An aerial photograph of a lush green golf course. In the upper left, several people are walking on a path. Long, dark shadows of trees and people stretch across the grass from the left. On the right side, there are large, mature trees. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

L.A.'S TALE OF TWO VENICES

With swelling homeless encampments abutting seven-figure homes, the area has emerged as a flash point for the inequality shaping Los Angeles — and a real-world test case of the progressive ideals of the beachside enclave's Hollywood denizens

BY PETER KIEFER AND SCOTT JOHNSON

Penmar Golf Course in Venice was photographed Jan. 4 by drone.

A

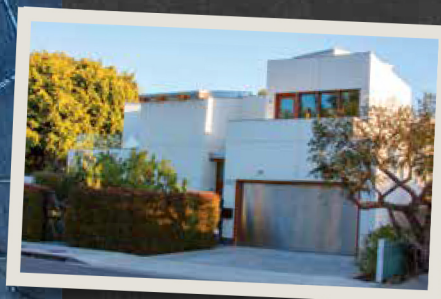
AFTER THE FIRST ATTACK, RANDY

Osborn figured it was just his turn. Tire slashings in his east Venice Beach neighborhood had become commonplace. But when his vintage Land Rover was hit a sixth time in the course of a few months, Osborn, who runs a small virtual reality company and has lived in Venice for seven years, began to worry he was being singled out.

"It may have been random, but it sure felt targeted and concentrated," says Osborn, who now protects his tires each night with a jury-rigged plywood-and-chain contraption that has so far deterred the assailants. Every time he takes his family out of town, he worries about his house being robbed. "It's not a very fun way to live," he says. A lot of residents within Osborn's 15-block area just east of Lincoln Boulevard — where actor Viggo Mortensen owns a home and director Jon Favreau is opening a production office — have similar stories. And though they can't say for sure, Osborn and others suspect the crime is tied to several homeless encampments that have sprung up nearby in the past 15 months.

Los Angeles is grappling with a homeless epidemic. "It's the worst human catastrophe in America," says Andy Bales, a pastor who runs the Union Rescue Mission on Skid Row. Faced with a growing crisis, city leaders last year budgeted more than \$100 million for affordable housing, addiction treatment, job placement and mental health services. And yet, as L.A.'s real estate prices soar, so

The western edge of Penmar Golf Course, now one of the largest homeless encampments on the Westside, abuts the Frank Gehry-designed home of artist John Baldessari.



does the city's homeless population. And nowhere have the twin forces of inaccessible housing and inequality found a more explosive mix than in Venice Beach, a hotbed of entertainment executives and talent where the median home price is \$1.9 million. Many of these residents are now grappling with a quality-of-life issue that defies their own liberal ideals.

Sleepless in Seattle and *Community* producer Gary Foster, who moved to the area two years ago from Westwood and works with the homeless advocacy group The People Concern, says he was surprised by the number of residents who expressed exasperation with — if not outright disdain for — the transient population. “They tend to be liberal, they want to do good in the world, but they’re balancing their beliefs with how that might impact the value of their real estate,” says Foster, who began his activism after producing *The Soloist*, about a journalist who discovers a musical savant living on Skid Row.

“There are actually [residents] advocating driving the homeless out of Venice — shipping them off somewhere, which is such a proto-fascist move,” says television writer Evan Dunskey, a 27-year resident of the area. “And then what? Do we have to build a wall around Venice?”

Venice is now home to the largest concentration of homeless anywhere on L.A.’s Westside, with nearly 1,000 non-domiciled people. During the past 18 months, several encampments have swelled in more residential areas where homes can easily sell for eight figures and up. Tents, many of them equipped with mini refrigerators, cupboards, televisions and heaters, vie with pedestrian traffic.

Residents who live near the encampments say mail regularly

goes missing. Break-ins have jumped. Hypodermic needles and human waste are appearing on sidewalks and at local playgrounds. Residents have complained to police about harassment and even physical assaults. “This is more of a criminal problem than a homeless problem,” says nonprofit worker Carly Voge, who lives next to the so-called Frederick camp adjacent to the Penmar Golf Course.

“There are crime problems in Venice,” concedes Mike Bonin, whose Council District 11 includes Venice Beach. Bonin has come under intense criticism for his handling of the homeless crisis by Venice residents displeased with his support of a measure to introduce a massive, \$5 million transitional housing project in their city. At the same time, Bonin says, “I can’t accept the idea that there is an inextricable link between crime and homelessness. It is wrong, it is not backed up by the data, and it leads to bad policy.”



