The Woman Who Saved Skid Row

Other Cities Have Razed Their Downtown Slums. Because of Alice Callaghan, L.A. Is Preserving Housing for the Poorest of the Poor.

Mexico's Media Mogul

Caged Animals: Wild Hunters

The Hair-Raising Feud Over the Helsinki Formula
THE SAVIOR OF SKID ROW

ALICE CALLAGHAN HAS Fought CITY HALL AND DOWNTOWN DEVELOPERS TO PRESERVE HOUSING FOR THE POOREST OF THE CITY'S POOR

COMING UPON SKID ROW FOR THE FIRST TIME along 7th Street, a visitor is struck by the trash and blight. Many of the old storefronts and hotels are scarred and crumbling or boarded up. Some doorways are covered not with boards but with sleeping people; others are blocked by locked gates, with garment workers seemingly caged behind sewing machines inside. The sidewalks reek of urine and the area is eerily silent, except for one corner near a spruced-up hotel, which is buzzing with people in suits this Wednesday morning.

The hotel, a three-story brick building that's recently been painted a muted green, has a yellow sign out front with black lettering that reads Prentice Hotel. Its pastel colors and sleek lines suggest a clean, scrubbed island—a safe zone. This is largely because of its developer, Alice Callaghan, a short, athletic-looking woman with a Jbuster Brown haircut and an in-your-face attitude.

Dubbed "Father Alice" because she is both an Episcopal priest and a former nun, Callaghan is best known in City Hall circles for her politically savvy lobbying on behalf of the poorest of the poor. On the streets, she stands for the proposition that no matter how much the downtown businesses and bureaucrats want to sweep away the problem of homelessness with police intervention, it won't disappear. At least not until permanent housing—not temporary shelters, not transitional programs—exists. By invoking her righteous rant—housing, housing, permanent housing—she has managed to drag on city leaders into doing what no other American city has dared consider: saving Skid Row, not for speculators but for the people who live there.

Activist-turned-entrepreneur Callaghan is playing real-life Monopoly these days, albeit on Baltic Avenue rather than Park Place. It is a transition that seems to energize her, even though it has cost her some of her closest allies. Then again, Callaghan's life has been defined by radical transformations. From rebellious surfer girl to nun, from Catholic nun to Episcopal priest. From Barry Goldwater supporter to Ronald Reagan naysayer. But her current metamorphosis into a radical real estate tycoon may be her most daring leap yet.

At a time when some luxury downtown hotels are going bankrupt, it is no small irony that Callaghan's hotel business for low-income residents—single-room-occupancy hotels, or SROs—is booming on downtown's eastern edge. Since 1988, her nonprofit Skid Row Housing Trust has bought 15 SROs, 10 of which were on the city's Slum Housing Task Force hit list, facing prosecution and possible condemnation. Three of them have been gutted and renovated with skylights, community kitchens and cheerful tile floors and are open to those barely scratching by on monthly general relief checks of $312—rent is between $234. Callaghan's mission is to put the remaining 35 Skid Row SROs in the hands of nonprofits, at a cost of $300 million from corporate and public funds.

How Callaghan can work such magic is immediately apparent as she races down 7th Street from her storefront center for garment workers' families, Las Familias del Pueblo (Families of the City), to the Prentice Hotel. At 44, round-faced and feisty, Callaghan wears her uniform—a perfectly

BY
JOY
HOROWITZ
pressed Oxford shirt (with the collar cut off), khaki skirt, hose and sneakers—and greeted the transients, drug addicts and prostitutes wandering by, who call out to her. This is the well-known way of the homeless, disgusted by those who seem unwilling to help themselves or who act like “predators,” Callaghan has taken the position that they are no different than anyone else, just poorer.

Suddenly, a Lincoln Town Car pulls up beside her. “Want a ride?” asks a man in a gray pin-striped suit who is sitting in the passenger seat. She jumps into the back seat. By straddling two levels of culture, the very rich and the very poor, Callaghan takes care of business.

“Remember,” she advises the driver is he swinging in front of the hotel, where there is no parking because Mayor Tom Bradley and the media have just arrived en masse for the hotel’s opening day ceremonies, “it’s less of a ticket if you park on the sidewalk than in the red.” Not that such financial concerns would bother the car’s owner, Robert E. Wycoff, president and chief operating officer of ARCO and one of her closest advisers. But the chauffeur parks on the sidewalk.

Callaghan’s intimate understanding of the municipal code stems from time she’s spent in jail. Over the years, she has gained some notoriety by getting arrested for acts of conscience—protesting the Vietnam War, the treatment of farm workers, the government’s policy of deporting illegal Latino immigrants. In 1987, when the city’s Department of Public Works was scooping homeless people off the sidewalks with skid-loaders, she was arrested for blocking a roadway. To protest the 1989 police sweeps of Skid Row, she held a sit-in outside the mayor’s office—“we get good coverage there,” she says, smiling.

