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<sup>83</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 38-40.

<sup>84</sup> Morgan, *Skid Road*, 60.

regional economy continued to rumble, however, and city leaders and investors did not question rebuilding. Rather, they recognized the disaster as an opportunity for regeneration and refashioning—involving infrastructure as well as architecture. The volume of construction during the past decades had outpaced urban systems, so that the Second Empire veneer had obscured inadequate drainage, roads, and waste removal. The fire's sudden erasure of blocks of urban fabric made possible a new plat, new sewers, and new grading, as well as new forms of architecture. Within a month, the city adopted Ordinance 1147, which mandated thick masonry wall construction within the city's core.<sup>85</sup> These codes found fitting expression in the recently imported architectural currents that bore the stamp of Henry Hobson Richardson. After all, Richardson's buildings in the East were characterized by their sophisticated use of fire-resistant materials: solidly massed brick, stone, and terra cotta. Yet they still incorporated generous fenestration to lighten their massive appearance. Also, the forms and facade elements of his buildings were typologically malleable and could contain the diverse needs of Seattle's economy—warehousing, hoteling, administration, and manufacturing.<sup>86</sup> Seattle's new construction, overseen by some of the same architects who had designed its buildings just a few years before, was now clad in the rusticated masonry, embedded arcades, and streamlined classical ornament characteristic of Richardson. A new and unfamiliar city rose from the burnt district.

Equally significant were the moral dimensions of rebuilding. The fire had burned on both sides of the Skid Road, wiping out legitimate and illegitimate commercial establishments alike without prejudice. The residential sectors of the city had been

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<sup>85</sup> Ochsner and Andersen, *Distant Corner*, 55-64.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

spared—all except the lodging houses on the Lava Beds, which had sheltered the city’s laborers. The brothels, bars, and hotels had been purged: it was a reformer’s dream to see the city abruptly rendered as a blank moral slate. Civic leaders wasted little time in recognizing they had an opportunity on their hands to shape a new, sanitized city core. The very evening of the fire, a report in the late edition of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote of the Skid Road, “Never again need this section be used for despicable purposes.”<sup>87</sup> Rebuilding Seattle’s core, some residents hoped, would remove laborers from the commercial districts that served the middle class, thus improving the city center.

Rebuilding proceeded with remarkable momentum as insurance and investment money poured into the city. Construction had begun on eighty-eight buildings in the first month after the fire.<sup>88</sup> The new stone- and brick-clad commercial blocks were located on the site of the city’s earlier commercial district, spreading away from the intersection between Yesler Way and Commercial Avenue. As before the great fire, a band of legitimate establishments (offices and warehouses) stretched south of the Skid Road along Commercial Avenue (later known as First Avenue South), suggesting that the new construction would be successful in reforming the moral landscape of the Lava Beds.

But the city still served a population of single, transient male laborers, and reform efforts were unfairly matched against their continued demand for establishments that offered cheap shelter, food, and pleasures. Despite reformers’ hopes, the district’s unsavory character soon returned. Much of the remainder of this chapter will focus on the Skid Road’s workingman’s hotels, which are central to its story and were among the first establishments to be rebuilt south of Yesler Way. As the following discussion illustrates,

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

hotel residents soon recreated the disreputable urban cultures on the Skid Road that earlier had made the Lava Beds so morally offensive to the city's proper classes.<sup>89</sup>



Image 11: The three hotels in the Hoteling Block, seen along the west side of First Avenue South, in a photograph taken by William P. Romans, c. 1903  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, UW17747

As before the fire, the rebuilt district contained great contrasts between reputable and disreputable businesses, and all within a relatively small area: banks, insurance offices, and well-appointed hotels stood within blocks of the workingman's hotels, saloons, gambling houses, and illicit theaters that laborers frequented. In some cases, they existed together in the same commercial block. Several hotels were quickly constructed following the fire in the heart of the district, along Commercial Avenue.<sup>90</sup> Three of these—the

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>90</sup> Available sources provide few details on the management practices of early hotels in the Skid Road; the likely arrangement was that property owners leased their buildings to separate management agencies, which handled the daily operations.

Marathon, the Rocker, and the Silver Bow—were set adjacent to one another and known together as the Hotaling Block. Three stories tall, with legitimate businesses at street level, their architecture showed a consistency in scale, fine ornament, and masonry construction that suggested a proper and modern city (*Image 11*).

But it was the rooms for workers on their second and third stories—the district’s second society—that would contribute to the seedier aspects of the Skid Road’s reputation. Some of the workingman’s hotels along First Avenue South<sup>91</sup> may have offered more than one level of accommodation for customers with a range of means. The police records of the *Seattle Daily Times* provide a cursory glimpse into these hotels, where thieves and other criminals were taken into custody on a somewhat regular basis. The reports frequently describe a suspect being apprehended in his room (presumably an enclosed private room), confirming that these establishments were not the most marginal in the district.<sup>92</sup> And reports that those hotels in the Hotaling Block served as brothels during the Klondike Gold Rush further suggest that the rooms offered some privacy.<sup>93</sup> Extrapolated from Groth’s descriptions of similarly multi-form, “mixed-income” hotels in San Francisco,<sup>94</sup> one of the upper floors of each hotel may have been filled with rooms of this sort, while another floor contained beds in an open dormitory room. A 1931 account described the arrest of a watch thief at one of the First Avenue South lodging houses in the midst of “many men asleep in the big room.”<sup>95</sup> This is borne out by a 1909 photograph of First Avenue South and the

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<sup>91</sup> These include the New England Hotel, Skagit Hotel, and St. Charles Hotel.

<sup>92</sup> See, for instance, “Police Briefs,” *Seattle Daily Times*, August 27, 1902, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Karin Link, “Pioneer Square-Skid Road National Historic District Boundary Increase” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2007), 317.

<sup>94</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 144.

<sup>95</sup> “Invite Guests, Put Watches on Chair—Notice Time Fly,” *Seattle Daily Times*, January 9, 1931, 7.



Image 12: 1909 photograph of the Grand Central Hotel, taken by Asahel Curtis  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, CUR570

Grand Central Hotel, from which hangs a sign advertising three nightly rates: twenty-five cents, fifty cents, and one dollar (*Image 12*). Customers who paid the highest price may have enjoyed relatively well-appointed private rooms, while the lower rates signified sparser accommodations. Compared to contemporary laborers' districts in cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, then, the Skid Road offered a higher percentage of workingman's hotels with private rooms. This reflected perhaps that short-term residents passing through Seattle enjoyed more reliable income from the region's industries than did laborers in other American cities at the turn of the twentieth century.

Designed by architects and offering some comfortable rooms, these hotels may have been the most desirable within laborers' geographies of accommodation after the fire. But a hierarchy of further lodging houses stretched beyond the heart of the Skid Road. The Phoenix Hotel, its name recalling the city's regeneration, was a floridly ornamented workingman's hotel (*Image 13*). But its location in the city's Chinese enclave at Second Avenue and Washington Street removed it socially from the commercial core.<sup>96</sup>



Image 13: The Phoenix and Lexington Hotels on Second Avenue South, c. 1909  
Source: Museum of History and Industry, 1983.10.8470

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<sup>96</sup> The enclaves of Chinese-Americans and Japanese-Americans within Skid Road were micro-districts that paralleled many of the developments of the broader neighborhood, with a recognizable effect on the city's accommodations landscape. These populations, too, were largely male and involved in mills and canneries, as well as informal economies; the groceries, laundries, and other establishments that catered to them had lodging houses above street level. Many of these buildings were demolished in the first decades of the twentieth century; Seattleites of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino origin moved to adjacent land to the east, as it was regarded. Here they established the multi-ethnic International District. See Chin, *Seattle's International District*, 25-39.



On Jackson Street, only three blocks south of Yesler Way, were the most marginal of the city's lodging houses.<sup>97</sup> While the Cadillac Hotel, a workingman's hotel with over fifty private rooms, was built in stone immediately after the fire (*see Image 19 in the following chapter*),<sup>98</sup> the buildings that first surrounded it were constructed in wood (as the city's new fire codes were not enforced at the neighborhood's edges). This was the district's most undesirable land, and some establishments located here were set on piers planted into the tide flats.<sup>99</sup> This environment does not seem to have been well recorded in contemporary sources; one *Seattle Times* journalist, however, described in detail the physical environment of a brothel at the very periphery of the district, indicating that it was organized as a cubicle hotel:

It is a monstrous looking affair. Entering at the corner, one sees a large room, a barroom, with what is intended for a dance hall in the rear. [...] On the Sixth Avenue side, half way along the length of the building, is a kind of turnstile entrance that allows ingress without people on the sidewalk having a chance to look into the interior of the building. On the inside one finds small rooms divided by long passages. There is a door and one window to each room. They are practically without light and have no sort of ventilation. The whole area of 120 feet square is cut up into these little cribs[.]<sup>100</sup>

This and the lodging houses, saloons, and card halls surrounding it were later razed and replaced by masonry warehouses. Because few descriptions and photographs documented this seedy area (*Image 14*), it is unclear how many laborers each of these lodging houses could take in. Still, their volume was remarkable: over one hundred lodging houses stood in the Skid Road one year after the fire, many of them at its edges.<sup>101</sup> And the area's impression on some reform-minded Seattleites is certain: J. T. Ronald, the city's mayor

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<sup>97</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 96.

<sup>98</sup> Link, "Pioneer Square-Skid Road," 204.

<sup>99</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 96.

<sup>100</sup> "New Frame-Up in Tenderloin," *Seattle Daily Times*, October 21, 1902, 7.

<sup>101</sup> *1890 Seattle City Directory* (Seattle: Polk's Seattle Directory Co., 1890), 818-819.



during the early 1890s, wrote that these margins of the Skid Road left a “stench in the nostrils of decency and a disgrace upon the good name of Seattle.”<sup>102</sup>



Image 14: A photograph of the Skid Road, taken in 1911 by Webster and Stevens; it is atypical for showing the wood-frame saloons, baths, and other businesses with upper-story lodging houses (later demolished) located along First Avenue South below King Street. Source: Museum of History and Industry, 1983.10.6784

### ***The entrenchment of the laborers' district and moral reforms***

In the decades between the Great Fire and the First World War, as Seattle's economic swells overcame its busts, the Skid Road continued as the city's vital, if mistrusted, residential and commercial district for laborers. Investment in rebuilding had slowed during the Panic of 1890 and then completely dried up with a wave of American bank failures in 1893.<sup>103</sup> But by this time, the city's new commercial core had filled the

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 96.

<sup>103</sup> Ochsner and Alexander, *Distant Corner*, 280.

majority of the area of the burnt district—the result of a reported thirteen million dollars’ investment, about three fourths of which had been spent during the first building push of 1889 and 1890.<sup>104</sup> The earliest masonry fabric of the city, including its workingman’s hotels, remained its core. The arrival of the Great Northern Railway’s transcontinental route in 1893 confirmed the city’s stature, and the Northwest was woven more tightly into national trade networks. The railroad intensified the volume and scale of labor and commodity flows that had driven the local and regional economies in prior decades: ever more transient workers disembarked in Seattle and were sent to processing and transportation facilities throughout the city—its warehouses, mills, and docks—and to sites of production in its hinterlands—mining camps, logging camps, and fish canneries. And from Seattle, the commodities that labor had fashioned were shipped to expanding markets throughout the continent.

Between 1890 and 1900, the city’s population nearly doubled, from roughly 43,000 to over 80,000 inhabitants.<sup>105</sup> The event that truly made manifest the city’s driving growth and the geographic extent of its hinterlands was the docking of the steamer *Portland* in Seattle in July 1897, burdened with gold prospected in the Yukon Territory. What deserves attention about the ensuing Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 and 1898 is that it ignited Seattle’s formal and informal economies to a roar, directing many of the city’s financial gains into the boundaries of the Skid Road. Word of gold spread across the continent, and boosters zealously advertised Seattle as the leaping off point for water and land routes to the goldfields. 70,000 men, virtually the entire permanent population of the city, passed through Seattle on their route north within those two years.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>105</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 70.

The Skid Road's retail landscape responded to the demand for the goods viewed as necessary for survival; gold pans, stoves, boots, warm clothing, underwear, nonperishable food, dogs, tools and equipment, and other supplies were widely available from outfitters.<sup>106</sup> The volume of sales mounted in the first winter of the gold rush, when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police required miners who headed north to bring at least a year's worth of supplies in order to prospect, amounting to well over one ton of provisions per person.<sup>107</sup> Cooper and Levy Pioneer Outfitters, for instance, became an immediate landmark, transforming the district's streetscape with its stacks of wares (*Image 15*). Seattle's governmental assay office allowed prospectors to cash their gold upon return from the north, filling their pockets to spend in the city before moving on.<sup>108</sup>



Image 15: Photograph of Cooper & Levy Outfitter by Asahel Curtis, c. 1897  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, SEA1334

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-85

<sup>107</sup> Lisa Mighetto and Marcia Montgomery, *Hard Drive to the Klondike: Promoting Seattle During the Gold Rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Hotels and lodging houses captured a good share of the miners' money. The influx of optimistic outsiders further ratcheted up demand for temporary accommodations. Luxury hotels absorbed a portion of the increased traffic. Full reversals of fortune were conceivable, and some prospectors who travelled north with modest means met prosperity in the Yukon. Upon returning to Seattle, they could afford the refinement of the Hotel Seattle and other accommodations that previously had stood utterly out of their reach.

But that scenario was less common in reality than in the miners' fantasies. Many of those who had not found fortune during their adventures—or who had yet to go looking for it—could afford only the district's less desirable workingman's hotels. Yet the number of bodies requiring overnight space still outstripped the available supply. More marginal hotels were appearing north of Yesler Way in a new commercial district alongside the bay. But significant demand concentrated in the Skid Road: many of the prospective miners were poor and transient, matching the customer profile for the district's existing workingman's hotels. Even so, miners saturated the supply of rooms that had been built to accommodate far fewer customers. The owners of some nearby buildings chased the phantom of profits by repurposing the upper stories of their properties into workingman's hotels. (This task was made possible because the commercial blocks allowed changes in their plans without difficulty.) The prominent Squire-Latimer Building, for instance, had been constructed as offices but was converted into the Grand Central Hotel;<sup>109</sup> during the same period, a wholesaler one block north became the J & M Hotel.<sup>110</sup> These and other early conversions were an indication that the neighborhood's formal and informal economies were ever in tension: while more establishments became oriented toward

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<sup>109</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 187.

<sup>110</sup> Link, "Pioneer Square-Skid Road," 70-71.

short-term, lower-class residents, more were located among offices, banks, and high-end hotels in the neighborhood's core along Commercial Avenue.

These developments complicated the Skid Road's already tangled social geography. The neighborhood's micro-districts, described above, contained commercial establishments and residences (cheap lodging houses) that were used variously by the city's privileged classes and by its transitory laborers, all within blocks of one another, or possibly in the same building. While members of these separate classes did not necessarily interact directly across social boundaries (although they may have transgressed those boundaries in saloons, brothels, or hotels), their routines for work, commerce, and home invariably crossed. Seattle's urban core was yet relatively small, and would soon expand to allow its social functions to become more strictly segregated. But for the first decade following the fire, the Skid Road was the city's established laborers' district as well as a suture line with the "proper" economic life of the city. This suggests that privileged urban residents may have adopted a conception of the urban poor that was appropriate to a late-nineteenth century manufacturing or frontier city: that laborers, prospectors, and others who spent their time in the Skid Road were recognized as integral, or at least unavoidable, within urban life. "The leading residents of the city know that, being a seaport city, Seattle must expect to harbor that class of criminals,"<sup>111</sup> reported the *Seattle Daily Times* in 1903, referring to prostitutes and their customers. It seems that laborers and other cheap lodging house dwellers were not rendered socially invisible, nor could they be within the tight confines of the Skid Road.

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<sup>111</sup> "Are Moving Uptown," *Seattle Daily Times*, February 1, 1903, 19.

Of course, spatial proximity among the classes did not guarantee that laborers would find acceptance. To be sure, the expansion of this at times unruly population fueled healthy debates among Seattle's civic leaders, reformers, and commercial proprietors: did the Skid Road's questionable residents—as well as the businesses that catered to them, including workingman's hotels—threaten the character of the city at large, or did Seattle benefit from them? Some attitudes reflected resignation, as shown in the quotation above. Municipal policies varied, oscillating between “open city” and “closed city” approaches. Some mayors used the former approach, attempting to monitor and collect licensing fees from disreputable but condoned enterprises in the Skid Road. Other mayors followed the latter approach and ordered the city's police force, including its infamous “purity squad,” to raid workingman's hotels and other questionable establishments and arrest suspected participants of vice activities.

As the Skid Road was where the formal and informal cities collided, it was unsurprisingly the location of numerous moral conflicts. This was made apparent when Seattle's transportation infrastructure expanded in the early twentieth century. Newly laid streetcar tracks and paved streets signaled that the formal city had expanded its reach through the Skid Road. Many of the drivers and passengers who took these new routes through the laborers' district likely viewed themselves as more respectable than the area's traditional denizens, and they reacted to scenes such as the one on display outside the Little Paris crib brothel. Here, streetcar passengers waiting for their carriage to be attached to a counterweight were exposed to “the loathsome creatures openly flaunting their vice and crime at the very doors of the cars.”<sup>112</sup> Uproar followed, and in 1903, the city closed all

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

brothel hotels in the “old tenderloin” near Yesler Way. They were allowed to move to a “new tenderloin” that was purposely out of sight from more heavily trafficked corridors, with the result that “[t]he paved district of the city, with the exception of the resorts above Yesler Way, is clean of questionable places.”<sup>113</sup>

Policing and regulation occurred with such zeal that some Seattle businesspeople protested on economic grounds. They argued that “closed city” policies discouraged money-laden men from staying in the city for any longer period than to receive a haircut. In 1911, one hotel owner delivered a letter to the reformist mayor at the time, stating that the Skid Road’s brothels, lodging houses, and gambling halls helped Seattle compete for men returning from Alaska: “They come out to be amused and enjoy themselves, and we tell them to get out. San Francisco is eager to receive them with open arms.”<sup>114</sup> This again illustrates complex attitudes toward the laborers’ district: while many privileged Seattleites would not have excused the vice activities occurring in the Skid Road, the district was a necessary evil, particularly to those who stood to profit from its operations.

And reform efforts were matched by spatial transformations in the city. After the Gold Rush filled the Skid Road with optimistic prospectors, some established business leaders were concerned that the city’s formal commercial district was drifting north of its historic center along Yesler Way. Lyman Cornelius Smith, a typewriter magnate with property bordering the tenderloin’s northern edge, invested one and a half million dollars in the landmark Smith Tower, which he hoped would anchor the city’s original commercial core. Built between 1910 and 1914, the steel-framed building was clad in gleaming white

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> “Sweeney Protests Against Policy of This Administration,” *Seattle Daily Times*, October 29, 1911, 18.

terra cotta and rose to a height nearly five hundred feet.<sup>115</sup> A formal Beaux Arts showcase surrounded the tower, consisting of a luxury hotel, the Frye; a new city hall; and a park that allowed in the light, air, and stroke of green that were otherwise missing from the surrounding district (*Image 16*). This attempt to capture commercial and civic activities around the Skid Road was a clear aesthetic counterpoint to the commercial blocks of the laborers' district. City Beautiful planning provided an architectural metaphor for the city's moral reform efforts. Broadly speaking, the principals of this movement promised urban decontamination and rebirth, which, according to urban historian M. Christine Boyer, "aimed to express the fullness of the human spirit: the ordering of material objects [...] so that the better impulses of the most elevated men would soon become common to all."<sup>116</sup>



Image 16: 1916 photograph by Asahel Curtis of City Hall Park and surrounding buildings  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, CUR1277

<sup>115</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 109-111.