Clarke



Boal



Linde

Disagreements over the potential causes of the crimes have begun to factionalize Venice’s neighborhoods. “It was six months of terror, absolute terror,” says radiologist Maria Altavilla, who lives in east Venice. She says that the period of increased health and safety concerns coincided with the expansion of the homeless encampments the past year. She recently arrived home with her two children to find a woman shooting up in her yard. Lately, her husband has expressed a desire to move because of his frustration with

Left: Venice is now home to nearly 1,000 homeless people. Right: Residents have started a GoFundMe page for an unpermitted landscaping project to deter the Penmar encampment, pictured.



the encampments. Several residents shared an unconfirmed theory — suggested to them by a local patrolman — that certain assailants were using the social media app NextDoor to monitor which residents are most vocal about their opposition to encampments and then targeting those individuals for retribution.

As the problem worsens, homeowners are banding together to try to reclaim patches of sidewalk in an effort to deter future encampments. At the corner of Millwood Avenue and Lincoln, bulky wood planters now hog much of the sidewalk. Those planters emerged mysteriously two months ago outside a Staples office supply store that was once a popular resting spot for a handful of tent dwellers. The same pattern can be seen on another block, further south on Palms Boulevard, where similar metallic planters have recently appeared.

On Venice Boulevard in front of Vice Media’s offices, a chain-link fence was erected to prohibit tents from going up. Residents around Penmar Golf Course have started a GoFundMe page and have hit their goal of raising \$80,000 to fill a pedestrian pathway with native plants and landscaping — a project being called the Frederick Avenue Pass-Through but whose

real objective is to deter the large encampment that has ballooned there.

“Honestly, I think we are a step and half away from vigilantism,” says a talent manager who has lived in the area for two decades. “I feel like this is heading toward a Guardian Angels type situation that you saw in 1970s New York. Someone is going to go out there with a lead pipe and give someone a serious beatdown. It’s awful to say, but I don’t see what prevents that from happening.”

LIFE IN VENICE BEACH HAS ALWAYS come with its own distinct form of urban grittiness. Unlike its bougie neighbors to the north in Pacific Palisades and Malibu, Venice has embraced its counterculture past. It’s the land of head shops and street art that celebrates icons like Jim Morrison, Dennis Hopper and Jerry Garcia. And, to a degree, that grittiness added to the area’s allure, helping turn Venice into one of L.A.’s most desirable neighborhoods. Venice now counts as residents actress Emilia Clarke, screenwriter Mark Boal and Participant Media’s David Linde, among many others in the industry. The area also has become “Silicon Beach,” home to tech giants Snapchat and Google.

Dunskey has witnessed Venice’s transformation from a battleground for gangs to one that boasts several Michelin-starred restaurants. A self-proclaimed progressive, Dunskey says he fears that recent gentrification has altered people’s sympathies. “There is a fever of money in Venice that has nothing to do with its past. Whatever progressive elements were historically here have dwindled, and they’re



PROPOSED HOUSING PROJECTS

Venice residents are debating three housing proposals in various stages of approval that aim to address the area’s homeless crisis

1. Sunset Avenue and Main Street

In December, the L.A. City Council approved plans to build a \$5 million bridge-housing shelter at the corner of Sunset Avenue and Main Street on a former bus yard owned by the city. The shelter will have 154 beds.

2. 718-720 Rose Ave.

Venice Community Housing is proposing to build a mixed-use structure near the corner of Rose and Lincoln Boulevard that would include 35 units providing permanent, supportive housing for 34 formerly homeless persons.

3. 200 N. Venice Blvd.

The nonprofit developers Hollywood Community Housing and Venice Community Housing have submitted plans to build a 140-unit permanent, low-income residence on what is now a parking lot.



being replaced by tech money.”

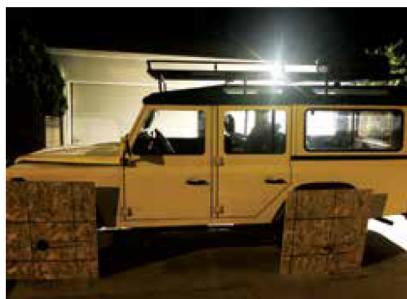
“It’s worse than it’s ever been,” says Tami Pardee, Venice’s top real estate broker, who moved to the area in 1993. “But sometimes it has to get like this for a real movement to start.” Compass’ Mark Kitching says that in the past year, four buyers he worked with opted out of purchasing after unpleasant encounters with homeless residents when touring the area. “The Palisades is looking way more attractive when you are thinking about schools and cleanliness,” he says.

