L.A.'s urban parks: for the homeless too?
The new small parks include features that homeless advocates say are meant to harass. But managers contend they just want to prevent people from living there.

By Gale Holland
August 31, 2013, 10:00 a.m.

Dawn was breaking when three scruffy men in dark clothing trudged past Grand Park's bubble-gum-pink benches and into its purple-tiled bathrooms to wash up.

The early-morning ablutions have become a daily ritual for homeless men at the 1-year-old park across the street from Los Angeles City Hall. But their presence has done little to dim the appeal of the $56-million, county-owned venue, as office workers, loft-dwelling professionals, curious suburbanites and, yes, the homeless flock to evening concerts, public ceremonies, fireworks shows and farmers' markets.

"I went to the opera the other night," said Tom Hackett, 60, a former garbage collector from upstate New York and one of the regulars at the homeless bathroom lineup. "I've never been to an opera."

The situation isn't so harmonious in other downtown parks, however, as officials' efforts to make the facilities more welcoming to the new urbanites have spurred claims of harassment by skid row advocates.
These efforts have also led to homeless nudged out of one park simply relocating to others blocks away — a reminder that even as much of downtown crackles with new, upscale condos, bars, restaurants and stores, the central city's revival still depends on maintaining an uneasy truce with one of the nation's largest concentrations of people living in the streets.

"It's a game of cat and mouse," said UCLA law professor Gary Blasi, who has studied homelessness in Los Angeles, "except the mice have nowhere to go."

In the last year, the city and county have opened or planned several new public spaces, including Grand Park, Spring Street Park, an Arts District park and a parcel next to Grand Park to be developed and managed by the city. They join parks that have welcomed visitors for many decades, including Pershing Square, the grassy grounds of City Hall and the historic sites near Olvera Street that mark the city's founding.

Park managers at Spring Street and Grand Park included extensive regulations and design elements to discourage homeless people from camping out. Grand Park's open spaces, stretching 12 acres from Bunker Hill to the foot of City Hall, in the shadow of the criminal court building, offer few hiding places for prostitutes or drug users. It's also farther away from skid row than some other parks, keeping the homeless count comparatively low.

But five blocks south, a resident describes Pershing Square, the city's original central park, as a "day-care center" for homeless people. The city is trying to change the park's character with a whirlwind of movies, concert series and farmers' markets.

"The homeless need somewhere to sit and be," said Kevin Regan, a park administrator. "We just aren't going to let them live there."

Skid row activists call it harassment.

A Los Angeles Community Action Network activist known as General Dogon leads a weekly patrol at Pershing Square and other downtown parks to monitor what he says is widespread intimidation of the poor and homeless.

Dogan pointed out concrete seating in the shade that had been cordoned off with yellow police tape. A chain blocked access to the lawn. Restrooms in the underground garage are off-limits to anyone without a parking ticket, and cafe tables with umbrellas where homeless people once rested are hauled out only for the noon concerts and other activities.

Police patrol cars park, sometimes two abreast, on the concrete plaza around the fountain, and officers stop people for loitering, Dogon said.

"How do you loiter in a park?" Dogon said.

Police officials said the seating is tied off for cleaning or so farmers can store their crates during market days. The grass is off-limits to protect the sound system or to prepare for concerts.

Police and city officials deny any bullying campaign, saying their enforcement efforts are directed at illegal activities.

"We welcome anybody from anywhere into any of our parks," said Rick Coca, spokesman for Councilman Jose Huizar.

"The key is keeping the area in a way that can be used by all," said Los Angeles police Capt. Horace Frank, who heads the downtown detail.

Police stepped up their presence at Pershing Square last year in response to complaints after Occupy Los Angeles was forcibly ejected from the City Hall lawn, Frank said. Remnants of the group disrupted the farmers' market, urinating on walls, grabbing food samples and demanding spare change, the market manager said.

As Occupiers drifted away from Pershing Square, a rowdy encampment arose outside El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, home to Olvera Street and the site of the city's founding. People partied to all hours and tossed needles over the wall into La Plaza de Cultura y Artes — a museum focused on the contributions of Mexican Americans in Southern California — said Father Richard Estrada, the parish priest at nearby La Placita church.

"It was like a tent city all day long," he said.

A city-county task force was formed to clean up the encampment, and some of the tarp-covered shopping carts and tents can now be seen at Father Serra Park, across the street from Union Station.

Climbing out of a tour bus with his family, Berlin tourist Nico Gruenberger looked askance at the huddle in Serra Park, with their plush blankets and carts bristling with plastic bags.
"In Germany we have homeless people, but [this is] a historical part of the city," Gruenberger said. "Here, unfortunately, everything is together."

Frank said people have complained about the homeless camp at Serra Park, but other "people put out a blanket, so do they. All you can do is shift them around."

The newest downtown green space, Spring Street Park, opened in June between 4th and 5th streets. The sign at the entrance lists 12 rules, including a ban on shopping carts. Its metal perforated benches discourage lying down, and there are no little enclosed "alcoves," said downtown neighborhood council President Patti Berman. So far, the only open conflict has been over loose dogs, she said.

But at less than two-thirds of an acre, including a playground, the small park needs to be watched closely to make sure everyone is comfortable and safe, Berman said. She heads a nonprofit that is raising private money to pay for a full-time city ranger to patrol the park.

Not long after Spring Street Park opened, a security guard at the loft building next door called police to investigate two men suspected of cooking heroin purchased on skid row. Zach Calig, a television writer, came down from his condo to find his cousin, whom he hadn't seen for years, slumped on the ground in handcuffs.

Calig said he is in recovery from substance abuse himself and understands how people end up addicted and homeless. But he doesn't want them overrunning his neighborhood park. "We don't want it to be Pershing Square," he said. "We want it to be Grand Avenue park."

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Michael Higby at 2:41 PM September 03, 2013
With gentrification of DTLA and Hollywood, the City is looking to move homeless out of these areas, to working class communities in the San Fernando Valley and elsewhere in the city. Indeed, former Councilman Richard Alarcon stated as such as part of Jan Perry's swan song. Sadly, in some of these communities where homeless are now being dumped, Neighborhood Councils who should be fighting this are under the thumb of the local Council Member insisting such and refusing to fight back.

Kristin Sabo at 12:40 PM September 03, 2013
Society needs to address the issues related to homelessness. In the meantime, our parks are not and should not be the defacto means to do the addressing, period. But as long as our parks continue to be allowed to be used as such, there is no real pressure on our electeds to work on the complex connected issues that lead to homelessness.

Garth G at 9:22 AM September 03, 2013
To call this a park is a joke. How many homeless people can you fit in a square of land 140 feet on a side? L.A. was built for the developers, not the people who live there.