<sup>116</sup> M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American Planning* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 44-45.



A more direct example of urban planning as moral reform was the 1928 extension of Second Avenue through several blocks of the old Chinatown. (The hotels depicted in Image 13 were among them.) Municipal officials argued the extension was necessary in order to provide direct automobile access to the central train terminal on the eastern edge of the Skid Road. But the area's literal obliteration cleansed the city, according to a recent account, of "a multicultural community and the struggling poor, [...] rife with cheap hotels, flophouses, small ethnic businesses, warehouses, and sweatshops."<sup>117</sup> One of the demolished hotels, for instance, was the Hoffman House, which the *Seattle Times* characterized as having been "perhaps the most heavily patronized gambling hall and saloon in the city" where "[p]romiscuous lodgers had the freedom of the upper floors." But its demolition confirmed that those days were past, and with a hint of sadness the newspaper memorial suggested that razing the Hoffman House would silence the moral abandon that might be revealed "if its walls could speak."<sup>118</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

By the Klondike Gold Rush, the Skid Road had begun its transformation from the heart of the city, containing a mix of licit and illicit activities, to a solid tenderloin district. As Seattle continued to grow rapidly from Elliott Bay toward the inland Lake Washington to the east, its residents inhabited a city of widely segregated uses. Despite the intentions of the Smith Tower's financiers in the early 1910s, downtown Seattle's legitimate economic establishments spread well north of Yesler Way along the shore of the sound. Some of the

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<sup>117</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 117.

<sup>118</sup> "Razing of Hoffman House Recalls Wild Days of Yore," *Seattle Daily Times*, February 6, 1928, 8.

well-appointed residential districts surrounding downtown were erased by large-scale municipal regrades. Residents with the means to move further from the city center settled in neighborhoods along streetcar lines in Queen Anne Hill to the north, for instance, and in Capitol Hill and along Lake Washington to the east.<sup>119</sup> Subsequent peripheral development pushed the city's boundaries further: by the 1910s, Seattle's residential sectors had surpassed the campus of the University of Washington, which had occupied a remote, wooded location on the city's northeast edge when it relocated there from downtown decades before. Still, while Seattle expanded, the central city housed those who had neither the money nor the tenure to occupy detached houses in the outer residential neighborhoods, or even apartments and rooming houses. And although the central city developed other cheap hotel districts (notably along the shore around Pike's Place Market and in the Belltown neighborhood), the Skid Road was an established and reliable home for the city's temporary residents (*Image 17*).

This chapter has illustrated that workingman's hotels were integral housing resources of the Skid Road during this period of Seattle's rapid expansion. The industries that fueled the economic growth of the city and region depended on the transient labor force that filled Seattle's various lodging houses. Moreover, hotel residents contributed to lower-class, and at times morally suspect, commercial and social activities, which clearly distinguished the laborers' district from the comfortable and permanent connotations of middle-class residential neighborhoods. The Skid Road's concentration of poor residents alongside saloons, gambling halls, and brothels inevitably involved the neighborhood in public discourses regarding moral reform in Seattle. The neighborhood was defined from

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<sup>119</sup> Sale, *Seattle, Past to Present*, 57-60.

the outset by elements of its social character that contrasted strongly with much of the city surrounding it. Its cheap hotels for laborers lay at the center of this contrast, which was to grow more glaring over the next decades.



Image 17: Southward view toward the Skid Road and remaining tide flats beyond, c. 1907  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, WAR0191

## CHAPTER III

### DOWN ON HARD TIMES: DEPRESSION AND THE SKID ROAD

Beginning at the end of the 1910s, and extending over the next half century, Seattle's laborers' district skidded into collapse, physically, economically, and socially. Investments in real estate had already begun to move elsewhere, and the area's poor moral reputation brought it notoriety throughout the city. But the economic slump that followed the First World War exacerbated the Skid Road's problems, and it became the undisputed hub of the city's down and out. Manufacturing and other forms of legitimate employment gradually evaporated, and the district's streets and workingman's hotels filled with chronically unemployed men—rather than the occasionally or seasonally employed residents of earlier decades. The demand for housing remained strong, even surpassing supply: in the 1930s, the district was abutted by a great plain of hundreds of shacks, self-built from jetsam materials by the city's masses of impoverished workers.

This was the period in which Seattle's Skid Road became a skid row, as many of us understand the term today. Whereas workingman's hotels had earlier been associated with a rough-and-ready laboring class, disreputable but animated, during the middle of the twentieth century the area's lodgings came to signify poverty, economic deceleration, mental illness, disintegration, and trash.<sup>120</sup> Jani Scandura, a cultural scholar of space and

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<sup>120</sup> "Trash" and "junk" reappear as motifs in this discussion in reference to the people and built environment of the Skid Road. I want to stress that this is not a judgment on the lifeways of the neighborhood's residents (although some observers saw them in this way) but reflects their relationship to and place within the city's industrial economy. Skid Roaders were trash insofar as their transient labor was no longer needed in manufacturing

place, has defined this kind of moment as *depressive modernity*, “a modernity that does not follow the forward thrust of mania, speed, and progress, but of depression, idling, and refuse[.]”<sup>121</sup> Concentrating on urban places during the Great Depression, Scandura describes environments that are more scraps than whole, which collect the detritus of faltering capitalism. This conceptualization matches the motifs of trash, wear, and aimlessness that frequently appear in accounts of the Skid Road during the Depression, and which continued through the middle of the twentieth century. The laboring society that was housed in the neighborhood deteriorated once the fire of the regional economies began to burn low. The Skid Road’s residents had trouble finding work; they idled in hotels with nowhere else to go. The poor condition of the physical environment reflected this social decline, as some of the buildings themselves fell to pieces and filled with rubbish. The 1930s solidified the Skid Road as an informal dumping ground, and one way to describe the period is the bust that followed the city’s first boom. Faltering national and world trade left many of Seattle’s maritime and railroad workers jobless, and the coal and timber industries quickly slowed.<sup>122</sup> Economic growth resumed in the city during and after the Second World War, largely the result of the Boeing Company’s military contracts and, later, its production of passenger jets. But few economic benefits reached the Skid Road. Seattle, resembling countless other postwar American cities, experienced growth on its periphery but saw little investment in its core. The story of the Skid Road, however, is not simply about its boom and bust, but also about a decline and revival. This chapter explores the district during its

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and post-manufacturing economies. They were “cast off” into a neighborhood of severe disinvestment that itself was seen by some as a trash pile of the postwar city.

<sup>121</sup> Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>122</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 118.

depressive years (*Image 18*), when the Skid Road became a place under great pressure to be reformed.



Image 18: The Skid Road south of Washington Street, photographed in 1931 by Asahel Curtis, after the wood-framed buildings of its margins had been replaced  
Source: University of Washington Special Collections, CUR1575

### ***Wear and tear on the Skid Road***

The First World War was a boon to Seattle's industries. Government contracts with local producers called for a continuous stream of ships and planes for the military.

Approximately 35,000 people were employed in the city's nineteen shipyards; those yards that still produced wood ships sourced their lumber from local mills, which also had begun to supply the Boeing Airplane Company (a relatively recent enterprise in the city). Ancillary industries cropped up as well: boilermaking, metalworking, and homebuilding. Farming remained strong throughout the city's hinterlands; flour and wheat were traded heavily to

California.<sup>123</sup> But the United States' involvement with the war lasted only two years. In the late 1910s, shipbuilding had claimed the title of Seattle's most important industry, but a decade later the Pacific Northwest was suffering through a postwar slump whose effects reached virtually all the region's major industries: lumbering, farming, mining, shipping, and transportation.<sup>124</sup>

The stuttering regional economy eliminated seasonal jobs throughout the rural areas of the Pacific Northwest. As a consequence, itinerant workers pushed into central Seattle in search of manufacturing jobs that were themselves ever less available. Laborers no longer passed through en route to employment in work camps and factories in the hinterland, but instead they stalled in the city without work.<sup>125</sup> Economically, they had few reasons to stay—but perhaps they had fewer reasons to risk heading to any other city in the region, where opportunities were equally uncertain. The slowing of the region's once-frenetic labor migrations signaled Seattle's transformation into what can be described as a depressive environment.

The growing pool of unemployed laborers amplified the city's social divisions that had become perceptible during preceding decades. Environmental historian Matthew Klingle has related Seattle's social geography leading up the Great Depression to the city's topography: the wave of arriving laborers accumulated in the cheap accommodations that were available in the least desirable urban landscapes, among them the reclaimed tide flats of the Skid Road. Klingle references the Chicago-trained sociologist Roderick McKenzie,

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<sup>123</sup> Richard C. Berner, *Seattle 1900-1920: From Boomtown, Urban Turbulence, to Restoration* (Seattle: Charles Press, 1991), 178-181.

<sup>124</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 118.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 185.

who followed the example of Ernest Burgess's concentric ring model of the city when he noted, in the mid-1920s, that many of Seattle's privileged classes had made homes in the proper residential districts that covered the hills surrounding downtown. The city's poor and unemployed laborers, on the other hand—the “more mobile and less responsible adults,” according to McKenzie—would “herd together in the hotel and apartment regions near the heart.”<sup>126</sup> In his Darwinist view, the process of competition for urban space naturally guided destitute residents into one of the only places available to them, the city's established laborers' zone.

In the depressive urban culture of the Skid Road that followed the 1920s, the hotels experienced two significant developments. The first was that many of their occupants no longer contributed their labor to the region's economy. They were getting older: many were now beyond the prime ages for performing physical labor, and they were dependent on state support instead of private sector employment. The residents had aged at the same time work opportunities disappeared. A 1935 study, compiled by a Seattle social worker who had spent time among the Skid Road's hotels, found that the typical resident of the area was a single male, around forty-two years old, and unemployed for at least ten months.<sup>127</sup> And as property investments in their neighborhood dwindled, these lodging house residents came to reflect a new paradigm of urban poverty. As opposed to the earlier generation of lodging house residents—poor but visible, seemingly engaged within urban society—the new Skid Roaders may have been seen more as a cast-off set. They appeared to live their lives physically and socially separate from the bourgeois city, treated as pariahs or (perhaps at best) ignored.

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<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Klinge, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle*, 186.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.



The second development was that in the 1920s, *Issei* (first-generation Japanese immigrants without citizenship) had taken over the management companies that ran many of Skid Road's workingman's hotels. Management was a step up from the other limited opportunities available to immigrants in the district (such as laundries) and was relatively lucrative to the *Issei*. They tended to involve themselves closely in the daily operations of their establishments, performing tasks from desk clerk to cleaner. Thus, they ran their hotels economically and were able offer low room rates to the district's pensioners. As the *Issei* had no legal right to own property, purchasing a management company gave them direct control over an establishment that was not otherwise available.<sup>128</sup>

Two of the best accounts of Skid Road SRO life during this period are by *Issei* hotel managers and their families. The first is Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, a memoir that opens with the author's childhood in the gold rush-era Carrollton Hotel, which was managed by her parents and which occupied the upper stories of a brick building on Main Street, in Seattle's old Japantown. She described how the plan and minimal accommodations of this workingman's hotel remained unchanged for decades: twenty of its sixty rooms were arranged along the building's outer walls, and the remaining forty were located in the interior, without direct access to fresh air or light. A single bathroom and bathtub served all of the hotel's residents.<sup>129</sup> The family inhabited four of the outer rooms, which they fashioned into an apartment. Sone describes the surrounding neighborhood as housing "shoddy stores, decayed buildings, and shriveled men."<sup>130</sup> And although the Carrollton had

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<sup>128</sup> Barbara Johns, "Biography: The Sign Painter," in *Signs of Home: The Paintings and Wartime Diary of Kamekichi Tokita*, ed. Barbara Johns (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>129</sup> Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (1953; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 8.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

brimmed with respectable residents affiliated with the war effort when the family purchased the hotel in 1918, in subsequent years Sone's parents found that they had to screen out "the flotsam of seedy, rough-looking characters milling around" in the postwar slump. According to her account, a number of the district's male denizens indeed were "petty thieves, bootleggers, drug peddlers, perverts, alcoholics, and fugitives from the law." But there was an adequate number of "lonely old men [...] who lived a sober existence on their meager savings or their monthly pension allotment"<sup>131</sup> to fill the rooms of the family's hotel. In Sone's descriptions, these guests—"fading, balding, watery men,"<sup>132</sup>—come across as the specters of Seattle's past boom days.

The second account is the recently translated diary of Kamekichi Tokita, a painter as well as manager of Second Avenue South's Cadillac Hotel (*Image 19*), a similar establishment to the Carrollton and located two blocks away. According to Tokita, Japanese resident aliens owned nearly all hotels south of Yesler Way at this time. But he did not directly describe many of the mundane experiences of hotel life, since he began writing on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941 and continued through his deportation to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho the following year. It is largely a diary of external threat: his main topics were the gradual censures, arrests, and curfews imposed upon Seattle's Japanese-Americans, as well as the misfortunes that befell his friends and neighbors. Still, details of the Cadillac's guests and material environment surface periodically, filtered through a cloud of anti-ethnic oppression. For instance, Tokita described the hotel's facilities through the regulations leveled against the *Issei* to cripple their businesses: blackout inspectors forced hallway skylights to be covered, and the city

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Department of Health required that the hotels' central heaters be continuously on, despite the significant expense that would be passed on to pensioner guests.<sup>133</sup>



Image 19: Undated photograph of the Cadillac Hotel, decades before Kamekichi Tokita operated it

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, SEA2487

As in the Carrollton, the residents of the Cadillac Hotel were predominantly elderly former laborers, and white. (Tokita did not rent to any of the district's African-Americans and Filipinos, considering them risks to the hotel's reputation and condition.) The guests who gained entry were still among the city's most socially and economically vulnerable residents, and Tokita worried that they would no longer be able to afford lodging if he were sent from the city and forced to sell the management company. He estimated residents earned only \$40 per month in Social Security payments and almost certainly lacked

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<sup>133</sup> Kamekichi Tokita, "Diary," in *Signs of Home: The Paintings and Wartime Diary of Kamekichi Tokita*, ed. Barbara Johns, trans. Haruo Takasugi and Naomi Kusunoki-Martin (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 107-141.

supportive family bonds or friendships. The diary describes the death of an eighty-three-year-old lodger in his hotel room, and Tokita and his two friends were the only mourners at the funeral. Nothing in the diary suggests that an uptick in wartime manufacturing and employed labor was imminent. And it indicates that the struggling regional economy was one reason hotel management remained among the most advantageous careers for Seattle's *Issei* at the beginning of the war: unemployed guests continued to require long-term lodging, while other Japanese-owned businesses in the Skid Road saw a drop in customers as a result of anti-ethnic bias. But in the end, this mattered for only a matter of months: after mounting oppression, Tokita sold the management company and the hotel's furnishings to an Italian from Bellingham for \$1,000, and in April 1942 he and his family were forced out of the city.<sup>134</sup>

A study conducted during the first half of the 1940s by University of Washington sociology professor Calvin Schmid, published as *Social Trends in Seattle*, offers a harsher characterization of the city's hotel culture than Sone and Tokita. Schmid's barrage of figures and maps depict the Skid Road as containing the city's most concentrated populations of men (81% of its residents were male) and the elderly (26% were older than sixty) (*Image 20*). Among the district's residents, the median school year completed was below the eighth grade, and a full 67% of its unemployed could not work due to age or infirmity. The Skid Road also contained a small concentration of African Americans. Other results from the study are unsurprising, given the district's large stock of workingman's hotels: it contained a high concentration of multi-dwelling units that belonged to the city's

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-180.

oldest existing buildings; very few were owner-occupied; their monthly rental rates were among the lowest in the city; and there were few private toilet or bathing facilities.<sup>135</sup>

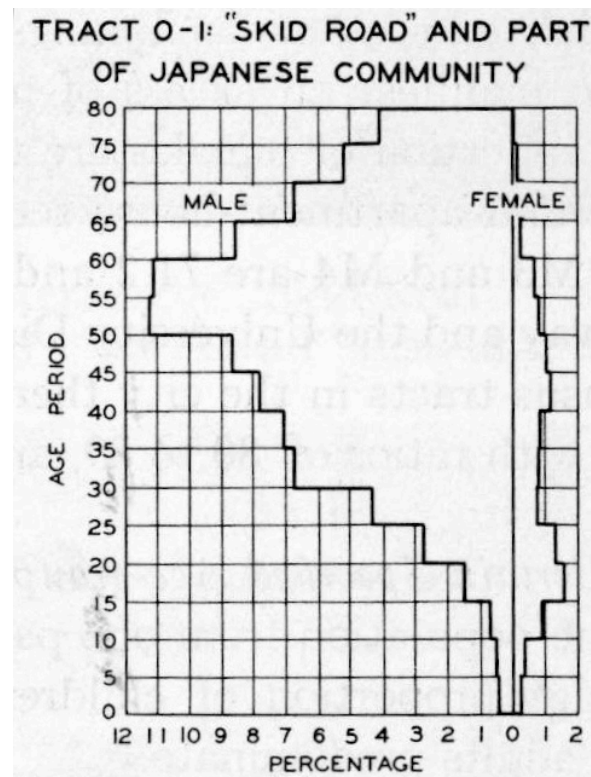


Image 20: Age and sex composition of census tract containing the Skid Road, 1940  
Source: Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle*

While these were simply social and physical descriptors, Schmid saw them as indicators that Skid Road was a slum.<sup>136</sup> Like Ernest Burgess and Roderick McKenzie before him, Schmid viewed class relations and urban development through a Darwinist lens. According to his characterization, the old laborers' district formed an area of obsolescence, whose main function was to collect the city's trash. His analysis had recurring mentions of garbage and ruin: the Skid Road contributed to the city's "dying center" filled with "discarded" or "cast-off" structures. In a map of the city's "natural areas," he named the Skid

<sup>135</sup> Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1944), 81-255.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Road the “habitat of homeless men” (*Image 21*). The district had reached the end stage of a prolonged deterioration, and the result was that “[a]long lower First Avenue and neighboring streets the unmistakable evidences of deterioration are to be seen—the smelly ‘hash house,’ the pawn shop, the second-hand stores along with the establishments offering perpetual ‘fire-sales,’ the cheap hotel, and the dingy beer parlor.”<sup>137</sup>

A further detail of the study paints the Skid Road as a truly depressive environment: Schmid found that the district had one of the city’s highest rates of suicide. The moralistic explanation he offered echoes Georg Simmel’s thoughts on alienation in urban modernity: the transient and segmented environments of the Skid Road intensified the mental distress of the city:

[T]he condition of anonymity, impersonality, and social distance tends to be accentuated on every hand by the life and institutions of this area. A district of this kind has a strong attractive force for those contemplating suicide, besides acting as a magnet to the more unconventional types, those who have revolted against the prevailing folkways and more and more who want ‘to get away from their neighbors.’ Here, one is relatively free to do as he pleases, no questions are asked and no suspicions are aroused.<sup>138</sup>

Painting the Skid Road as a laboratory for psychological corrosion and social disjuncture, Schmid followed the prevailing sociological understanding of hotel life in poor central cities. Notably, his view as an educated outsider differs from the experiences of Monica Sone and Kamekichi Tokita, whose families maintained their properties with painstaking work and enjoyed close relationships with other Japanese Seattleites. But they also witnessed the waves of men wounded by the deceleration of the laboring economy: even those sober residents whom they accepted into their hotels appeared to them as aimless