The most common refrain heard when discussing the cause of L.A.’s homeless crisis is soaring housing costs. But there are other forces at play in Venice and throughout the city involving various laws and ballot measures that date back more than a decade. A 2006 ruling by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in *Jones v. City of Los Angeles* required that law enforcement and city officials no longer enforce the ban on sleeping on sidewalks anywhere in the city until a sufficient amount of permanent supportive housing could be built. Further complicating matters were two state ballot measures that voters overwhelmingly approved in 2016 — Propositions 47 and 57 — which decriminalized certain felonies to misdemeanors in an effort to address the state’s overburdened prison system. Officials, including Bonin, admit that those measures have complicated matters for law enforcement, who make arrests only to see the same perpetrators back on the street days later.

The people living in the encampments say they have been unfairly maligned, even as they admit there is little policing when

they do break the law. City rules dictate that tents be taken down between the hours of 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. But police rarely enforce the code, say several members of the Frederick homeless encampment. “We get away with a lot,” says Randy “Dee” Collins, 25, who adds his family has long owned property in Venice and that he has chosen a life on the street against their wishes. The Frederick camp, home to about a dozen tents and twice as many people, is littered with nine weeks’ worth of trash. These homeless people say neighbors are openly hostile to them. Collins says he offered one resident money for water but “she didn’t want to participate in anything that would help us.”

John Maceri, executive director of The People Concern, takes issue



After multiple tire slashings, one resident built a homemade deterrent system, left. Others have put up unpermitted planters to eat up sidewalk space on Millwood Avenue, above.

with residents who complain about the problem and then go on to criticize every proposed remedy. “The criminal element needs to be dealt with, but statistically, homeless people aren’t committing more crimes than other people, it’s just more visible and they are easier to blame,” he says. “I understand both sides.

No one wants to see a tent city outside their window,” says one woman who lives at the Frederick camp. “There could be a solution if everyone wasn’t so hell-bent

on destroying us.” This woman, who declined to provide a name, is a former heroin addict who left her two daughters in Tennessee and moved to Venice several years ago. She claims neighbors have pulled guns on her and says that “the biggest crimes we’re guilty of are digging in the trash and being homeless.” As if to make her point, a well-dressed jogger happened through as she was talking, exclaiming, “Oh, aren’t we lucky to have a new city dump right here!”

Things reached a boiling point at a packed town hall meeting in October, when residents got a chance to address the city’s plans to open a 154-bed transitional (“bridge”) housing shelter set to be built on a former Metro bus yard at Sunset and Pacific avenues (the plan was approved by the City Council in December). At the four-hour meeting, Bonin and Mayor Eric Garcetti were targets of angry chants and tirades that effectively centered on whether Venice was being asked to unfairly shoulder the burden for the entire Westside’s homeless population. Bonin says he had an obligation to place the bridge housing for his district in Venice because that is “where the problem is most acute” (each council district is required to open a bridge-housing shelter under a City Hall directive). Those

Even the homeless woman at the Frederick camp says the city’s housing plans aren’t a viable long-term solution. “I’m not going to rub my tummy and jump through hoops just to live inside,” she says, “I shouldn’t have to go through that much of an act just to get housing. People should be allowed to live how they want.”

Bonin alleges that critics of the city’s efforts are resorting to hyperbolic, inflammatory language in an effort to smear the homeless. “One of the anti-bridge-housing organizers posted something online that said, ‘We need to call in Stephen Miller to help us deal with this,’ ” says Bonin. “The similarities in the language used when referring to the homeless and how Trump refers to immigrants is startling.” The councilmember’s critics say his efforts are simply misguided.

“Bonin sent out a survey like 10 months ago asking residents where would be a good place for the shelter,” says software executive Travis Binen, who lives directly across from the Metro bus depot and has emerged as one of the most vocal opponents to the bridge shelter. “Of the 641 surveys returned, only 5 percent pointed to [the Metro bus depot] as a good location. More people pointed to Bonin’s house. He is, like, the most hated man in Venice.” Binen, who spends four hours a day online organizing against the shelter, says his activity has pushed him rightward.

Garcetti has hinted that once enough shelter beds and supportive housing have been built to meet the court’s requirements, it would clear the way for the city to start enforcing the former law that banned sleeping on sidewalks. Says Bonin, “We have approved a shit ton of money, and if we are building housing with it, we should be able to go to the courts and say no to [certain] encampments.”

No one expects Venice to resolve its homeless issue soon, if ever. For now it remains a worrisome microcosm for one of L.A.’s most intractable questions: How much burden should homeowners bear for transients? And perhaps more important, where do we expect them to go? **THIS**