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[Home](#) > [The Beat](#) > [Pershing Square](#)

Pershing Square



Throughout its history, the park has been known as Public Square, La Plaza Abaja, City Park, 6th Street Park and St. Vincent's Park.

by Christian Goss

The controversial history of Downtown's would-be civic hub

Directly above the redline train that rumbles below Hill Street and resting in the shadows of the stately Biltmore Hotel, Pershing Square is the city's oldest park and has for more than a century been in search of an identity and a defined purpose.

Placed in what is almost the geographic center of downtown Los Angeles, Pershing Square began its life under the name Central Park in 1866. It bore little resemblance to the concrete square of today. Lush, sub-tropical plantings flourished and meandering walkways cut through the park. A large central fountain anchored the park and stone sculptures dotted its grounds. It was a popular meeting and lunch destination for residents and businessmen. Up until the middle of the century, military recruiters took advantage of the traffic and rallies for union organizations and socialist political causes were common. The park was a true urban oasis and a necessary refuge. Since then, however, the park's evolution has been far-less bucolic.

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In an effort to redefine and update itself, Pershing Square has gone through a series of name changes. Throughout its history, the park has been known as Public Square, La Plaza Abaja, City Park, 6th Street Park and St. Vincent's Park. Finally, on Armistice Day in 1918, the park's moniker was given some stability. In honor of the highest U.S. military commander in World War I, General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, Los Angeles' Central Park became Pershing Square.

As Downtown and Bunker Hill declined, so did the appeal of its civic hub. Downtown residents and businesses fled west due to decentralization and suburbanization. The park was co-opted by the marginalized. It became the domain of hustlers, pushers and drunks. That made the decision to use the Biltmore Hotel as the staging ground for The 1960 Democratic National Convention very unusual. In an instant, the eyes of the nation were drawn to the hotel and the unsightly square across the street. John F. Kennedy, while staying in a suite facing the park, was rumored to have commented on its rough nature. American "tough-guy laureate" Norman Mailer, in an article for Esquire Magazine on the 1960 Convention, was less apt to mince words. He wrote, "Pershing Square, that square block of park with cactus and palm trees, the three-hundred-and-sixty-five-day-a-year convention of every junkie, pot-head, pusher, queen..."

John Rechy, a well known writer on Los Angeles and its homosexual culture made his own cruel observations on the park in the literary magazine Big Table 3: "The tough teen-age chicks-'dittybops'-making it with the lost hustlers ... all amid the incongruous piped music and the flowers-twin fountains gushing rainbow colored: the world of Lonely America squeezed into Pershing Square, of the Cities of Terrible Night, downtown now trapped in the City of lost Angels ... and the trees hang over it all like some type of apathetic fate."

The fate of the Square was addressed in fits and starts over the years, but the increasing homeless population made the tinkering a futile exercise. The 1984 Olympics prompted a downtown business association to attempt a complete overhaul, but ultimately the effort failed and the Square remained a reliable haven for the destitute and malcontented.

In 1994, the tumblers fell into place for yet another reinvention and the vision of Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta was brought to bear on L.A.'s foremost public space. Legoretta had become famous for his work in the Southwest for a style that used elements of bright color, play of light and shadow, and solid geometric shapes. It was these hard surfaces, low walls, geometric kiosks, and a 125-foot campanile that eventually came to define Legorreta's Pershing Square design.

It is this design that prevails today, struggling for civic respect. The park is still, even after these renovations, in a state of transition. It was dug up in the '50s to provide the framework for underground parking. On paper the idea seemed ideal. Recreate the success of Union Square in San Francisco and kill two birds with one stone; provide public space for pedestrians and parking space for commuters.

In practice, it hasn't worked out that well. So much of the park is given to garage access that the pedestrian perimeter has been obscured. The usable space of the park has been reduced. Criticism of the design doesn't end there. Architects and landscapers have been hashing out the failings of Pershing Square ever since Legoretta's ideas first found paper.

Thomas S. Hines, Professor of History and Architecture, Emeritus, UCLA, shares an opinion that seems to carry weight among professionals. "Its chief fault, for me," he says, "is that it includes too much 'architecture', especially the tower

which overwhelms the small site. I wish [Legorreta] had reserved more space for trees, plantings, and seating.”

That’s the irony of the current design. Initially, it bore more than a passing resemblance to its intended model: Central Park of New York. Michael Higgins, a Skid Row resident who spends his afternoons in the park shirtless, sunbathing and doing crossword puzzles, pointed this out while explaining his preference for the Square. “I think the reason why it seems cold is the big area of concrete, but that’s why they call it a square not a park. It’s not actually a park.”

This is a distinction that seemed lost on park goers on a recent weekend. Kids giggled and played in the fountain. Tourists snapped pictures. “Downtown on Ice” was in full swing, and while not an event on par with the Rockefeller Center, skaters still turned an endless series of clockwise rotations. Vagrants played chess in easy company with the lunch crowd and a strong security presence kept a close eye on the whole symphony.

Despite the hard surfaces, geometric planes and playschool colors, John Pollard, an Altadena resident who took the train in to Downtown with his family, explained that he nonetheless enjoyed the Square in its current form. “I like the park,” he said. “It’s great. I go to concerts in the park. I saw the Motels here last summer.”

It remains to be seen whether more of L.A.’s residents will come around to his opinion.

Pershing Square is located at 532 South Olive Street, Los Angeles CA, 90013. It is open to the public from 9 a.m. through 5:30 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. through 4 p.m. on weekends.



MARCH 2011

The Spring Fashion Issue

This issue features a profile on [Sam Endicott](#) as well as fashion spreads by [Scott Hugh Mitchell](#) and [Chris Steinbach](#) as well as reviews of [Sugarfish](#), a delicious and traditional sushi restaurant.

We hope you enjoy this month's issue and feel free to let us know what you [think](#).

–The Bunker Hill Magazine Staff