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



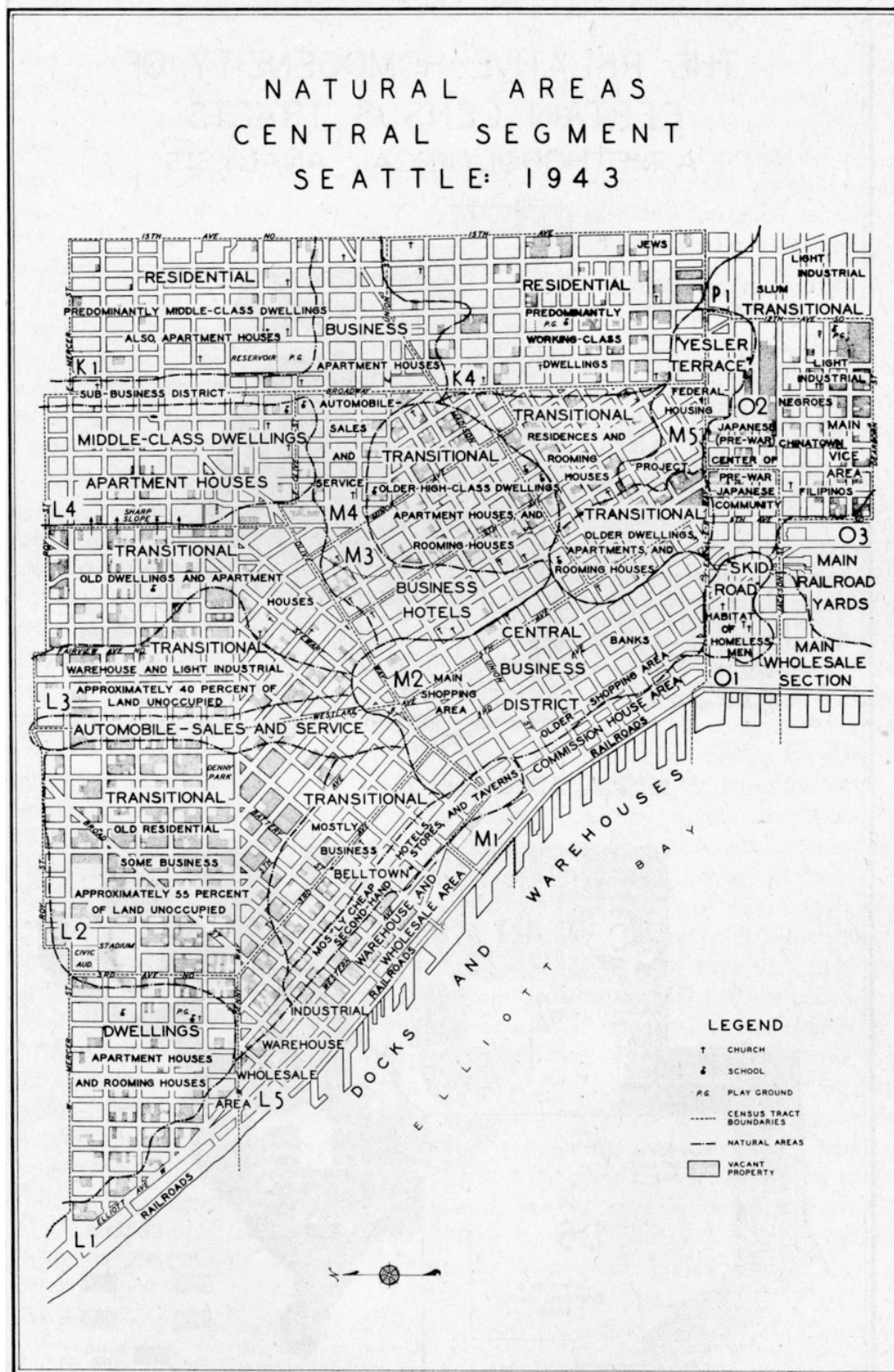


Image 21: "Natural area" map: the Skid Road, "habitat of homeless men," in the context of central Seattle's social characteristics, 1943.

Source: Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle*

and alone. It is difficult to say to what extent the city's residents shared Schmid's academic picture of the Skid Road and its collection of workingman's hotels. But as the city's formal business district spread northward from the Skid Road, and as the regional economy slumped, *depressive* remains an appropriate term to describe Skid Road through the 1930s, 1940s, and after. The accounts of it at that time make clear that it would have signified a different place within the city than it had been before the First World War, when many of its short-term residents were ephemerally employed laborers who actively supported its formal and informal economies. But in the 1920s and after, the neighborhood increasingly was characterized by permanent unemployment, rather than unreliable employment; chronic poverty, rather than cyclical financial instability; demand for cheap long-term housing in the city, rather than for short hotel stays. And even the city's production boom during the Second World War did not have a prolonged effect on what observers saw as the neighborhood's decline.

### ***The postwar crisis***

Beginning in 1940, government military contracts returned to Seattle manufacturers. Because of Boeing, the region's shipyards, and ancillary industries, the city doubled its manufacturing work force between 1939 and 1941. A stream of labor migrants, including many African Americans from the Southern United States, arrived in the city to replace the area's 69,000 men who had enlisted in the armed forces.<sup>139</sup> Still, the effects on the workingman's hotels/SROs of the Skid Road are unclear. Restaurants, stores, and taverns throughout the Skid Road (though evidently not those managed by Japanese-

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<sup>139</sup> Richard C. Berner, *Seattle Transformed: World War II to Cold War* (Seattle: Charles Press, 1999), 44-50.



Americans) were reinvigorated by the cash of wartime laborers and military personnel, who could reach the nearest Boeing plant and the city's major shipyards, all located several miles south of downtown, by bus and trolley. The Army and Navy leased the luxurious Frye Hotel on Yesler Way for troop accommodations.<sup>140</sup> But according to Tokita's account, the residents of his hotel in early 1942 were still those who had characterized the laborers' district during the 1930s: long-term guests either unemployed or on pensions.

The following three decades brought the worst physical and social decline in the old laborers' district. Seattle experienced the same damaging effects of federal urban policies that plagued other American cities after the war. Housing shortages in the city for the middle class, in tandem with the increased availability of mortgages secured through the Federal Housing Authority, led to widespread residential development on the city's suburban periphery. Boeing's domination of the aircraft industry after the war, achieved through its continued military contracts and the exploding market for commercial jets, had no trickle-down effect on the depressed Skid Road. Employment opportunities there were ad hoc. The State Employment Security Department had its office for casual workers in the district, and its staff recruited hands for short-term tasks throughout the city such as hauling coal, carrying merchandise from trucks into warehouses, and cleaning house or maintaining yards for private homeowners.<sup>141</sup> But the Skid Road remained largely a haven for aging men disengaged from the workforce, joined by those in even rougher straits.

In the 1950s, the mentally ill increasingly were being administered new antipsychotic drugs, which were intended as an alternative to institutionalization in psychiatric hospitals. This policy jettisoned mental health patients into the streets and

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<sup>140</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 129-131.

<sup>141</sup> "Earthquake Has Provided Jobs for Hundreds," *Seattle Times*, April 17, 1949, 21.

frequently into SROs, which were among the only residential options available to them. Skid rows nationwide were affected, often traumatically. In 1953, for instance, a psychiatric patient set fire to one of Chicago's skid row hotels the day after his release from a state hospital; seven died.<sup>142</sup> While Congress passed the Community Mental Health Act of 1963 in order to establish neighborhood psychiatric centers to reach deinstitutionalized patients with medications and other resources, that task became increasingly formidable as federal funding for the centers sagged and more and more hospital patients were introduced onto the streets.<sup>143</sup> SROs provided private-sector accommodations that were far too poorly equipped to pick up the slack from an eroding public-sector mental health care system.

Alcoholism brought even more negative attention. Drinking had certainly contributed to the character of the Skid Road since its early saloon-culture days, but after the war the drunk hotel customer and Skid Roader (as many of the neighborhood's residents were referred to by outsiders) became something of an urban archetype. Many in the neighborhood remained sober, but those who drank heavily were visible on the streets. It is difficult to estimate their numbers, but there were enough to warrant statements in the press such as, "The business executive, the working man and the housewife are as subject to [alcoholism] as the Skid Road resident."<sup>144</sup> After surveying Skid Road alcoholics in 1954, researchers from the University of Washington suggested that the neighborhood created a psychological prison for addicted residents, in which they could not curtail their drinking. In some cases, the researchers determined, the road to rehabilitation began only when residents were removed from the neighborhood against their wills, to hospitals or jail

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<sup>142</sup> "Arson Clues Sought in Hotel Fire in Chicago," *Seattle Times*, December 18, 1953, 20.

<sup>143</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 137.

<sup>144</sup> "Doctors Advise on Alcoholism as Disease," *Seattle Times*, March 20, 1956, 17.

cells.<sup>145</sup> And again, SROs bore the brunt of the human cost of failing governmental social services: for instance, the police department had operated a successful therapeutic farm in South Seattle for rehabilitating alcoholics beginning in 1947,<sup>146</sup> but it was suspended in the early 1960s due to municipal budget woes.<sup>147</sup> Alternatives existed—the Salvation Army operated a center, and the former Grand Union Hotel in the Skid Road housed the private Yesler Rehabilitation Center. But the cumulative impression of the Skid Road in the 1950s and 1960s is a neighborhood of people caught in a gradual downward slide. Hotel residents were “aging, tired men,”<sup>148</sup> aimless, idle, and damaged. Some were “bleary-eyed from booze,”<sup>149</sup> although not the majority of them. Broadly speaking, the Skid Road hotels absorbed some of the city’s most vulnerable residents and their social problems: they otherwise fell through the cracks in a middle-class consumer culture increasingly reoriented toward the suburban peripheries.

These deep social troubles found a physical metaphor in the Skid Road’s buildings, which likewise suffered from lost investment. They subsequently faced the threat of deteriorating and becoming dump sites. Proper repair and upkeep proved difficult for property owners whose income streams came from low-wage and pensioning hotel residents. The lack of maintenance further branded the neighborhood as a space of urban waste. This was amplified dramatically by a 7.1-point tremor that rattled the city in April

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<sup>145</sup> “Skid Road Alcoholic is Problem; Rehabilitation Possible,” *Seattle Times*, September 6, 1954, 10.

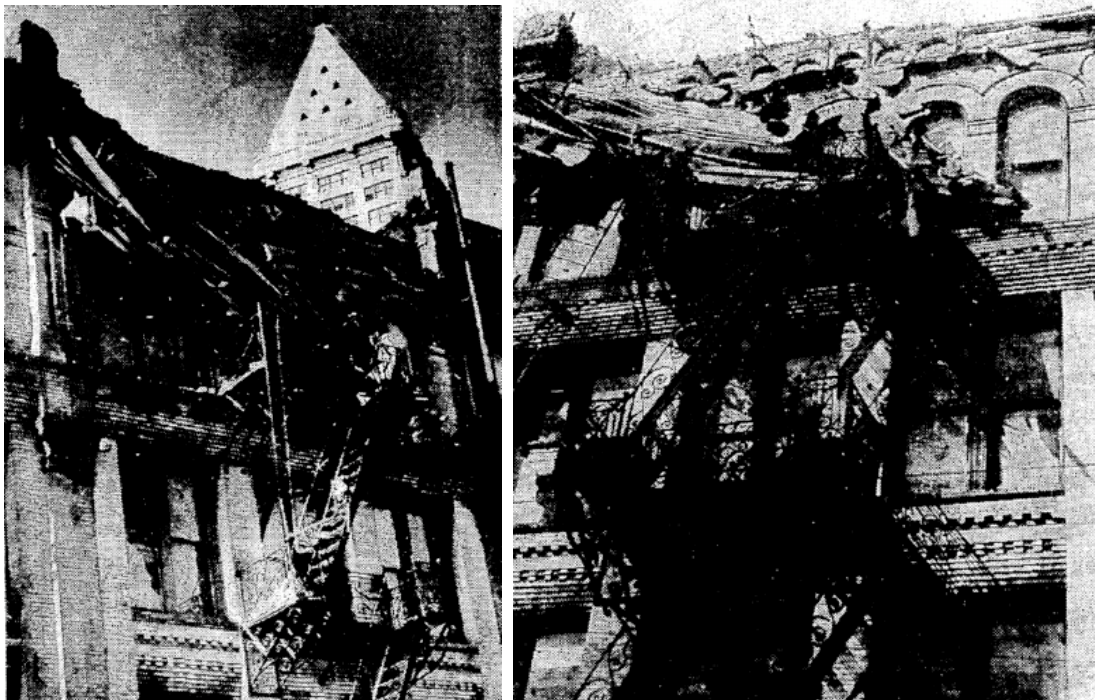
<sup>146</sup> Edward Grindrod and Russell VanTine, “Rehabilitation for Alcoholics,” *Seattle Sunday Times Magazine*, February 19, 1956, 11.

<sup>147</sup> “For Further Study of an Urgent Problem,” *Seattle Times*, October 11, 1961, 8.

<sup>148</sup> Ray Ruppert, “The Nord’s Far from Fancy, but for Aging Men It’s Home,” *Seattle Times*, April 6, 1969, 47.

<sup>149</sup> Don Duncan, “There Are Some Changes But It Still is Skid Road,” *Seattle Times*, February 15, 1965, 22.

1949. In the Skid Road, walls of some of the city's oldest buildings were pushed near collapse; cornices fell, and dislodged bricks piled in the sidewalks (*Images 22 and 23*). Some SROs were hard hit. Inspectors ordered destabilized ornament to be removed, and the damaged top stories of several hotels had to be abandoned or demolished.<sup>150</sup> (Even today, the effects of these measures are visible throughout the area, in buildings that appear to have been sheared off and capped.) The earthquake prompted the city to revise its earthquake codes, which previously had not been mandatory. The closing of upper floors and the need for repairs made the profitability of hotel operation even more challenging, and one recent history of the Skid Road has described the earthquake as the true beginning to the district's worst period of deterioration.<sup>151</sup>



Images 22 and 23: Earthquake damage to a hotel cornice in the Skid Road, 1949. Identified in the newspaper only as vacant, it is possibly the Hotel Interurban, which subsequently lost its upper three stories.

Source: *Seattle Times*

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<sup>150</sup> "Quake Gave Seattle New Look," *Seattle Times*, April 1, 1951, 9.

<sup>151</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 135.

But perhaps just as emblematic of the Skid Road's decline was the gradual trashing of interior spaces in the neighborhood's SROs. Judging from Monica Sone and Kamekichi Tomita's prewar accounts, *Issei* managers had worked tirelessly to keep their establishments clean and reputable. But subsequently, upkeep fell to managers who were far less attentive. Typical to workingman's hotels, the average private room would have provided minimal amenities—a bed, a desk and chair, and perhaps a wash basin or hot plate for cooking—dimly lit by a single light, all for the price of \$2 or \$3 per night. A bed in a dormitory may cost fifty or seventy-five cents (*Image 24*).<sup>152</sup> By the 1960s, years of neglect had taken their toll on furnishings that had served wave after wave of temporary residents. In some hotels, managers ignored cyclical maintenance; bedding, for instance, was not cleaned or replaced when necessary, if ever. A newspaper reporter who lived in

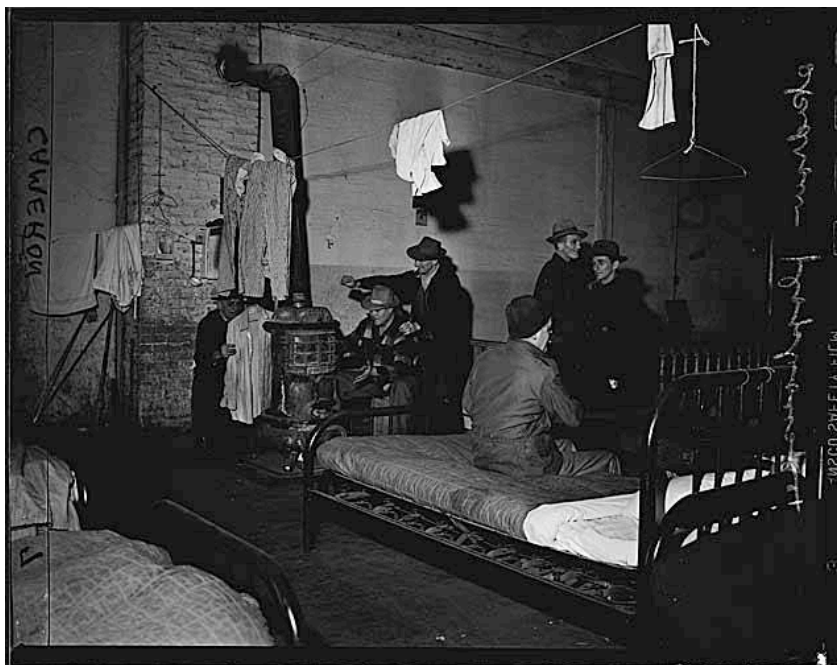


Image 24: Photograph of an unidentified Skid Road dormitory interior in 1950, taken by *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* photographer Dick Cameron  
Source: Museum of History and Industry, 1986.5.11829.1

<sup>152</sup> Don Duncan, "'Historic' Skid Road—Do We Really Want to Preserve It?," *Seattle Times*, August 23, 1966, 13.

the Skid Road on assignment for four days described his “dismal room” by first mentioning that “a dirty spread on the iron bedstead hid the dirty linen.”<sup>153</sup> According to a writer for the national magazine *Look*, however, decay was less the prevailing impression than stagnation: in one hotel, “weary, idle old men sat unmoved in straight-backed chairs along lobby walls still hung with tired Christmas posters.”<sup>154</sup>

Furthermore, piles of trash enveloped the deteriorating furnishings when hotels were seldom cleaned. Residents let detritus build up: the *Look* article described the workingman’s hotel room in which police found a resident’s dead body as “a litter of rubbish.”<sup>155</sup> And a *Seattle Times* columnist, balking at the neighborhood’s earliest preservationists, explained his vile sensory experience in the hotels’ public areas:

The first thing that hits you as you enter these old landmarks today is the pile of refuse at the bottom of the stairs, usually spiced by an empty wine bottle. You tug open a door and step from exhaust-fume filled streets into an almost overpowering mustiness, mingled with the odors of tens of thousands of meals cooked on hot plates.<sup>156</sup>

And this was not the impression of a single cynic: in 1964, the chairman of a visiting committee from the National Association of Real Estate Boards announced that Skid Road contained the most objectionable residential hotel conditions in the country. Unsurprisingly, municipal officials protested.<sup>157</sup> But regardless of the city’s ranking, it was already clear to many that the Skid Road’s hotels had suffered plenty of abuse. Perhaps they attributed it to unresponsive landlords and chronically deferred maintenance, or else to hapless residents. But the unwelcome crown bestowed on Seattle by the real estate

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<sup>153</sup> Marshall Wilson, “A Plea on Skid Road: ‘My God! My God!’,” *Seattle Times*, June 10, 1965, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Chester Morrison, “Trouble,” *Look*, March 27, 1962, 103.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Duncan, “‘Historic’ Skid Road.”

<sup>157</sup> “Our Flophouses are Not ‘Worst’ in U.S.,” *Seattle Times*, May 4, 1964, 20.

committee strongly suggested that the physical and social mess they found in the Skid Road was a great embarrassment to Seattle at large, and it was well time to find a solution for the sake of the city's reputation.

### ***Blight and bids for renewal***

By the 1960s, then, wear and tear on the Skid Road's buildings and residents had made it a poster child for deteriorating urban neighborhoods in the United States. Nationwide, cities had been concerned with "blight" since the Second World War. The term was an economic descriptor of a building's (or neighborhood's) low property value and poor condition, and it repositioned discussions of revitalization away from *slum*, a social descriptor that had been favored earlier. In the context of decentralizing postwar cities, blight was central to midcentury discourses on urban health and disease: the low property values of blighted areas were thought to spread like a cancer to surrounding urban tissue if they were allowed to remain in place.<sup>158</sup> At the level of national policy, Title I of the 1949 Housing Act had introduced government subsidies to fund blight clearance projects—now known under the umbrella of postwar "urban renewal." This marked the start of an era of intense planning across the United States, and many municipalities were eager to nominate their blighted areas for dramatic redevelopment.

Using the metaphor of the Skid Road as trashed urban space, urban renewal was a major strategy to "clean house." Despite occasional calls during the 1950s and early 1960s for the rehabilitation of the district's buildings, the availability of federal aid made demolition and redevelopment attractive options. In the mid-1960s, a group of Seattle

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<sup>158</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 346-357.

businessmen funded the Graham Plan (named after John Graham, the supervising architect), meant to persuade the city to pursue federal renewal money. Although blight broadly referred to economic characteristics, the feasibility study and redevelopment plan in Seattle intertwined the Skid Road's physical deterioration, low property values, and sociological problems. Its SROs were placed at the root. The authors of the plan identified the majority of hotels within a seventeen-block area as "questionable" or "substandard" in condition.<sup>159</sup> The plan's rhetoric reflected earlier sociological portraits of skid rows: the neighborhood was "the last refuge for the homeless and unwanted," attracting "the physically disabled, the elderly, the alcoholics, the derelicts, and the unemployed, to escape the pressures, responsibilities, and frustrations of urban life."<sup>160</sup> The forty-two-acre urban renewal area—primarily consisting of a two-block-wide strip immediately south of Yesler Way, reaching from the waterfront to Fifth Avenue South—contained twenty-nine hotels, 1,700 rooms, and roughly 1,300 residents. The plan acknowledged the housing and social service needs of the Skid Roaders, but it made plain that their presence in the area's hotels would not contribute to a viable central business district.<sup>161</sup>

The redevelopment scheme that was presented to the city's urban renewal agency in 1966 actually gestured towards the concerns of early preservationists. It retained an island of the most ornate commercial blocks surrounding the Skid Road and lining the first block of First Avenue South below Yesler Way, which the Municipal Art Commission and the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects had identified as architecturally significant. But the remaining hotel district was to be plowed under for a dramatically new

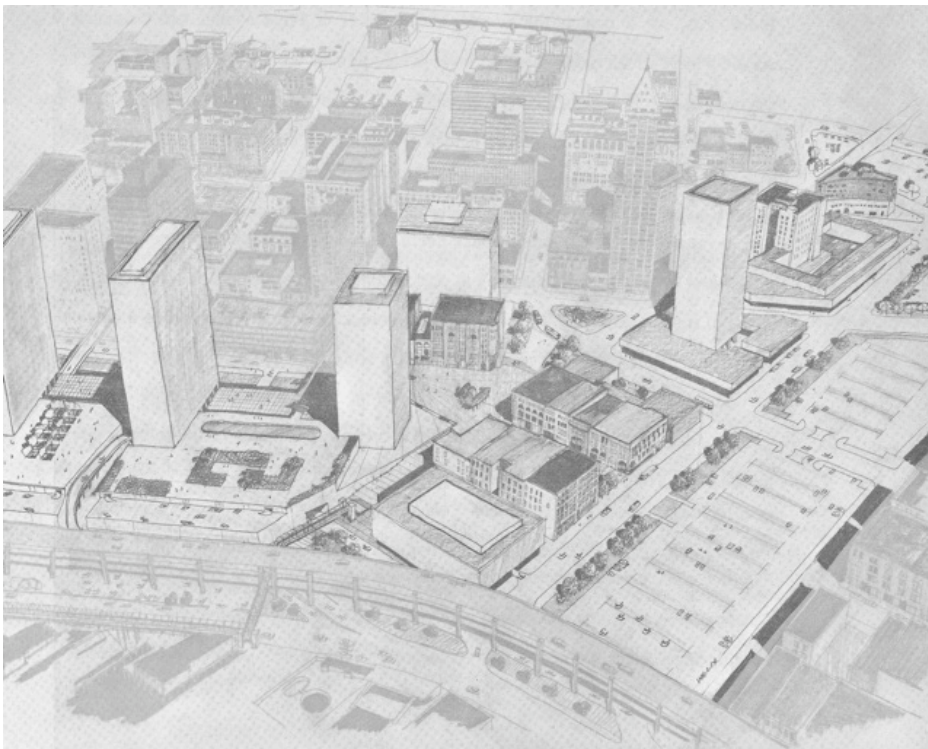
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<sup>159</sup> *Proposal for Advance Planning and Feasibility Study, Pioneer Square Redevelopment* (Seattle: John Graham and Company, 1965), 4.

<sup>160</sup> *Pioneer Square Redevelopment* (Seattle: John Graham and Company, 1966), 19.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-42.





Images 25 and 26: Existing Skid Road area, 1966, compared with urban renewal plan. Buildings around Pioneer Place and along first block of First Avenue South are retained, while hotels north of Yesler Way and south of Washington Street are replaced.  
Source: *Pioneer Square Redevelopment* (Graham Plan)

urban landscape of surface parking lots and office towers (*Images 25 and 26*). And even those buildings tagged for preservation, several of them old workingman's hotels, were re-programmed as a new destination district. Their new role was to create "the old Seattle flavor" and house restaurants and entertainment establishments. Any hotels included in the redeveloped district were intended for short-term business travelers.<sup>162</sup>

The Graham Plan's planar geometry and selective density were hallmarks of American urban renewal projects of the time, purposely ignoring the existing built patterns of the neighborhood. The Graham Plan proposed an alternative central Seattle of clean surfaces and broad, open spaces—in obvious contrast to the dense and "trashed" urban space of the Skid Road. Like the majority of American cities (if not all of them), Seattle had a tradition of "creative destruction:" civic leaders, developers, and investors eliminated economically underperforming urban spaces in order to redevelop the sites, ostensibly to become bigger, better, bolder, and more productive.<sup>163</sup> The Graham Plan was imagined as a continuation of those earlier urban transformations in the city, such the Second Avenue Extension (described in the preceding chapter), which had both re-formed and reformed the laborers' district by eliminating its existing hotels. If the Skid Road wasn't truly trash before urban renewal was suggested, the Graham Plan rendered it a place to throw away. But before the project could be implemented, preservation advocates managed to gain protection for the district through the city's 1970 historic landmark ordinance. That action sparked a contrasting strategy to clean up the district. But another unexpected event

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-42.

<sup>163</sup> I take this use of "creative destruction" from urban historian Max Page, who adapted Joseph Schumpeter's economic concept through the lens of the city and its built environment. See Page's book *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan: 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

ultimately led to the elimination of the Skid Road's workingman's hotels, which had served as the strongest link between the area's early labor history and its years of postwar decline.

### ***The Ozark Ordinance and the SRO crisis***

In the early morning of March 20, 1970, fire consumed the Ozark Hotel, an SRO located in a hotel district at the northern end of downtown Seattle. The cause was arson, and twenty residents were killed in the five-story, wood-frame building. As was the case with workingman's hotels in the Skid Road, many who lived in the Ozark were elderly or infirm, and they were unable to escape the rapidly spreading flames. The fire department had made an inspection of the Ozark the very evening before—such procedures had become routine as officials were increasingly concerned about the safety of the city's aging hotel stock.<sup>164</sup> The disaster immediately prompted calls to revisit municipal fire codes. Seattle's fire chief stated that there were forty or fifty hotels equally as vulnerable as the Ozark, all poorly constructed, with transom windows and hollow-core doors that allowed the spread of fire. Individual rooms that served as apartments for long-term residents were wired chaotically for televisions and hot plates. And hotel managers made too meager of profits to upgrade their facilities to earlier code changes, or simply did not care to.<sup>165</sup>

Within three months of the fire, the City Council passed what is known as the Ozark Ordinance, an updated fire code that targeted workingman's hotels and apartment complexes with four or more stories. Internal walls, doors, and transoms thereafter would need to provide one-hour fire protection, and each property now had to include two egress

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<sup>164</sup> "Hotel Inspected Shortly Before Fire," *Seattle Times*, March 20, 1970, A20.

<sup>165</sup> Dee Norton, "Department Powerless to Head Off Disasters," *Seattle Times*, March 22, 1970, B1.

staircases. A hotel manager's first alternative to these improvements was to install a sprinkler system, while the second alternative was to cease operations. The city pledged to enforce the new code strictly. Twenty-two hotels were classified as "high hazard" and given one year's notice to make the required improvements; over three hundred low- and moderate-risk multi-unit buildings were given four years (until the beginning of 1974).<sup>166</sup> The year following the Ozark disaster, another fire swept through the Seventh Avenue Apartments, again downtown. Twelve residents were trapped and killed. The City Council quickly included multi-unit buildings three stories and lower in the new code restrictions. The number of infracting properties throughout Seattle reached well over one thousand.<sup>167</sup>

When managers could afford to bring their hotels up to the new code, the improvements were credited with savings lives.<sup>168</sup> But by far the most common consequence was that property managers were forced to close. The effect on Seattle's low-cost residential landscape was dramatic. While an exact number remains elusive, over five thousand apartment and hotel rooms were removed from use after the ordinances went into effect. And SROs were particularly vulnerable: while the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development made subsidies available for improvements to apartment complexes, SROs were ineligible due to their supposed blighting effect.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Paul Henderson, "Fire Traps Here are Living on Borrowed Time," *Seattle Times*, March 21, 1971, A16.

<sup>167</sup> George Foster, "272 Older Hotels to Get Fire Hazard Notices," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 19, 1972, A4.

<sup>168</sup> See "Lifesaving Effect of New Fire Rules Cited," *Seattle Times*, January 10, 1972, C3; Paul Henderson, "1 Dead, 18 Safe in Hotel Blaze," *Seattle Times*, December 20, 1974, 1.

<sup>169</sup> Reuben McKnight, "The Legacy of the Ozark Ordinance," *Preservation Seattle*. Last modified October 2002. <http://www.historicseattle.org/preservationseattle/publicpolicy/defaultoct.htm>.

In the aftermath of the ordinances, a great number of the Skid Road's SROs were shuttered. A 1974 report by the Skid Road Community Council found that of over 3,200 residential units that had been available in the district in 1960, just above 1,200 remained in 1970—and only about 850 were there at the beginning of 1974. Over the same time period, the neighborhood's resident population was cut in half, from over 1,400 to around 700.<sup>170</sup> These figures do not distinguish SROs from other housing types, but hotels were the predominant residential stock in the area. A list of the names of Skid Road SROs forced to padlock their doors during those years has not been located, although a map included in the Skid Road Community Council report suggests that the number of closed establishments in the district was around thirty (*Image 27*). But without a doubt, the ordinances that followed the Ozark fire marked the end of an era: the lodging house/SRO, a type of residence that had defined the neighborhood and housed its residents for close to a century, was now exceedingly difficult to keep in operation. But the need for affordable lodgings in the neighborhood had not waned.

The closure of SROs throughout Seattle following the Ozark fire contributed to the simultaneous nationwide situation that has been called the "SRO crisis." In cities throughout the United States, SROs were eliminated for several reasons: some were converted to tourist hotels by owners who sought greater profits, while many others were demolished as blight, as the Graham Plan had threatened to do in Seattle.<sup>171</sup> In so many cases, a historic but deteriorating SRO district was written off as blight; to those with decision-making power, creative destruction appeared to be the obvious solution to spark

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<sup>170</sup> "Changes in Downtown Seattle: 1960-1974" (Seattle: Skid Road Community Council, 1974), n.p.

<sup>171</sup> Groth, *Living Downtown*, 8-10.

capital investment in urban cores at a time when money flowed most freely to the suburban periphery.

During the nationwide SRO crisis, the disappearance of such an immense supply of private-sector affordable housing contributed to jumps in urban homelessness. In Seattle, no numbers seem to have been compiled to specify how many hotel residents found rooms in hotels elsewhere in the city, and how many became homeless. But a survey conducted by the Skid Road Community Council in early 1972 sketches a slightly clearer picture of homelessness and housing options south of Yesler Way. (This was prior to all of the neighborhood's hotels closures, however.) The survey's methods were hardly conclusive—

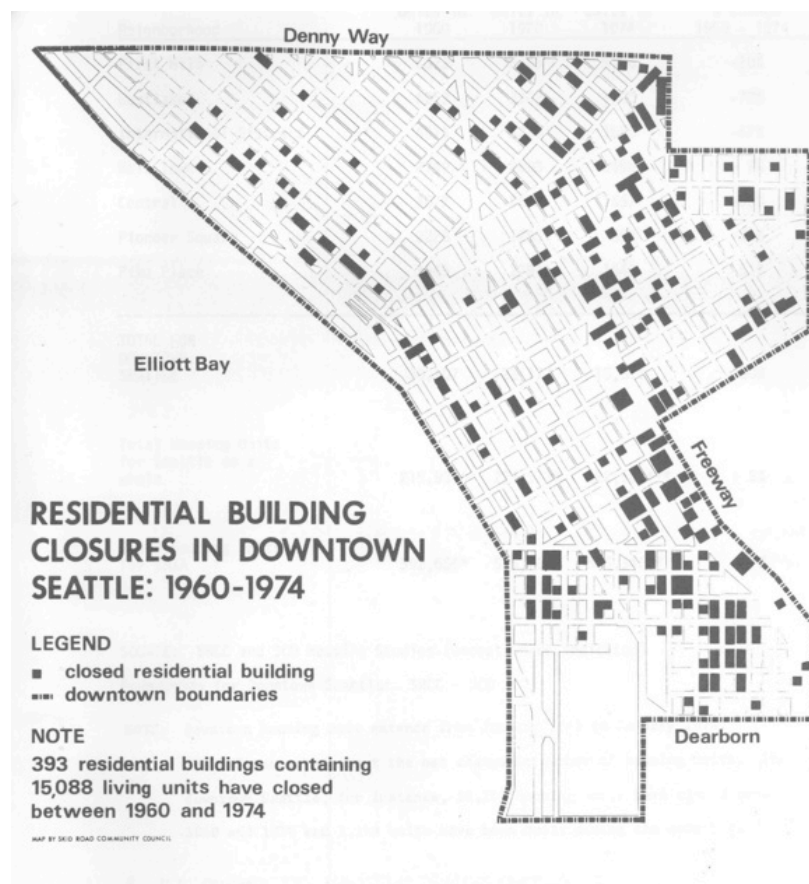


Image 27: Skid Road Community Council map of residential building closures, 1960-1974; Pioneer Square is the southwestern sector  
Source: "Changes in Downtown Seattle, 1960-1974"

the surveyor approached nearly fifty people on the street who appeared to be “typical” Skid Roaders—but the results showed that homelessness was a persistent reality for a significant number of neighborhood residents. Roughly half of the respondents reported that they did not have any reliable place to stay at night: they predominantly had slept on the streets, under bridges, and in railroad yards. (Those who did have a place to stay resided in apartments, missions, and the remaining workingman’s hotels.)<sup>172</sup> What specifically had caused these people’s homelessness, however, remains unclear: the surveyor did not inquire if respondents had at one time lived in SROs and had been kicked out, if they had sought rooms but had found too few available, or if other circumstances were at work. But one conclusion that can be drawn from the survey is that individual lodging house rooms would have met the needs of many homeless. The great majority of survey respondents reported that they did not like to stay in the district’s missions, and their common complaint was that those establishments did not respect their autonomy or privacy. They were too crowded and noisy; wake-up times were too early; religious preaching was inescapable. In other words, those surveyed wanted to control their own schedules and spaces, something allowed by the SROs that were increasingly scarce.

Additional accounts indicate that many Skid Roaders relocated to other lodging house districts in downtown, although some have suggested that managers inflated their room prices in response to the increased demand for accommodations.<sup>173</sup> Downtown was somewhat removed, however, from the social service agencies that had been established in the Skid Road, such as mission kitchens and employment offices. And while the Seattle

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<sup>172</sup> Bruce Zielsdorf, “Housing Resources and Shelter Preference of the Skid Road Population” (Seattle: Skid Road Community Council, 1972), 1-3.

<sup>173</sup> Ray Ruppert, “Room at the Inn’ Ends for 170 Tenants,” *Seattle Times*, December 14, 1972, 1.

Housing Authority provided financial assistance to displaced residents to help them find new lodgings, some were given no warning of their evictions, and some were simply not informed that the city even had resources to support them.<sup>174</sup> It is a considerable understatement to say that the closure of the Skid Road's SROs disrupted the lives of their residents. As a member of the city's housing committee stated to the *Seattle Times* in 1973, "When a Skid Roader moves, he leaves his world behind."<sup>175</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has concentrated on tough times for the Skid Road, during the half century that followed the First World War. As the city's economic engines increasingly shifted away from the central city, investments in building stock of the Skid Road dried up, while the governmental net of social services frayed thin. As a consequence, the material fabric of the neighborhood's SROs deteriorated, and vulnerable residents faced serious social troubles without having access to needed resources. Until at least the 1970s, the neighborhood was something of a trash space for the city—a metaphorical rubbish bin for the urban conditions of idleness and decay that did not appear to contribute to regional economic growth. Some postwar business leaders suggested urban renewal clearance and redevelopment as a strategy to remake the district as economically productive urban space. The legacy of the Skid Road's depressive modernity was that, in the context of a middle-class consumer culture and suburban expansion, many of Seattle's worn places and people fell through the cracks.

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<sup>174</sup> ---, "Skid Road People Moving Out of Sight," *Seattle Times*, November 19, 1973, C4.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*



Boom and bust is hardly an uncommon story in American urban history, but cities largely tend to be characterized by their booms. A critical point in this chapter is that the depressive Skid Road was a defining space of twentieth-century Seattle. The neighborhood's SROs provided the barest of accommodations to vulnerable residents who had few or no alternatives within their economic and social contexts. Yet the continuous operation of these establishments during this period maintained a link to the labor boom in which they had been built, in spite of the political oppression of *Issei* managers and long delayed maintenance. The Ozark Ordinance, in tandem with the city's preservation movement, began a major transformation of the Skid Road. The question of how distinct the district would become from its earlier iterations was a source of tension during the decades that followed.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESERVATION AND RENAISSANCE

In 1963, when architect Ralph Anderson purchased the Capitol Brewing Company Building along the Skid Road's First Avenue South spine for \$30,000,<sup>176</sup> he had on his hands an establishment that had added to its neighborhood's poor reputation. Although constructed around 1900 as a brewery, the building's upper stories had most recently housed a "third-rate hotel," as the *Seattle Times* described it.<sup>177</sup> To rehabilitate the property into market-rate apartments and an interior designer's studio, Anderson had to deal with its material "junk:" the detritus of its years as an SRO and as an engineering supplier. He removed a great deal of stuff from the building, such as linoleum flooring and exterior signage, and he sandblasted away "the accumulated grime of many years."<sup>178</sup> Anderson felt his building had aesthetic and economic importance that was buried deep, where it was hardly visible any longer. This historic rehabilitation set a precedent in the area, prompting the gradual transformation of the Skid Road from a down-and-out neighborhood into a place that in some ways was unrecognizable. Within fifteen years of Anderson's sprucing up his first building, no SROs operated in the Skid Road; they had been replaced by a collection of boutiques, studios, and galleries, all surrounded by a greened streetscape that belied the barren and grimed surfaces that had characterized the neighborhood for decades.

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<sup>176</sup> Judy Mattivi Morley, *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West: Albuquerque, Denver, and Seattle* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>177</sup> "Old Building is Given Modern Touch," *Seattle Times*, November 24, 1963, 2C.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

This chapter will offer a straightforward account of Seattle’s preservation movement as it unfolded in Pioneer Square—where its seed germinated earliest, and perhaps with the most dramatic effect. (Here I will also begin to refer to the neighborhood as Pioneer Square, as that name increasingly signified the entire district during its rehabilitation.) Moving chronologically from the early 1960s to the 1980s, this narrative will cover the changes in thinking among Seattleites about Pioneer Square’s architectural, historical, and financial value to the city, unavoidably including its SROs. More detailed analysis of these changes will come in the next chapter—but here it is useful to lay out the primary characters and events that shaped preservation discourse in Seattle, starting with grassroots advocates, property developers, and architects such as Ralph Anderson, who disagreed with the suggestions of some business leaders that demolition and rebuilding was the appropriate response to the neighborhood’s deterioration. This account intends to balance the preceding chapter, by showing that Pioneer Square’s decline was met by attempts to pick it from the junk heap, so to speak, and repackage it for largely new audiences, new uses, and new benefits to the city.

### ***Business and cultural responses to neighborhood deterioration***

As the previous chapter mentioned, several groups of neighbors, business leaders, and city planners in the late 1950s and 1960s suggested preserving Pioneer Square as an alternative to demolishing its buildings or allowing them to deteriorate further. The 1966 Graham Plan for urban renewal recommended rehabilitating several buildings that members of the Municipal Art Commission and American Institute of Architects had identified for their noteworthy architecture. But even in the preceding decade, several

affiliated stakeholder groups that included architects and Pioneer Square business owners among their members—including the Allied Arts Pioneer Square Committee, Action/Better City, and the Pioneer Square Association—advocated for the neighborhood’s rehabilitation. Notably, in 1958 Seattle businessmen established the Central Association, a venture that aimed to improve the economic base of the greater downtown district and to stem the loss of investment and consumer attention to new shopping areas in Seattle’s suburbs. A 1959 planning study undertaken by the group and the Seattle Planning Commission recognized that a downtown district with preserved historic architecture—intact and repaired for middle-class audiences—would attract waves of tourists. The success of similar neighborhood efforts elsewhere in the country had not escaped the Central Association’s attention: in 1960, the group sent a representative to investigate San Francisco’s Jackson Square and Los Angeles’s Olvera Street. Both had been struggling downtown neighborhoods until concentrated restoration efforts in each brought heavy property investment. (The rehabilitation of Olvera Street’s adobe buildings during the 1920s attracted a food market and other establishments that marketed the area’s Hispanic heritage to large tourist crowds; Jackson Square was transformed into San Francisco’s interior design district in the 1950s, oriented toward well-off local residents.) The Central Association aspired to place Pioneer Square within a new canon of American urban historic districts that were increasing their respective municipal tax incomes. According to the group’s perspective, “Pioneer Square can become to Seattle what the French Quarter is to New Orleans,” an ambition that stood to capture a portion of the city’s \$1,000,000 tourist economy.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> “Association Pursues Pioneer Square Restoration,” *Seattle Times*, October 30, 1960, C3.

But while groups such as the Central Association may have begun a broad reassessment of Pioneer Square, individual cultural elites were largely responsible for the bricks-and-mortar work of preservation. Victor Steinbrueck, an architect and faculty member at the University of Washington, had the highest profile among individual advocates through the 1950s and 1960s, and he guided discussions towards recognizing the neighborhood's building stock as a collection of historical, architectural, and social resources, rather than as promising economic investments first and foremost. Steinbrueck and his students documented the Skid Road's architecture and published drawings as early as 1953, in the midst of its midcentury crisis.<sup>180</sup> In 1965, simultaneous to the Graham Plan, Steinbrueck summarized his preservation viewpoint in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: "Taken separately the Pioneer Square buildings are not great architecture, but as a group of buildings of similar character, scale and material of the same era, a total environment is created that is the most architecturally successful within the central business district."<sup>181</sup> And he did not limit his concern to the neighborhood's physical attributes: he was interested equally, if not more, in the Skid Road's down-and-out social milieu, which distinguished the district from any other in the city.<sup>182</sup> In other words, Steinbrueck seems to be among the first in the city to recognize the value of the neighborhood's grit and grain.

Writer and amateur historian Bill Speidel also stepped in with concerns that Pioneer Square's defining features and narratives were in danger of being lost through urban transformation—specifically, the rough and tumble events of the city's first half century.

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<sup>180</sup> Lawrence Kreisman, *Made to Last: Historic Preservation in Seattle and King County* (Seattle: Historic Seattle Preservation Foundation, 1999), 13.

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 175.

<sup>182</sup> See, for instance, Larry Coffman, "'Human Renewal' is Key Part of Pioneer Square Project," *Seattle Times*, July 25, 1967, 14.

Speidel pulled together a revisionist history of the city that emphasized its crooks, loggers, and brothel owners: in his words, “the tough characters who took a wilderness and carved a city out of it[.]”<sup>183</sup> He found, literally underground, a largely forgotten landscape that best expressed “the archaeology of the Skid Road:” the ground-level rooms and corridors that had disappeared when the city’s streets and sidewalks were razed after the fire. “I see the city’s birthplace down there,” he wrote, “I see ghosts of the past...”<sup>184</sup> In 1965, Speidel began guiding tours through cleared areas of subterranean Pioneer Square, interpreting the passageways with stories of carousing. His uncouth narratives of the city’s development did not directly require the comprehensive physical rehabilitation of Seattle’s Underground; nonetheless, his work contributed to Pioneer Square’s preservation by casting light into dark and unknown corners, helping to make the area a destination neighborhood known for its opportunities to consume a sense of history. Immediately popular, the Underground Tour enterprise became a major attraction.

This was contemporaneous to the first wave of rehabilitations in the district. Although Ralph Anderson has said he shared Steinbrueck’s concerns for the urban skid row landscape,<sup>185</sup> the series of projects that he initiated ultimately reconfigured the district’s commercial character. This chapter began with Anderson’s (and developer Alan Black’s) work on the Capital Brewing Company Building in 1963, which produced studio space and market-rate residences. His next efforts were at the southern end of the district, where in 1966 he began to rehabilitate the side-by-side Union Trust Buildings, located on Main Street immediately around the corner from the Capitol Brewing Company Building. He

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<sup>183</sup> William C. Speidel, *Sons of the Profits: The Seattle Story, 1851-1901* (Seattle: Nettle Creek, 1967), 214.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Morley, *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West*, 84.

targeted the Union Trust Buildings because they were “among the best examples of good Victorian architecture in Seattle.”<sup>186</sup> Their combined 26,000 square feet previously had contained business space and Washington’s casual labor office, but through rehabilitation they were reprogrammed for an art gallery and restaurant.

Anderson’s first efforts planted the seeds of transformation in the district, leading like-minded architects, developers, artists, and business owners to purchase and rehabilitate down-at-heel buildings at the southern edge of the Skid Road, below Main Street. In 1967, one *Seattle Times* columnist noted that the Capital Brewing Company Building had “trailblazing and venturesome” tenants, among them two interior designers, a sculptor, and art dealers. By this time, nearby properties had been bought up and repurposed for a list of similarly bourgeois-artistic establishments: a custom framer, an art salon, “ateliers and studio work shops, art galleries and street-level shops catering to the decorative and design professions.” Only a year or two after some business leaders had responded to the trash space of the Skid Row with suggestions of slum clearance and urban renewal development, the area was being drastically rebranded, pushed toward the high-taste vanguard. According to the clearly impressed newspaper columnist, Pioneer Square would soon become “the sort of setting favored for luxury-item advertising, art salons and a distinctive merchandising center offering the ultimate in home furnishings for gracious and sophisticated living.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> “Old Buildings on Occidental Will Be Restored by Purchaser,” *Seattle Times*, January 16, 1966, 30.

<sup>187</sup> John J. Reddin, “Do-It-Yourself Urban Renewal,” *Seattle Times*, October 8, 1967, 9.

### ***Coordinated preservation design and planning strategies***

These developments were roughly simultaneous with—and exemplary of—the maturation of the historic preservation movement nationwide. 1966’s National Historic Preservation Act, in addition to municipal-level templates for preservation planning, created frameworks for the inventory and legal protection of historic properties. In light of these developments, Pioneer Square was the obvious candidate for a preservation test case in Seattle. Its architecture was recognized more and more as a significant resource for the city at large; it was where the city’s rehabilitation projects had concentrated, with the most noticeable effects.<sup>188</sup> After surveying the neighborhood’s buildings for the Seattle Planning Commission, Victor Steinbrueck recommended a thirty-acre historic district, the majority of whose buildings generally shared a physical scale and period of construction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1969, Pioneer Square was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. The following year, the Seattle City Council approved the Pioneer Square Historic District ordinance (the first such law in the city), which established a review board to guide exterior alterations within the district. Funding sources for rehabilitations expanded in the wake of the ordinance: preservation grants became available, and banks and investors looked more favorably on projects in Pioneer Square that they previously had considered financial risks.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> The demolition of the Seattle Hotel in the early 1960s also should be mentioned for its role stoking the flames of the city’s preservation movement. Once a flagship luxury hotel on Yesler Way, the Seattle was replaced by a parking garage. The outrage that followed its destruction points to an early appreciation of the district’s architectural merits.

<sup>189</sup> Kreisman, *Made to Last*, 13-16.





Image 28: The Grand Central Building photographed by Victor Steinbrueck before rehabilitation, c. 1969

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, SEA3061



Image 29: The Grand Central following rehabilitation, c. 1974, photographed by Art Hupy. One corner of Occidental Park is just visible behind the building, to the right.

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, MPH586

The landmark rehabilitation of the immense, four-story Squire Latimer Block soon followed the district's historic designation. Built in 1890 but converted to the Grand Central Hotel during the gold rush, it subsequently suffered "eight decades of hard use and inattention" as a 160-room SRO (*Images 28 and 29; see also Image 12 in Chapter II for a 1909 view*).<sup>190</sup> Ralph Anderson was again one of the partners in the rehabilitation (alongside developers Alan White and Richard Black), and the project signaled greater ambitions for the preservation of the old Skid Road. This was due in part to the building's size, but the project also showed that architects, developers, and municipal planning authorities had begun to approach the district as a collection of integrated architectural spaces and landscapes. The revamped Grand Central featured an interior shopping arcade leading from First Avenue South to Occidental Avenue. Here it opened to a new public plaza, Occidental Park, which replaced a surface parking lot where workingman's hotels had been razed decades earlier. (The building ultimately would be rechristened Grand Central on the Park.) Paved in stone and studded with trees, the park had been designed by the firm of Jones and Jones Architects and Landscape Architects so as to soften the neighborhood's tough fabric, as well as to provide a gathering space for residents and shoppers. By the mid-1970s, the park was linked to another of the Joneses' commissions: an expanded and re-landscaped Pioneer Place, the wedge-shaped plaza formed by intersecting street grids at the north end of Pioneer Square. It now included a wide pedestrian thoroughfare shaded by a tree canopy. Anderson oversaw the rehabilitation of the imposing Pioneer Building, which was sited on the plaza.<sup>191</sup> These conjoined projects pulled the wave of rehabilitations into the most visible and trafficked area of the district,

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<sup>190</sup> Bob Lane, "Grand Central Hotel Being Refurbished," *Seattle Times*, January 4, 1970.

<sup>191</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 188-190.

and they reintroduced the plaza as the architectural showplace that it had been at the turn of the twentieth century. Only it now served as a place of respite, distinguished from the transportation hub it had been for much of its life (*Image 30*).



Image 30: Pioneer Place, c. 1912

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, SEA0827

In this fashion, in an initial preservation campaign that lasted from the early 1960s until the 1980s, Pioneer Square's urban landscape was transformed bit by bit. The facades of rehabilitated buildings were cleaned of whatever deposits had accumulated on them in the past seventy or eighty years; awnings were installed over storefronts; coats of plaster were removed from interior walls to reveal brick; pockets and corridors of green replaced littered stretches of concrete. And while the city's organized preservation movement found new neighborhoods to champion during this time, most notably Pike Place Market, interest remained strong in the effort to coax Pioneer Square out of its mid-century state of deterioration. Its previous wild and wooly urban atmosphere made way for a more refined

collection of businesses that marketed themselves to economically privileged consumers. Newly landscaped open spaces reoriented the neighborhood's streetscape away from its association with littered, hard surfaces, and towards comfort. Perhaps inevitably, observers used words like "renaissance," "regeneration," "renewal," and "resurrection" to describe this dramatic turnaround. And at least one likened the rehabilitation of Pioneer Square to the district's construction after the 1889 fire: a new beacon neighborhood emerging once more from an urban ruin.<sup>192</sup>

### ***The place of hotels and affordable housing***

The code changes that caused SRO closures throughout the Skid Road contributed to its transformation, beginning before the Ozark Ordinance was passed in 1970. One of those closed was the Boston Hotel—one of twenty-three properties owned by Dollar Hotels, Inc. in Pioneer Square. The company's owner, Abie Label, had developed plans to renovate some of his SRO properties while keeping rooms rates under \$100 per month; he wished to demonstrate that, in his words, "private enterprise can play a significant role in reducing the shortage of low- and moderate-income housing in the urban areas"<sup>193</sup> (*Image 31*). But these plans never came to pass, and private enterprise seemed handicapped to maintain safe and clean hotel rooms that were affordable to Skid Roaders. In the end, establishments such as the Boston were simply so deteriorated that Label could not feasibly rehabilitate them with income from the established SRO operational model, and he was forced to close

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<sup>192</sup> "Restoring Historic Old Seattle," *Seattle Times*, January 6, 1970, 12.

<sup>193</sup> "Owner Says Old Hotels Can Provide Good Housing," *Seattle Times*, October 27, 1968, D6.

them.<sup>194</sup> Label subsequently leased the hotel to architects who, in 1969, reopened the building as an art gallery and studio space.<sup>195</sup> Several others of Label's hotels followed suit.

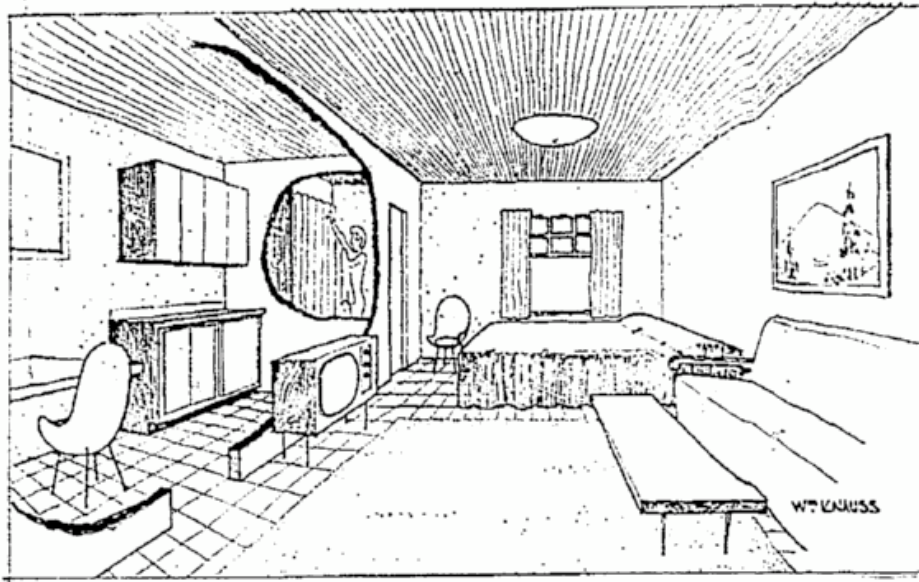


Image 31: Designer Bill Knauss's sketch of an expanded SRO room proposed by Abie Label, converted from one and a half previous rooms to add a kitchenette and private bath  
Source: *Seattle Times*, October 27, 1968

Yet Label was responsible for one pioneering hotel rehabilitation in the Skid Road that delivered on his concern for affordable housing options. The Frye Hotel, like some other SROs in the neighborhood, originally had been built to accommodate customers who were more privileged than laborers—in fact, it had been among Seattle's most exclusive hotels and had contributed to the formal Beaux Arts tableau surrounding City Hall Park. (Image 16 in Chapter II offers a historical view.) Depending on one's perspective, the Frye had fallen perhaps furthest and hardest among Pioneer Square's hotels by the time it housed poor, pensioning lodgers in the 1960s. Label oversaw the conversion of its 325 rooms into 234 expanded units. The project became financially feasible after Label lobbied

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<sup>194</sup> Alf Collins, "Abie Label's 'Urban-Renewal' Program Runs into Snags," *Seattle Times*, March 24, 1968, 2C.

<sup>195</sup> "Pioneer Square Gallery Hangs First Show," *Seattle Times*, September 7, 1969, 8B.

for funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which subsidized both the rehabilitation costs and the rental payments of the building's low-income tenants.<sup>196</sup>



Image 32: Rendering of proposed conversion of rooms within Abie Label's SROs to commercial spaces

Source: *Seattle Times*, October 14, 1973

The hotel, whose residents came from among the many who had been displaced by other SRO closures in Pioneer Square, was renamed the Frye Apartments. The change reflected a turn away from the temporary accommodations that defined SROs, towards permanence and a sense of respectability. Yet in spite of his publicly stated concern for the place of Skid Roaders, and in spite of his work on the Frye and affordable housing projects in other neighborhoods in the city,<sup>197</sup> Abie Label's other contributions to Pioneer Square's

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<sup>196</sup> "Frye Hotel Will Be 234 Units," *Seattle Times*, August 15, 1971, G1.

<sup>197</sup> Label was a partner in the conversion of the International Hotel, for instance, located in the neighboring International District. Providing affordable studio apartments with private kitchens and baths, it absorbed residents pushed out of the Skid Road. The International Hotel was evidently one of several similar conversions Label had planned in the International District during the early 1970s, supported by the Federal Housing

preservation more closely followed the course of the gentrifying real estate market. As hotels in the neighborhood continued to close, Label envisioned remaking SRO rooms not as refashioned residential spaces, but as small shops and “incubator spaces” for middle-class “craftsmen and farmers and anyone with a product or service to sell”<sup>198</sup> (*Image 32*).

A point of comparison is the one provided by Ilze and Grant Jones, the designers responsible for designing Pioneer Square’s major regenerative landscapes. The Joneses became Skid Road property owners and developers in 1974, four years after the Ozark Ordinance, with their purchase of one of the final SROs that remained open in the neighborhood, the Traveler’s Hotel on Yesler Way. Unlike Abie Label’s rehabilitation of the Frye Hotel, the Joneses wanted to keep the hotel available to its existing clientele and planned to retain its operational model as an SRO. To demonstrate their commitment to its residents, they retained the Japanese-American family who had managed the SRO for the previous thirty years.<sup>199</sup> But only three years after they had taken over operations, and despite their initial intentions, the Joneses distributed eviction notices to its fifty residents. The Joneses had never been able to turn a profit operating the hotel, and after tenants were removed, they consolidated many of the building’s 150 cramped SRO rooms into several large, up-market condominiums—the first in the neighborhood. Ilze Jones explained in the *Seattle Times* that she and her husband had turned pessimistic about an SRO’s prospects in Pioneer Square, largely because the people there who required that form of lodging were

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Administration’s Section 221(d) affordable housing programs. See Alice Staples, “New Homes in Old Setting for Downtown Oldtimers,” *Seattle Times*, December 13, 1970, G2. More research is warranted to explain why Label ultimately did not pursue the same course in Pioneer Square.

<sup>198</sup> Alf Collins, “Shopping a Solution,” *Seattle Times*, October 14, 1973, G2.

<sup>199</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 138-139.

becoming fewer and fewer. Many had already been relocated to other parts of the city.<sup>200</sup> This turn of events demonstrated that the matter of maintaining an SRO in the midst of amplified capital investment and gentrification was, to put it simply, more easily said than done. And it was a signal that the Skid Road had crossed a threshold: building rehabilitations and code changes had pushed out enough of the previous residents that their place in the neighborhood was no longer self-evident.

Planners had also become aware of the demand for affordable housing, perhaps in response to criticism by groups such as the Skid Road Community Council.<sup>201</sup> Architect Arthur Skolnick, hired by the city in 1973 as manager of the Pioneer Square Historic District, was responsible for implementing a series of capital improvements in the neighborhood. 1974's "Pioneer Square Historic District Plan" proposed two new mixed-income housing complexes within or adjacent to the neighborhood, producing around 1,750 total units. But these remained unbuilt, while the municipal funds that reached the streets provided aesthetic and infrastructural improvements: replaced sidewalks, medians newly planted with trees, "historic" street lamps, and new public furniture.<sup>202</sup>

### ***Escalating gentrification in Pioneer Square***

After 1975, the map of preserved properties in Pioneer Square continued to fill in along the First Avenue South and Yesler Avenue corridors, spurred on by new tax benefits available for rehabilitations. These developments affirmed what some planners and business leaders had hoped for the neighborhood during the previous decade, but for

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<sup>200</sup> Ray Ruppert, "Skid Roaders Getting the Gate," *Seattle Times*, November 16, 1977, E11.

<sup>201</sup> ---, "Skid Roaders Moving Out of Sight," *Seattle Times*, November 19, 1973, C4.

<sup>202</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 192-194.



others they triggered anxiety. Artists, design firms, and specialty stores continued as the neighborhood's prominent class of commercial tenants, but beginning in the early 1970s some relatively recent tenants feared that their tenure in Pioneer Square would be short-lived. They found that Pioneer Square was rapidly becoming too "commercial:" rents in the neighborhood were increasing, fewer tenants appeared to be independent artists, and new establishments were oriented towards a tourist market.<sup>203</sup> Between 1970 and 1974, rental rates in the neighborhood increased by 250%.<sup>204</sup> Eminent landscape architect Laurie Olin witnessed these changes firsthand while he lived in Seattle and spent time in and around the Skid Road's final SROs. He described and sketched what he saw in a self-published pamphlet, *Breath on the Mirror*, which appeared in 1972. In Olin's words,

By 1968 the area had absorbed a small invasion of newcomers: working artists. These harbingers of change and seekers of environmental quality coexisted with the residents of the neighborhood, but the businesses, offices, restaurants, and new construction which followed and the subsequent changes in rent structure, ownership, and the prospect of increased revenues has forced the former residents out. Most of the artists have now also moved on to cheaper studios but the galleries remain.<sup>205</sup>

The rate of change in Pioneer Square was remarkable. In the ten years since Ralph Anderson's first rehabilitation there, the neighborhood had gained a firm reputation as an arts destination, concomitant with the removal of residents from the district's SRO hotels. Now new tenants already felt economic and cultural changes that signaled that they would hold a place in the neighborhood for only a short time longer. After the recession of the late 1970s, preservation interest again climbed, largely attributable to greater tax incentives made available by 1981's Economic Recovery Tax Act. The result was something of a return

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<sup>203</sup> Carolyn Dale, "Renaissance in Pioneer Square," *Seattle Times Magazine*, January 30, 1972, 4-6.

<sup>204</sup> Morley, *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West*, 85.

<sup>205</sup> Laurie Olin, *Breath on the Mirror: Seattle's Skid Road Community* (Seattle: 1972), 41.

to the cadence of the first wave of rehabilitations: the *Seattle Times* poetically reported that “a healthy second wind caresses the historic turn-of-the-century structures[.]” A deluge of new investment—around \$92 million—reached rehabilitation projects in Pioneer Square, while the neighborhood gained a reputation as one of the cheapest downtown office districts on the West Coast.<sup>206</sup> It remained somewhat affordable for art galleries and studios, but it also attracted offices for lawyers, accountants, and other white-collar professionals. Through the 1980s, perhaps the most significant development in Pioneer Square was the addition of market-rate housing units, many of them condominiums and luxury apartments. Infill development into empty lots reflected the mixed-use paradigm of the surrounding neighborhood: the new Olympic Block, constructed where a nineteenth-century commercial building had collapsed a decade before, included four stories of condos and five stories of offices and retail.<sup>207</sup> The result was a neighborhood tailored in many ways to accommodate the decade’s yuppie stereotype: it provided downtown housing in close proximity to residents’ workplaces, in professions that netted earnings well above those in the arts and design fields.<sup>208</sup>

And still, despite Pioneer Square’s gentrification and the loss of its SROs, its mid-century hard-luck days had not been swept off the map entirely. Missions were able to stand their ground because they had received property tax credits from the city. Some social service agencies also remained. Although (or because) no semi-permanent affordable housing was available in the neighborhood apart from rooms at the Frye Hotel, the so-called bums returned for temporary beds at the missions, spent their days on the street,

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<sup>206</sup> Sally Gene Mahoney, “A Rebirth Reborn,” *Seattle Times*, August 14, 1983, D7.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> Morley, *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West*, 85.

and held on to their role as a Skid Road archetype. One well-worn trope of Pioneer Square in the 1980s was the image of vagrants with cheap beer sitting across the street from patrons drinking wine at an outdoor café.<sup>209</sup> This contrast has never fully left the old Skid Road, but its jarring blatancy two decades into the city's preservation movement emphasized that the neighborhood had undergone a sweeping transformation—which, although not “complete,” had led to a bourgeois revitalization that may have been unimaginable thirty years before.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, the large wave of preservation activities that occurred in Pioneer Square between the 1960s and 1980s, consisting of building rehabilitations and improvements in infrastructure and public spaces, largely repackaged the neighborhood as a set of living, shopping, and production spaces aimed at educated members of the middle and upper classes with somewhat bohemian tastes. Architects were initially drawn to the neighborhood in order to halt the deterioration of much of the city's oldest standing architecture, acting for the sake of the architecture itself. This stood in contrast to business leaders' previous interests in preservation, which was predominantly oriented towards increasing tourism in the city's core. Early rehabilitations created an unorganized, grassroots campaign that brought ever more attention and investment from individuals. Declining or closed SRO hotels could serve as comparably cheap artists' studio space or stores. Despite that, some of the major players involved in the district's preservation recognized the value of offering affordable housing for Pioneer Square's vulnerable

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

residents; however, their proposals and attempts to create these opportunities largely were unsuccessful.

The subsequent efforts to rehabilitate Pioneer Square in the late 1970s and 1980s were strengthened through municipal and federal preservation regulations and incentives, as well as through the use of city funds to redesign public spaces and renew the area's infrastructure. These improvements enlarged and linked the collection of new boutiques and studios into an identifiable destination district, paradoxically a source of both vanguard culture and a seemingly intact past. Preservation in the neighborhood never eliminated the contradictions that it brought about, particularly the proximity of new privileged tenants and consumers to poor residents who remained visible in Pioneer Square despite the loss of their affordable hotels. This chapter has shown that a range of preservation efforts emerged beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s to save Pioneer Square from urban obsolescence, to present its built fabric as something other than a liability to the city, and to find consensus on its historic and cultural value. The first two largely succeeded, while the third has remained unresolved because of several claims to Pioneer Square's "true" identity. Due to the series of transformations in the neighborhood that this thesis has described thus far, Pioneer Square has been interpreted in a few different ways: as a city's origin story, as a wasteland, and as a home when no other exists. The following chapter will explore how preservation activities in the district represented the nature and place of its past, as well as the direction of its developments to come.

## CHAPTER V

### TRUE GRIT: COMPETING AUTHENTIC HISTORIES IN THE PRESERVED PIONEER SQUARE

It is at once paradoxical and self-evident to claim that the process of historic preservation, in the broadest sense, produces new places. In spite of the vocabulary developed by preservationists to distinguish various treatments of the built environment—reconstruction, restoration, rehabilitation, preservation—each produces a representation of the past that cannot guarantee that previous cultural and social uses of space be replicated in the present. Rather, each one contributes to the persistent transformation of our surrounding landscapes, in sometimes subtle and sometimes sweeping ways. Almost any building that undergoes some form of preservation experiences a change in use, condition, or integrity. It may look somewhat different, exude a new energy, and/or house new patterns of circulation and behavior. Put another way, preservation is usually not inconspicuous: it reveals itself through a building's material form and, if a new program has been introduced, might be sensed from the new activities occurring within its spaces.

Taken together, the rehabilitations that occurred in Pioneer Square after 1960 created an renaissance, as some observers noted: the neighborhood was both transformed and returned to an appearance and a set of qualities that had existed there earlier. The architects, policy makers, preservation advocates, property owners, commercial tenants, and social service agencies who led the unorganized campaign to refashion Pioneer Square attempted to deliver the neighborhood to an imagined authentic condition based on the

area's past. Historic preservation, like any form of public history, seeks or derives its legitimacy from the way that past is represented, and preservation is fraught with implicit and explicit ideological struggles. But no place truly has one single past—and indeed, previous chapters of this thesis have explored Pioneer Square's overlapping urban identities. For over 70 years, the district was home to SRO hotels and their outsider residents, yet other accounts of the neighborhood's development—which mainly emphasized the aesthetic significance of its architecture—were popular among many advocates who played roles refashioning the neighborhood.

Considering these competing claims in Seattle's preservation movement, we should briefly return the discussion to grit. It might have been physical in nature, found in the literal grit and grime that had coated the neighborhood's brick facades due to a lack of regular upkeep. Or it might have had social and human dimensions, seen specifically in the unemployed hotel tenants and other impoverished people on the district's streets whose social lives opposed bourgeois norms and gave Pioneer Square its reputation for urban heterogeneity. Again, John Ruskin's admiration of the "golden stain of time"—the physical and perceptual reminders that announce a building's age—offers a useful approach to Pioneer Square's grit, its unruly and troubled pasts, and its transformation to a largely gentrified urban district. Again, Ruskin stated that honorable actions as well as pain and struggle contributed to architecture's weathered patina—as when "its walls have been witnesses of suffering, and its pillars rise out of the shadows of death"<sup>210</sup>—which suggests that traces of Pioneer Square's down-and-out history were valid expressions of its buildings' age and value.

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<sup>210</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 155.

Ruskin's words frame an ideological conflict in Seattle's early preservation movement. While a binary opposition here may overly simplify the motivations of those involved, it illustrates the central tension between conceptions of authenticity that characterize gentrification in any setting. In terms of the Ruskinian metaphor of a patina, would preservation activities in the neighborhood largely respect and maintain the traces of SROs, poverty, and grit that increasingly had come to define the area through the middle of the twentieth century? Or would preservationists strip away this material and social evidence in order to reveal an appealing, supposedly authentic original character that had been buried over several decades? Advocates took both approaches, and their positions said more about how they imagined Pioneer Square's future—specifically, who had license to inhabit its spaces—than it did about how they viewed its past.

### ***Architecture, gentrification, and urban authenticity***

Preservation discourse surrounding Pioneer Square's transformation largely stressed the importance of its architectural qualities. This may not be surprising, as it reflected how historic preservation has been practiced in the United States over much of the last half century. Contemporary preservation policy and planning frameworks at various scales—federal tax credits, national and state historic registers, and municipal design guidelines, for instance—have been organized chiefly to consider the physical attributes of the built environment. Any building or landscape was constructed in a certain manner, took an original form, and then achieved a range of appearances over its lifetime; preserving or replicating the material characteristics that defined it at the time that it gained cultural significance is meant to link the property back to those significant

moments. And what is at stake in this process, simply stated, is authenticity: in the context of historic preservation, the physical reality of the built environment typically becomes the favored signifier to what a place *actually is*—which should bear more than a passing similarity to what the place *actually was*.

Accordingly, the Pioneer Square-Skid Road Historic District's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, from 1970, summarized a rationale that was widely shared among the neighborhood's preservation boosters: that Pioneer Square's fine collection of Victorian-era buildings represented "a significant and very distinguishable homogeneity of style, form, character, and construction."<sup>211</sup> This logic had led architects and other members of Seattle's cultural elite to value the neighborhood for its numerous ornate but rundown Richardsonian Romanesque buildings (*Image 33*). (Battered by time and neglect, these buildings had gained additional appeal through their affordably low property values.) Downtown business leaders likewise endorsed reinvestment and rehabilitation because they presumed the distinctive qualities of the neighborhood's historic buildings would draw privileged tourists.

And gradually, windows were replaced, mullions repaired, recent signage removed—a range of restorative treatments that stopped only at replacing cornices that had been taken down after the 1949 earthquake. Lists of physical restorations and repairs were central to written reports that detailed progress in Pioneer Square. A newspaper account of Ralph Anderson's first rehabilitation, the Capitol Brewing Company Building, noted almost reverentially that the architect had revealed fine architectural details that had

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<sup>211</sup> Margaret A. Corley, "Pioneer Square—Skid Road National Historic District" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1969), 2.





Image 33: Photograph by Victor Steinbrueck of Pioneer Square buildings along First Avenue South, prior to rehabilitation

Source: University of Washington Special Collections, SEA3062

been obscured during decades used as an SRO and engineering supplier: “delightful frescoes of infigreed plaster and embossed metal on the walls inside, a white-and-green tile floor that had been covered for 50 years by linoleum.”<sup>212</sup> As one further example: in 1967, after a tour of several of the earliest rehabilitations in the neighborhood, a *Seattle Times* editor described the interior architectural details that had been brought into view in various buildings: brick walls and marble flooring, antique light fixtures, and elevator décor.<sup>213</sup> As these restorations spread through the neighborhood, they received a great deal of curiosity from Seattle residents who wanted to witness the emergence of a more aesthetically appealing, more approachable, and more “real” downtown district.

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<sup>212</sup> “Old Building is Given Modern Touch,” 2C.

<sup>213</sup> Dorothy Brant Brazier, “‘Way Down Town’ is Coming Up in Seattle’s World,” *Seattle Times*, September 17, 1967, 4S.

Pioneer Square's gentrification reminds us that any building's restoration does not deliver simply an assemblage of materials to developers, architects, commercial tenants, and public users. Architecture is the vessel for intangible qualities: a sense of self or community in relation to an environment—in other words, a sense of place.<sup>214</sup> Pioneer Square's architecture was the principal medium through which its "authentic" character of place was preserved, but preservationists pursued authenticity not only through the integrity of the appearance and materials of the neighborhood's built environment, but also in the manner through which it was experienced at the level of everyday impressions and cultural associations. Sociologist Sharon Zukin has defined recent American gentrification by these cultural constructions of urban authenticity, which she characterizes as having "migrated from a quality of people to a quality of things, and most recently to a quality of experiences [...] a city is authentic if it can create the *experience* of origins."<sup>215</sup>

Public history initiatives in Pioneer Square deserve mention here, as they were the most obvious attempts to forge a sense of place from narratives of the past, to package and deliver the historical experience of the neighborhood's "origins" to visitors. The aim of interpretation was to transport visitors back in time, so to speak—to sense the district as it

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<sup>214</sup> *Place* is used extensively in vernacular and academic language, particularly in human geography, and it deserves far greater attention than can be afforded here. It may suffice to reference Yi-Fu Tuan's definition, from his seminal *Space and Place*, that place is created as "we get to know [physical space] better and endow it with meaning." A "sense of place" results from all factors that produce an external package of associations and feelings—place-making—rather than entirely individual, subjective responses. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

<sup>215</sup> Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3. The experience of origins must not replicate historical experience beyond convincing us that it does so. Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum and hyperreality are useful concepts that would take this discussion in a further poststructuralist terrain: simulation is not merely an inaccurate representation of origins but rather fabricates origins entirely. See Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988.)

*really had been.* Victor Steinbrueck once stated that Pioneer Square was Seattle's "home place,"<sup>216</sup> suggesting that the neighborhood's rehabilitation would forge a spiritual link to the birth of the city. This took on theatrical dimensions, as the Central Association's early bids for tourists called for the neighborhood to be reborn as a "historic entertainment center."<sup>217</sup> And sure enough, once the city was fully on board with preservation in the mid-1970s, the performance turned heavy-handed: Pioneer Square was introduced to patrolling municipal police officers, named the Pioneer Squad, who dressed in facsimile 1910 uniforms during the summer.<sup>218</sup> Bill Speidel offered something of an alternative with his Underground Tours, which led paying visitors through the district's subterranean architecture. The tours were framed as revisionist history—perhaps seeming, then, all the more "authentic"—as they popularized seedy aspects of the city's frontier and Gold Rush days.

These and other Pioneer Square initiatives quickly earned criticism. Although they marketed the neighborhood's "real" or "living" history, some property owners and business proprietors found them inauthentic for pandering to the tourist market. Critics felt that tourism, the long-held business motive behind Pioneer Square's rehabilitation, indeed had delivered an entertainment center that then detracted from their own conceptions of the neighborhood's authenticity. A proposed wax museum, for instance, threatened to puncture the atmosphere of tastefulness that had been crafted by gentrification's place-making and experience-making processes.<sup>219</sup> One description of the neighborhood

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<sup>216</sup> Quoted in Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 175.

<sup>217</sup> "Association Pushes Pioneer Square Restoration," *Seattle Times*. October 30, 1960, C3.

<sup>218</sup> T.C. Martin, "Seattle's 'Pioneer Squad,'" *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, February 1976, 16-20.

<sup>219</sup> Dale, "Renaissance in Pioneer Square," 5.

published in the *Seattle Times* succinctly summarized this milieu: “There is an air of integrity and good taste about the section blending with the solidity and design of the buildings.”<sup>220</sup> To put it simply, the intangible qualities of a preserved Pioneer Square were derived from the cultural discourse surrounding the age, design, materials, and construction of its architecture. Pioneer Square’s 1970 National Register nomination, for instance, notes simply that the cohesive scale and materials of the district’s buildings alone created “a feeling of substance.”<sup>221</sup>

While the galleries, showrooms, boutiques, restaurants, studios, and offices that filled in many of the district’s neglected spaces did not all share the same surface finishes or level of architectural detail, as a whole the neighborhood’s refashioned architecture left a unified impression. “The shop owners have renovated and redecorated in keeping with the mid-Victorian style of the buildings,” wrote one *Seattle Times* reporter to summarize some of Pioneer Square’s commercial rehabilitations. “The inside walls are usually rough red brick, enhanced by wood beams, shelves and trim.” (This forecasted an aesthetic that would become a cliché of loft apartments and upscale retailers in gentrified urban neighborhoods). “Often the heating system is an old radiator or a pot-bellied stove,” the reporter continued, “the old window shapes, arched on top, have remained.”<sup>222</sup>

These details suggested the span of the buildings’ histories while avoiding the staged and scripted nature of public history initiatives. This chapter has mentioned that the neighborhood’s architecture was ascribed aesthetic value, but frescoes, mosaics, and carved stone facades, wherever present, also bore a sense of authenticity because they

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<sup>220</sup> Ruth Welch, “Seattleites Finding a Future for History of Pioneer Square,” *Seattle Times*, July 16, 1972, B6.

<sup>221</sup> Corley, “Pioneer Square—Skid Road National Historic District,” 4.

<sup>222</sup> Dale, “Renaissance in Pioneer Square,” 4.

represented an elegance and craftsmanship that stood in contrast to the glass and steel towers of downtown Seattle.<sup>223</sup> The arched windows and radiators of the rehabilitated Pioneer Square gained mention because they were anachronisms and relics, exhibited and deemed real because they had survived the passage of time. And these architectural features complemented many of the items available for sale in the neighborhood's new commercial landscape—antiques, yarn, handmade clothing, flowers, paintings, and sculptures—as well as even the clothing worn by young artists and shopkeepers (“jeans, sweaters, and old coats,” according to one report).<sup>224</sup> Together they suggested authenticity through their handcrafted origins of an earlier vintage and earlier tastes. These contributed to what was described as the district's “color”<sup>225</sup>—which, in one sense, is a bourgeois, visual synonym for the tangible term grit. When referring to neighborhoods, both imply an unorthodox quality within the city. But color lacks the threat of grit; rather, it is exciting, artful, and consumable, an experience that allows the impression of transgression without treading too far.

This distinction raises one major contradiction of the refashioned Pioneer Square: while its rough, exposed brick and wood interior finishes may have suggested their wear and tear over time, architects' rehabilitations had stripped the neighborhood's buildings of much that had been added over the course of its seventy-five or so years. The contrasts between images 28 and 29 in the previous chapter, showing the Grand Central Building before and after its rehabilitation, illustrates one example of this striking transformation. Over the course of its life, until the early 1970s, the building had accumulated trace upon

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<sup>223</sup> See Welch, “Seattleites Finding a Future,” B6.

<sup>224</sup> Dale, “Renaissance in Pioneer Square,” 5.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

trace of its past uses. The brick façade was still marked by painted advertisements of the building's Gold Rush-era workingman's hotel; windows had been altered to meet modern trends in merchandise display; an electric sign hung over the entrance, likely pointing toward the SRO located upstairs; other prominent signage announced the cheap café and discount store at street level. On top of everything else, the building's exterior brick had collected a heavy coating of dirt and grime over several decades. These elements formed the building's patina, its grit, even its "junk." According to a perspective informed by Ruskin, they signified the hotel's age, its fortunes, and its decline. But several years later, all of these markers had been removed, leaving attractive façades of cleaned brick, new windows sheltered under awnings, and a perimeter of young trees. We are told that the resulting condition was meant to match the building after its construction<sup>226</sup> (*Image 34*).



Image 34: Rendering of the Grand Central Building, as it was to appear after rehabilitation  
Source: *Seattle Times*, January 4, 1970

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<sup>226</sup> Lane, "Grand Hotel Being Refurbished," E1.

Many of Pioneer Square's exterior and interior surfaces were similarly excavated from underneath materials that had been laid down by time and use: plaster was removed, linoleum peeled up, surface deposits sandblasted away. According to one observer, the preservation movement "pushed back the perimeter of decay,"<sup>227</sup> meaning that the removal of materials from the neighborhood corresponded with shuttering SROs and the relocation of poor residents. And for most business leaders and cultural elites who supported rehabilitation into stores and offices, the neighborhood's skid row past was an obstacle to its authentic condition, its origins, its supposedly "glamorous days"<sup>228</sup> that were expressed through architectural details and stylistic flourishes from an earlier era. While preservation activities certainly emphasized certain Ruskinian virtues, namely craftsmanship and beauty, the façade restorations and interior rehabilitations amounted to "a Lie from beginning to end,"<sup>229</sup> in Ruskin's words—the creation of a simulacrum, a false return to an appearance of the past that belied the passage of time.

In short, Pioneer Square's architectural refashioning proceeded through the 1960s and 1970s as a neighborhood-wide rehabilitation and restoration. Its buildings and streets housed new uses, but their groomed appearance—not only scrubbed facades, gutted interiors, and repaired detailing, but also cleaned sidewalks, new green spaces, and rows of young street trees—gave the impression of an original, pure condition that bore few traces of the deteriorating Skid Road of the previous decades. Still, a series of buzzwords accompanied the transformation ("substance," "integrity," "color," "atmosphere," "flavor") that suggested the neighborhood was somewhat edgy despite its lack of physical grit. But

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<sup>227</sup> Welch, "Seattleites Finding a Future for History," B6.

<sup>228</sup> Corley, "Pioneer Square—Skid Road National Historic District," 2.

<sup>229</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 185.

also partly because of it: Pioneer Square's perceived authenticity came from its unadulterated architecture, whose connotations of sturdiness, aesthetic refinement, and craft distinguished it from the city's other downtown and suburban consumer districts. This point has been observed in gentrifying neighborhoods across the United States. Historic architecture suits the consumer tastes of an educated bourgeoisie, in response to modernism's perceived soullessness and "bland homogeneity."<sup>230</sup> But if Pioneer Square had a soul, few—if any—of those involved in the neighborhood's rehabilitation considered that its soul was housed in the materials and finishes that had been laid down over its many years as home to the down and out.

### ***"Human renewal," social preservation, and the place of SROs***

Considering the preceding discussion, what other strategies could acknowledge Pioneer Square's skid row history and avoid the arguably dishonest authenticities of restoration? Would complete fidelity to the Ruskinian perspective introduced earlier simply allow the neighborhood to continue in its course of disinvestment and collapse until it became a ruin?

Obviously, this suggestion seriously challenges preservationists' attempts to revitalize Pioneer Square's spaces with any new functions, which nearly inevitably would disturb some evidence of past use. But this perspective frames the major tensions in Seattle's early preservation movement. Downtown housing for some of the city's poorest residents remained in demand through the 1960s and 1970s; Pioneer Square's refashioning largely did not address it, as new stores and offices filled former SROs. As

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<sup>230</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 37.



described in the previous chapter, however, select property owners and preservation advocates did not wholeheartedly accept that a return to the neighborhood's architectural origins should be the movement's principal motive: they considered the presence of poor residents as one of the neighborhood's most distinctive characteristics. Without them, Pioneer Square would no longer be Pioneer Square, defined by a heterogeneous public life unmatched elsewhere in the city. Those who saw the neighborhood's socio-economic qualities as its authentic characteristics looked past the material features of the built environment, and they aimed to provide affordable housing options that allowed marginalized, long-term hotel occupants to retain Pioneer Square as their home turf.

Earlier sections of this thesis have shown that prior to the city's preservation movement, SRO hotels and their residents were ubiquitous in Pioneer Square. In 1960, the number of residential units there reached nearly 3,500: while this category included apartments, the majority were rooms in SROs.<sup>231</sup> The predominance of SROs in the neighborhood over other housing types would have been apparent on the street through the frequent neon-lit and painted brick signs that advertised the establishments, as well as through the hotels' numerous residents who, during the day, found "small unofficial public spaces for themselves, using stairs, sidewalks, parking lots, and alleyways"<sup>232</sup> (*Image 35*). Generally speaking, advocates for affordable housing during the neighborhood's preservation shared the viewpoint that hotel residents threaded Seattle's labor and prospecting history to its postwar reality of urban decline. While Pioneer Square's high energy in 1900 did not wholly resemble the depressive mood that followed forty years later, both were characterized by their residents' opposition to conventions of bourgeois

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<sup>231</sup> Morley, *Historic Preservation and the Imagined West*, 85.

<sup>232</sup> Olin, *Breath on the Mirror*, 14.



Image 35: Drawing by Laurie Olin of two Skid Roaders on their sidewalk perch  
Source: Olin, *Breath on the Mirror: Seattle's Skid Road Community*

domesticity and public life. Writing in 1972, one *Seattle Times* reporter recognized the connection and stated that the Skid Roaders represented “the residue of the Northwest’s logging and railroad and construction past.”<sup>233</sup> The mention of residue immediately calls to mind Ruskin’s concern for patina, but here the physical concept is dematerialized: Pioneer Square’s “grit” was manifested socio-culturally alongside its trash heaps and soiled facades. The neighborhood’s grit sprang, in large part, from its residents’ embodiment of a down-and-out public culture, understood as its authentic condition from earlier periods.

This conception of authenticity conflicted with the ideologies of traditional historic preservation in the neighborhood. As members of Seattle’s cultural and business elites aimed to create opportunities to capture capital from tourists and privileged Seattleites,

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<sup>233</sup> Ray Ruppert, “Skid Road: People vs. Progress,” *Seattle Times*, May 14, 1972, A24.

the presence of Pioneer Square's poor residents would prove an obstacle to luring bourgeois visitors to the neighborhood and consuming its pure architectural goods. (In Laurie Olin's words, "Skid Road irritates well-scrubbed Americans in many ways.")<sup>234</sup> Preserving hotel occupants' residential opportunities was as much a place-making process as the efforts to interpret Pioneer Square's history on walking tours, or the removal of façade improvements that revealed buildings' original architectural details. The Skid Roaders who gathered in the neighborhood's public spaces had reputations for unruliness, panhandling, public inebriation, and poor hygiene, which inevitably colored how visitors shopping in the area's new boutiques experienced Pioneer Square. And the Skid Roaders' ability to spend time on the street and enjoy tenure in the neighborhood's hotel rooms certainly shaped their understandings of their environment: it was where they could afford to live, it was where many had friends, and it was a home.

As the previous chapter has described, Abie Label and Victor Steinbrueck were visible participants in the neighborhood's transformation who also publicly asserted the importance of existing poor residents to Pioneer Square's character. They were hardly alone in their views, which reiterated calls for affordable housing by social service agencies like the Skid Road Community Council. In the early 1970s, one of the agency's staff members was quoted—just as some of the new commercial tenants of the neighborhood had been—as fearing that rehabilitations would turn Pioneer Square into a “commercial circus.”<sup>235</sup> Similar statements came from concerned Seattleites like Olin. But Steinbrueck and Label will receive attention here because they contributed most directly to the

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<sup>234</sup> Olin, *Breath on the Mirror*, 39.

<sup>235</sup> Ruppert, “Skid Road,” A24.

discussions and activities of historic preservation in the neighborhood, using the emerging preservation planning frameworks that facilitated bricks-and-mortar changes.

Even so, neither used the vocabularies of preservation to frame their concerns for Pioneer Square's SROs and their occupants. Rather, they spoke in terms of rights (belonging to the neighborhood's existing residents) and responsibilities (their own). Label's brother and business partner, Reuben, asserted that creating affordable housing was simply the right—or even righteous—thing to do. (Although a secular Jew, he justified his efforts by claiming the Skid Road was where Jesus Christ would have served the poor had he lived in twentieth-century Seattle.)<sup>236</sup> Abie's proposals to improve the facilities and maintain the affordability of his existing Pioneer Square SROs stipulated that the hotels' residents themselves—some of them “hard-core unemployed males”—were to contribute labor to the building's rehabilitation, if possible.<sup>237</sup> And while the majority of his plans in Pioneer Square came to naught, and while it is not clear if Label used this strategy in residential rehabilitations elsewhere in Seattle, it nonetheless was an unmatched conception of Pioneer Square's preservation as social improvement or social service, an obligation to give Skid Roaders work and skills rather than simply to allow them to keep their spaces and their routines.

Label's rehabilitation of the Frye Hotel into apartments produced perhaps the only stock of affordable-housing units that remained in the neighborhood at the end of the 1970s. Of the projects Label suggested in Pioneer Square, the Frye's rehabilitation was the one that had the most elaborate exterior ornament. It thus best suited the grand architectural renaissance toward which other preservationists aspired. But this may be

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<sup>236</sup> ---, “Dropout Earns a Degree in Kindness,” *Seattle Times*, January 30, 1976, A15.

<sup>237</sup> “Owner Says Hotels Can Provide Good Housing,” D6.

simply a coincidence: Label does not appear to have framed the project in terms of its architecture, and the rehabilitation was completed because he fought for federal grants and subsidies that allowed an affordable rent structure.

Label's work in Pioneer Square amounted to a claim that affordability was one of the neighborhood's defining characteristics, a perspective that set him far apart from the other preservationists. He has received scant attention in most accounts of Seattle's preservation movement, but this speaks to their focus on architectural narratives. It is worth noting that unlike Pioneer Square's architects, developers, and financiers, the Label brothers had engaged with its residents (and, not to mention, had profited from them) for many years. Abie managed his collection of SROs, and Reuben operated a pawnshop on First Avenue until joining his brother in the Frye Hotel.<sup>238</sup> While they were not true insiders among the hotel occupants, the Labels nonetheless enjoyed greater exposure to the realities of Skid Roaders' lives, social dynamics, and needs than anyone else involved in the neighborhood's refashioning. Surely Abie Label stood to profit at least some from improving their SROs (he stood to profit from selling them, too), but nevertheless he was alone in suggesting that an authentic Pioneer Square would remain an affordable home to the down and out.

Victor Steinbrueck, on the other hand, was a well-regarded local architect who became involved in the neighborhood from the outside. He, like other educated cultural elites in Seattle, began his preservation experience with a strong appreciation of Pioneer Square's architecture. Yet among preservationists he was known for his anti-gentrification stance, and he spoke heatedly against the displacement of poor residents and other users both in Pioneer Square and, several years later, at Pike's Place Market. His viewpoint was

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<sup>238</sup> Ruppert, "Dropout Earns a Degree in Kindness," A15.

based on “humanitarian grounds,”<sup>239</sup> in his words, and others praised him for having “fought to make the architecture profession meet its social obligations[.]”<sup>240</sup> During one *Seattle Times* interview, he explained that he valued “human renewal” over plans for urban renewal (referring to any project that would remove existing tenants), since “the rehabilitation of people is the answer.”<sup>241</sup> Steinbrueck’s meaning seems not to have been about lifting up the neighborhood’s residents, but rather he suggested that preservationists should concentrate on maintaining the institutions that shaped residents’ routines. In reference to Pioneer Square, he stated, “We have about 450 itinerants along with pawn shops, cheap-furniture stores, and surplus-clothing outlets [...] if these are wiped out, where do the people move to and where does a guy go who wants to find a pawn shop?” (He did not mention Seattle’s SROs, but they suited his argument because they granted Skid Roaders tenure in Pioneer Square.) If preservationists were to prevent the displacement of these kinds of lower-class institutions, First Avenue could be maintained “as THE colorful street in Seattle.”<sup>242</sup>

Expanding Abie Label’s focus on housing, Steinbrueck argued that *accessibility* was among Pioneer Square’s authentic qualities: the neighborhood should provide a range of spaces that responded to poor residents’ social and (meager) consumer needs, which were not met anywhere else. The mention of color again, however, suggests an outsider’s desire for an authentic urban feeling as much as it does a resident’s right to space. In this instance, a sense of social *color* has much in common with the aged but scrubbed architectural qualities that appealed to the privileged people who were increasingly using Pioneer

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<sup>239</sup> “Who are the Real ‘Friends’ of the Market?” *Seattle Times*, April 9, 1971, A13.

<sup>240</sup> Olin, *Breath on the Mirror*, 53.

<sup>241</sup> Coffman, “‘Human Renewal’ is Key Part of Pioneer Square Project.”

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

Square: a down-and-out social milieu would also contribute to the “quality of experience” at the heart of perceived urban authenticity. Indeed, as Pioneer Square gained its reputation as a haven of “knowledgeable and art-oriented tastemakers,”<sup>243</sup> a *Seattle Times* piece on the neighborhood described an outdoor restaurant scene in which “a colorful sort of fillip was added occasionally by a few friendly winos wandering in from their nearby home streets.”<sup>244</sup> The reporter may not have offered this comment with an absolute lack of self-awareness—but even so, the article suggests that in the midst of rapid reinvestment, newly arrived consumers might derive a sense of the neighborhood’s authenticity from superficial encounters with the down and out. Even if Pioneer Square’s buildings were rehabilitated to provide SRO accommodations or other forms of affordable housing, their residents were at risk of contributing to the neighborhood’s edgy consumable experience.

The social dynamics of gentrification have troubled observers of American cities for decades, and the concept of *social preservation* has recently been introduced in academic discussions in order to investigate issues of class and authenticity in the midst of rapid neighborhood reinvestment. Using contemporary case studies, sociologist Japonica Brown-Saracino has coined the term to define a process related to but distinct from gentrification. Like gentrifiers, social preservationists are privileged newcomers who move into urban areas of less advantaged character—but social preservationists, unlike gentrifiers, locate the authenticity of their new environments in the presence of so-called “old-timers” and the institutions that cater to them. Brown-Saracino frames the distinction this way: “Gentrifiers wish to tame the ‘frontier,’ while social preservationists work to preserve the wilderness, including its inhabitants, despite their own ability to invest in and benefit from

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<sup>243</sup> Welch, “Seattleites Finding a Future,” B6.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

‘improvements’ or revitalization.”<sup>245</sup> The continued presence of earlier institutions and people allows social preservationists to access the authentic experience of origins that Sharon Zukin has characterized as “a continuous process of living and working, a gradual buildup of everyday experience, the expectation that neighbors and buildings that are here today will be here tomorrow.”<sup>246</sup>

I reference social preservation because it is a useful characterization of some of the actions and attitudes of major actors who refashioned Pioneer Square—including Victor Steinbrueck, Grant and Ilze Jones, and Ralph Anderson. It roughly matches the narrative of social authenticity that I have distinguished from a material-based preservation ethic. And likewise, Brown-Saracino theorizes social preservationists as distinct in most cases from traditional historic preservation advocates, who social preservationists allege are concerned only with maintaining buildings’ aesthetic values and increasing property taxes at the expense of destitute neighbors.<sup>247</sup>

But during the Pioneer Square’s initial wave of preservation, these identities overlapped in some instances: advocates for social preservation also oversaw rehabilitations that transformed SROs into bourgeois spaces of lifestyle consumption. The Joneses are a fine example: their Travelers Hotel project in the early 1970s was the neighborhood’s only effort that maintained up-to-code SRO housing, at least for a time. Moreover, it also was an uncommonly direct attempt to ensure that at least some earlier residents could stay in Pioneer Square: those social preservationists that Brown-Saracino describes in her case studies did not use their capital, or did not have enough of it, to invest

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<sup>245</sup> Japonica Brown-Saracino, “Social Preservationists and the Quest for Authentic Community,” *City & Community* 3 (2004), 135.

<sup>246</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 6.

<sup>247</sup> Brown-Saracino, “Social Preservationists,” 138-139.



in resources that would support old-timers' ways of life. Yet the Joneses' other design projects, such as the re-landscaping of Pioneer Square's open spaces for bourgeois audiences,<sup>248</sup> show that their identities as historic and social preservationists were simultaneous. They were not devoted exclusively to projects that preserved spaces for remaining Skid Roaders, and it seems that social preservation and traditional rehabilitations were not considered strictly opposed to one another.

But social preservation does depend on newcomers selectively taming the wilderness for their own needs, creating islands in the midst of an allegedly complete social world that preceded them. Those who work to preserve existing social dynamics and community institutions most likely will be connected to old-timers through proximity rather than through social integration—which yet contributes to an impression that the newcomers have always belonged somewhere within the surrounding community. It is unlikely that consumers who arrived in Pioneer Square after the first wave of commercial rehabilitations, even if they sought some sense of authenticity from the neighborhood's visible hotel occupants, frequented the remaining taverns where Skid Roaders congregated during the day. Any street drama would still viewed be viewed from the safety of restaurant patios.

But overall, the social preservationist ethic was not vibrant in Pioneer Square; it created more discussion than action. As property values climbed, gentrification-oriented rehabilitations gained predominance, all but guaranteeing that the rate of social and physical change would not soon slacken until most of the most obvious evidence of the Skid

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<sup>248</sup> Poor Skid Roaders also used these spaces before and after rehabilitation, but the newly repaved and replanted spaces conformed the neighborhood to a pleasant landscape ideal that primarily met the aesthetic and environmental tastes of middle-class consumers.

Road was gone. The Joneses shuttered the Travelers Hotel and transformed it into condominiums; Abie Label sold off his SROs to architects despite his earlier plans to upgrade them. After the mid-1970s, when Pioneer Square saw the first large-scale rehabilitations and residential conversions, the likelihood of SROs being reintroduced there became very slim. As soon as social preservation-minded agencies and individuals recognized the threat to the neighborhood's social fabric, its transformation had gained momentum enough so that a broad and organized effort likely would have been needed to slow its course.

### ***Authenticity and residents' experiences***

The preceding discussion has addressed the issues of architectural value, social continuity, and urban authenticity from the perspectives of economically privileged agents of change in Pioneer Square. Hotel occupants and other poor people who used the neighborhood's spaces witnessed its gradual transformation firsthand, on a daily basis. Sooner or later it would dramatically disrupt their everyday routines. The hotels in which they had rented rooms were sold, forcing them to find affordable housing elsewhere in the city; reliable cafes, taverns, and pawnshops likewise closed and were converted to higher-end establishments. These Skid Roaders' perspectives are crucial to the picture of how an authentic Pioneer Square was understood during its initial rehabilitation. Predominantly elderly, single, and unemployed, they held exceptionally marginal social positions in the city. As a result, they were consulted and documented the least of anyone who stood to be affected by preservation. (If planners and architects did ask Skid Roaders about their visions for the future of the neighborhood, their records are elusive.) Their views and

needs, then, had little of a direct influence on the construction projects that steered the direction of the neighborhood through the 1960s and 1970s, despite that much of their ways of life were at stake.

The available evidence on hotel occupants' views toward their neighborhood is framed in occasional newspaper articles, several of which were reported by the religion editor of the *Seattle Times*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these sources reveal that hotel occupants had numerous social and economic needs for which they depended on the resources and spaces that were being eliminated around them: surely hotels, but also cheap restaurants and social service agencies. This more or less corresponded to Abie Label and Victor Steinbrueck's arguments on what components of the neighborhood should be preserved. Those residents who spoke to the newspaper, however, simply expressed that they valued those establishments that had served their needs for as long as they had lived in the neighborhood. In 1974, for instance, the long-time owner of the New Washington Café, which had no menu item priced above \$2.25, learned that her landlord would not renew her lease in order to rehabilitate the building. "Maria, Maria, what will we do if you close down, where will we go?" she reported being asked by her regular customers.<sup>249</sup> The neighborhood's hotel rooms were likewise described by a journalist as containing "everything a man owns, his complete estate after a lifetime of work, with no windows to look out to the world."<sup>250</sup> These were not so much spaces of authenticity, but rather spaces of necessity that could fit within a Skid Roader's monthly pension budget of as little as \$80. And many neighborhood residents, like those who frequented the New Washington Café, were confused by the prospect of losing these institutions—they had

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<sup>249</sup> Eric Lacitis, "'Progress' Taking Toll of Cheap-Meal Cafes," *Seattle Times*, July 4, 1974, A6.

<sup>250</sup> Ruppert, "The Nord's Far from Fancy," 47.

relied on the hope that they would long be available. And they planned to stay until the end: “I guess I’ll be here when they come to take me off,” said one hotel occupant of his room.<sup>251</sup>

SRO residents recognized their living conditions were poor. Deferred maintenance to many hotels contributed to outsiders’ conceptions of Pioneer Square’s physical grit—but again, residents most likely saw decay and trash as unavoidable necessities of cheap accommodations. An occupant of the Nord Hotel described the place as “about like all the others of its type, as good as you could expect,”<sup>252</sup> in spite of its obvious material problems. And social “grit” had likewise branded the neighborhood to the outside, seen in the gathering spaces where Skid Roaders came to talk and, in some cases, drink alcohol together during the day. Some hotel residents led solitary, withdrawn lives, but those who wished to form communities did so on the streets. Laurie Olin observed instances of “real aid or affection for each another,” and that “their limited pedestrian life style tends toward behavior far more gregarious” than what he found among middle-class Seattleites in the city’s other neighborhoods.<sup>253</sup> In other words, this was a public culture of the Skid Road, and it contained most, if not all, of the social bonds that residents had.

One could argue that Pioneer Square’s down-and-out hotel occupants valued the same aspects of their neighborhood that bourgeois social preservationists recognized as authentic and worthy of protection. To return to a previously cited quotation from Sharon Zukin regarding social preservationists: they frame urban authenticity according to the hope that “neighbors and buildings that are here today will be here tomorrow.”<sup>254</sup>

Neighbors and buildings—specifically the institutions they housed—no doubt defined

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<sup>251</sup> ---, “Skid Road,” A24.

<sup>252</sup> ---, “The Nord’s Far from Fancy,” 47.

<sup>253</sup> Olin, *Breath on the Mirror*, 27.

<sup>254</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 6.

Pioneer Square for its residents: in fact, they amounted to the most important landmarks in the social worlds of many Skid Roaders. But residents' reliance on their hotels, compatriots, and other resources extends beyond authenticity as it has been discussed here thus far. The neighborhood's existing built and social fabrics were accessible to residents when little else in the city was, often marking the limits of their livelihoods. Skid Roaders embodied Pioneer Square's authenticity in their daily lives.

### ***Conclusion***

Bill Speidel, the Underground Tours mastermind, was quoted in 1972 by the *Seattle Times*: "We had to make a choice somewhere back, two or three years ago. Are we going to go commercial or are we going to try to have a social conscience? [...] So we've gone for free enterprise. Bag the social plan, let's make restoration financially feasible."<sup>255</sup> He summarized the predominant conflict, as well as the resolution, that emerged from the initial preservation movement in Pioneer Square. "Going commercial" meant preserving the neighborhood's architecture as unsoiled, apparently true to the time it was built, in order to invite capital investment. And a social conscience (or something close to it) was shared by a number of property owners and advocates, who aimed to preserve some degree of the resources that the neighborhood's existing residents relied on, in particular its SROs. No coordinated decision was truly reached, of course, and some property owners and investors were involved in both "commercial" and social approaches. But as Speidel indicated, the Pioneer Square's preservation movement largely veered toward façade

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<sup>255</sup> Ruppert, "Skid Road," A24.

renovations and drastic changes in use, the result of numerous individual decisions in response to the real estate market and the projected tastes of desired, privileged tenants.

This chapter has framed the conflicting visions for a refashioned Pioneer Square in terms of urban authenticity: the priorities and approaches of preservation were guided by differing ideas of what was true to the neighborhood, of what belonged to its past and what should belong to its future. Pioneer Square is considered an important test case for the success of grassroots preservation efforts in the United States: over a decade, its transformation expanded from a few rehabilitations to the scale of the entire neighborhood, leading city officials to establish Seattle's first frameworks for preservation planning. But this chapter has suggested that its restaging of the city's origins was not as complete as some may see it. While rehabilitations brought new investment downtown that the city desperately sought, the neighborhood's refashioning came at the expense of the institutions that had defined the neighborhood for decades, and at the expense of the people who yet had need for them.

## CONCLUSION

### THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE SKID ROAD

The SRO crisis and the disappearance of affordable hotels was experienced in urban centers across the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. While the experiences of individual cities varied according to local trends in policy and property investment, the causes often were federally supported urban renewal and demolition programs, as well as rehabilitations and subsequent gentrification that arrived with the growth of the historic preservation movement, as in Seattle. The national SRO crisis was one result of many planners', investors', and community leaders' attempts to cope with economic shifts that had left American central cities suffering during the postwar period—particularly the loss of urban manufacturing and the migration of middle-class residents to the suburban fringe. The low profits and property values of SROs and their surrounding skid row neighborhoods, in short, did not contribute to visions of modern, revitalized downtowns that promised continued investment from middle- and upper-class residents and consumers.

As described in the previous chapter, Pioneer Square's own SRO crisis—spurred by its hotel closures and cemented through its transformation to bourgeois uses—exposed tensions between the neighborhood's architectural and social qualities. And these tensions are still evident. Many homeless continue to congregate throughout its streets during the day, and affordable housing has not disappeared completely. Prominent missions—the Bread of Life Mission, the Union Gospel Mission, and the Compass Center—have continued

to offer beds, meals, and social services to disadvantaged residents of the neighborhood. One finds some remaining affordable housing there, as well: within the past ten years, the Frye Apartments has been renovated by the nonprofit Low Income Housing Institute, for instance, and a private development agency rehabilitated the O.K. Hotel as rent-subsidized apartments.<sup>256</sup> While Pioneer Square has held onto its reputation as one of Seattle's go-to arts and tourism districts, the neighborhood has not gentrified so much as to exclude entirely a down-and-out milieu. The homeless occupy many of the district's public benches, holding alcohol wrapped in brown paper; some sleep in the district's doorways at night alongside their few possessions; and men occasionally hawk drugs to passing crowds on the Underground Tour. Through these phenomena, along with the remaining architecture and signage from long-closed SROs (*Images 36 and 37*), the neighborhood recalls the urban environment that Laurie Olin documented during the late 1960s.

Indeed, a neighborhood plan drafted in 1998 explicitly stated that socioeconomic diversity was one of the district's "most beloved attributes,"<sup>257</sup> reflecting a significant change in official planning rhetoric from that of the 1950s. Planners noted that low-income housing can make beneficial contributions to the neighborhood, although they specified that it should be accompanied by market-rate units to house middle- and upper-income residents.<sup>258</sup> Perhaps it became possible for such statements to appear in planning documents only after significant capital investments had been made in the neighborhood—reassuring us that Pioneer Square was no longer at risk of sliding back into its state of decline.

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<sup>256</sup> Andrews, Link, and Blackburn, *Pioneer Square*, 202.

<sup>257</sup> *1998 Pioneer Square Neighborhood Plan* (Seattle: Pioneer Square Planning Committee, 1998), 2.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.





Images 36 and 37: Extant neon signage advertising Pioneer Square's past workingman's hotels, January 2012. They are welcome but ambivalent traces of the neighborhood's SRO history. The Cadillac, for instance, now houses one branch of the National Park Service's Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. Yet the signs signify the loss of the hotels and the neighborhood's historical "color" aimed at a tourist audience.

Source: Author

Yet over the next decade, Pioneer Square's built and social fabrics are likely to change even further. One of the most dramatic recent developments in the neighborhood has been the planned replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct, an elevated highway that has separated Pioneer Square from the edge of Elliot Bay since the 1950s. (In its place will be an immense underground tunnel and tree-lined surface thoroughfare.) The demolition of the viaduct, which began in 2011, will accommodate a reinvigorated waterfront, whose southernmost anchor will be located along Pioneer Square. Preliminary schemes propose a "Festival Pier" on Pier 48, which extends into the bay across from two buildings that housed workingman's hotels in past decades.<sup>259</sup> Regardless of the exact form the project takes by its projected completion date in 2019, it will undoubtedly produce attractive public space along Pioneer Square's western edge and will connect the neighborhood's waterfront to event and shopping areas in downtown to the north. It only can be expected that waterfront revitalization will increase demand for market-rate residential units nearby.

Some of this housing will become available in Stadium Place, a mixed-use development currently under construction on former parking lots at the southern edge of Pioneer Square. Stadium Place will contain over 900,000 square feet of commercial and residential space, including more than 700 condominiums and market-rate apartments. (Its thirty below-market apartments are slated to be sold as artists' studios.) According to Kevin Daniels, the president of Stadium Place's development company, Pioneer Square's first preservationists did not attract enough economically comfortable residents to foster a vibrant and prosperous community there. Daniels has employed middle-class marketing

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<sup>259</sup> *Design Summary: Concept Design and Framework Plan for Seattle's Central Waterfront* (New York: James Corner Field Operations, 2012), 26.

language to describe his vision for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Pioneer Square: “To have a healthy community, you need to live, work, and play in the neighborhood.”<sup>260</sup> Seattle’s City Council, having recently approved high-density development (including Stadium Place) along the boundaries of the Pioneer Square-Skid Road Historic District, appears in favor of introducing scores of well-off residents into the neighborhood. And some Seattleites would like to see Pioneer Square house a Whole Foods and other large-scale commercial establishments that reflect upscale tastes.<sup>261</sup> While Daniels does not publicly advocate against social service providers and the homeless occupying parts of the neighborhood, it seems that a middle-class identity will increasingly dominate Pioneer Square. Fifty years after historic preservationists began to invest in rehabilitations and reorient the district away from the needs of its poor residents, the place of low-income housing and the evidence of its Skid Road past remain uncertain.

This dramatic transformation in users indicates the city’s broad economic restructuring over the past 120 years: having served laborers involved in the region’s industrial and extraction economies, much of Pioneer Square now reflects Seattle’s service and tourism industries. And while transient labor and goods are no longer funneled through the neighborhood as they once were, there is obvious need still for the spaces that the Skid Road once provided. Why should these developments concern preservationists, planners, and Seattle’s residents at large? I have approached the transformations of the Skid Road/Pioneer Square neighborhood largely from historical and theoretical perspectives, not from a “practical” one that addresses policy mechanisms, community

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<sup>260</sup> Joe Follansbee, “Pioneer Square’s New Big Deal,” *Seattle Magazine*, January 2012, accessed November 2, 2012, <http://www.seattlemag.com/article/pioneer-squares-big-new-deal>.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

organizing, or other strategies for change. But by complicating the prevailing narratives of historic preservation during the 1960s and 1970s, the thesis has sought to enable a more nuanced discussion of preservation's relationship to lower-class urban residents. Today, Pioneer Square has many fewer spaces that provide vulnerable residents with affordable housing, meals, clothing and entertainment, and I believe this point deserves a central place in discussions of what it means to preserve an "authentic" Pioneer Square.

I want to suggest, then, that we reconsider our understandings of preservation ethics and our commitment to places that support diverse social experiences within cities and regions. Ned Kaufman, for one, has expressed a relevant viewpoint regarding the enterprise of historic preservation in the United States: that rehabilitating the material shells of our built environment goes only so far in retaining their associations with lived experiences throughout history. Kaufman is concerned with what he calls "social sites" or "story sites:" places that are connected to a diversity of cultural heritage, that represent a spectrum of human life across time.<sup>262</sup> My intention has been to describe the Skid Road/Pioneer Square as one of these places, a setting for types of human drama that have not conformed to the norms of bourgeois urban spaces. The neighborhood's stories—concerning loggers, Japanese-Americans, and the struggling poor, among others—have historically set it apart from the surrounding city. They are proof that social diversity has held a place in Seattle's heritage. To adopt the words of John Ruskin once again, they express the city's past struggles and triumphs.

Some of Pioneer Square's stories indeed receive attention through the interpretive strategies of the Underground Tours and the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park.

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<sup>262</sup> Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 38-43.

But while these stories help to reveal the district's down-and-out social history, they are limited in their reach. Many of Pioneer Square's skid row establishments do not exist today and no longer shape the livelihoods of poor residents. As a result, interpretation seems able to present the district's social history only as history, without a firm connection to the present. But still, many Seattleites see Pioneer Square's preservation as a success—and economically it seems to be. Architecturally it is as well. But without a strong social agenda, historic preservation appears to move only tentatively past its somewhat limited criteria for integrity, based prominently on a structure's materials, design, and workmanship. Is it useful to think about architecture's social integrity? Could we add criteria within our legal preservation frameworks (whether in resource survey or landmark registry standards, for instance) that recognize a building's social uses over time, and then incentivize projects that preserve those uses?

To place SROs and their social grit among Pioneer Square's character-defining features undoubtedly poses challenges to the preservation field, which yet lacks a vocabulary for this type of intangible cultural resource. This move would be a considerable reorientation of established preservation thinking and ethics. But I argue that historic preservationists should attempt to identify all that contributes to our sense of place and belonging beyond a building's component materials. This appears organic to preservation's promise of delivering continuity between past and present. The established rules are still appropriate for the preservation of some places, although it will be difficult to create standards that distinguish them. (After all, few places are not sites of rich social diversity.) The case of Pioneer Square suggests that preservationists need to formulate new strategies

in order to recognize and valorize the social narratives within resources such as the Skid Road, and then to craft responses that maintain these sites' significance and use.

As Pioneer Square's rehabilitation has shown, efforts to recognize place-based stories of social difference could have had the additional effect of maintaining needed housing and other resources for the neighborhood's poor. But this case emphasizes the barriers to such an approach. For decades, the neighborhood experienced pressures to be more economically productive. These pressures were seen in Progressive-era city planning, in proposed midcentury urban-renewal projects, and finally in waves of building rehabilitations. As a planning philosophy, after all, historic preservation demands flexibility in the face of large-scale economic transitions. While I do not wish to deny the possibilities of finding new uses for old buildings—of pouring new wine into old bottles, as the preservation dictum goes—I want to suggest that preservationists and policymakers must consider new ethical standards regarding the consequences of their work. The need for SROs or other forms of affordable housing has hardly disappeared from Pioneer Square: homelessness obviously remains a cruel reality for many in the neighborhood. To continue with a useful metaphor: the old wine is in great supply, but neither old bottles nor new are plentiful enough receive it all. It is particularly unfortunate, then, that SROs and skid rows have so often been understood as “junk” when they have served an essential role in economically stratified American cities, as spaces that remain accessible to some of those who fall through the cracks.

An ethical preservation response in Pioneer Square would have maintained its SROs as safe, clean, and affordable. But it is evident that efforts to preserve many of Pioneer Square's SROs as lodging in the 1970s would have succeeded only if advocates from several

arenas (such as municipal planners, social service providers, and historic preservationists) were to reach an ideological consensus that the social aims of historic preservation were equally as important as its architectural aims. In the wake of changes to the city's building codes, particularly the Ozark Ordinance, municipal and federal agencies would have needed to respond quickly with generous renovation funds, as well as with generous timelines for updates. (As Chapter III has mentioned, HUD subsidies initially were available only for apartment upgrades, not for hotels.) A next step for other researchers in this area will be to compare successful case studies in order to suggest strategies for SROs still under threat.

Indeed, SROs have been maintained elsewhere in American cities. In Seattle, even, the International District (adjacent to Pioneer Square) contains affordable housing within original workingman's hotels. Further afield, San Francisco's National Register-listed Ambassador Hotel—an SRO in the city's Tenderloin district—was renovated during the early 2000s by the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation and now provides subsidized rooms to low-income residents. And Los Angeles is home to many operating SROs owned by the SRO Housing Corporation and the Skid Row Housing Trust. These nongovernmental agencies develop and manage affordable hotel properties for extremely disadvantaged clients: the homeless, the mentally ill, drug addicts, and others. Their properties provide several models of accommodations (emergency, special needs, transitional, and permanent housing units), along with on-site support services that address some of the issues that have prevented residents from otherwise attaining stable housing. These are some examples of recent efforts in the United States to preserve SROs for socially vulnerable skid row populations. They and others should be investigated in

order to address a number of questions: What federal and municipal tools aided the maintenance of SROs? What social characteristics of the neighborhood have been preserved? What forms of community organizing were required to build support from residents, local business communities, and planning offices? What role, if any, did formal historic preservationists play in these projects? What roles might they have played? And, finally, how do the other inhabitants of the cities in which they are situated view these facilities, and their residents?

In conclusion, the case of Pioneer Square suggests that grit is very much a part of American cities, particularly visible in those with identified skid rows. In Seattle and elsewhere, these urban zones developed in response to the needs of residents who benefited least from local economic engines. Affordable hotels have been central to the history of skid rows in the United States; the experiences of Pioneer Square show that the hotels' low economic productivity during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century invited historic preservation efforts as a way to bring new, privileged consumers and property owners into the neighborhood. While physical rehabilitations there have appeared to succeed in raising the area's economic profile, the social traces of its past literally no longer have a place.

Should grit be preserved, as vague as the term perhaps remains? I argue that it should, insofar as establishments that support the poor urban residents who embody it remain necessary. (It is unlikely this need will wane at any foreseeable point.) Some property owners, investors, and city leaders will have different perspectives on the significance of skid rows in American cities. But is it somehow untruthful for preservationists, planners, and in fact all urban residents to overlook gritty districts and their desperately poor residents when imagining new places within our cities? That



question suggests that some concepts frequently informing historic preservation—history, place, integrity—can be enriched by other professional fields, such as social work. By describing the fate of one neighborhood in one city, the preceding discussion emphasizes that buildings and landscapes are always spaces that give shape to social systems. Preservation place-making must recognize this and offer flexible, collaborative, and no doubt challenging responses to the needs of many stakeholders, only some of whom are traditionally given opportunities to contribute their voices. Failing to consider the place of the poor prevents us from understanding the depths of the past, and it limits our perspectives on some of the most persistent needs in American cities.

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