But on this day, she’s on her good behavior. When the mayor takes the microphone beneath helium balloons, Bradley marvels at the hotel’s renewal. “I used to work this area as a police officer,” he remembers, “and I cannot believe it could have been done.” Then, Wycoff announces ARCO’s intention to contribute $1 million this year to the California Equity Fund, earmarked for Skid Row housing (for which ARCO will receive tax credits). Callaghan stands off to the side, her arms folded and mouth shut for a change.

The crunch of business and government leaders at the hotel is more evident that Alice Callaghan’s moment has arrived. After a decade of working as a housing activist, a time when commercial and industrial developers sought to disperse the Skid Row population, Callaghan has watched her agenda of saving and developing low-income housing become the city’s agenda. Recently, she has seen major victories: the City Council imposed a five-year moratorium on demolition of SRO hotels on Skid Row, the toughest ordinance of its kind in the nation, and the city’s Community Redevelopment Agency, after years of delays and promises, renewed its commitment to buy and refurbish 15 SROs. The CRA also recently announced that Callaghan’s Skid Row Housing Trust would receive more than $7.5 million to not only renovate four hotels but to also build a new one, the first in decades.

“More than anyone," says Mike Badalini, the mayor’s housing coordinator, "she’s demonstrated that with a clear focus and a clear goal, you can get things done in the city.” Says Councilman Mike Woo, whom Callaghan tapped to sponsor the demolition moratorium. "Alice has set a real national precedent. For many cities, it’s too late—they lost their SROs and will never get them back. In this case, we’re fortunate that Alice is here to sound the trumpet and let us know we still have time to take this constructive action in our city.” Alice has turned into quite the developer," adds CRA chairman Jim Wood, whom Callaghan has frequently criticized in the past.

While her critics—and there are many—denounce her abrasive style and controlling manner, her supporters prefer to think of her as the Mother Teresa of Skid Row. Callaghan bristles at such comparisons, not because she doesn’t measure up but because she’s disgusted with Teresa of Calcutta: “I find it unforgivable she’s never addressed the systemic problems of poverty,” she says. “She talked about Ron-ald Reagan as a good Christian—the very person who’s destroyed programs for poor people. I cannot imagine what her theology is.”

But there is more at stake here than the recognition of a sharp-tongued do-gooder slaying the dragons of poverty. During the past decade, Los Angeles has become the capital of homelessness in the United States, with estimates hovering between 100,000 and 150,000. Although Skid Row may be considered an enclave of the homeless, with a population of about 11,000, including the largest concentration of mentally ill residents in the county, Callaghan prefers to think of it as an “endangered low-income residential community.” At least 75% of that population suffers from mental disorders or drug and alcohol abuse, sometimes both. On any given night, 8,000 men and women live in the SROs, and 2,000 spend the night in the emergency beds and chairs provided by half a dozen missions and shelters; 1,000 people sleep on the sidewalks and in back alleys.

At the same time, Skid Row—or Central City East, as the 925 acres on the east side of downtown are called—remains the last undeveloped chunk of downtown real estate. As Little Tokyo commercial interests encroach on the area, determining how to redevelop, toy-manufacturing and cold-storage industries can coexist with the low-income residents is a political hot potato. Many have begun to wonder how these two pieces of a schizophrenic puzzle will fit together. Alice Callaghan may well be part of the answer.

CALLAGHAN CAME TO SKID ROW IN 1971. SHE WAS 54 AND HAD SPENT THE previous eight years in Pasadena running a community center called Union Station, through All Saints Episcopal Church. Now, 10 years later, she is, if anything, more determined to make a difference in the 55 square blocks bordered by Main and Alameda streets and between 3rd and 7th streets—one of the nation’s most devastated, drug-ridden inner-city neighborhoods.

Here there exists a violent poverty beyond what Americans have previously defined as poverty. Part of the problem is crack cocaine, part is social indifference. One of the first questions people asked me when I arrived was where I parked my car—tall pipes are often hocked off and used as crack pipes. The crime rate in the area is the highest in the city. If a new web of support can be taken hold of, it can be woven anywhere.

“You can always do something,” Callaghan says in a voice so strong and resolute it’s hard not to believe her. “We’ve done more to clean up the neighborhood by providing safe housing than any other city agency. We can buy up the hotels. We can save housing for 5,000 people. There’s no question, we can do it.”

We are walking on the northern edge of Skid Row, between 3rd and 4th, next to a huge building, Little Tokyo Investment. Callaghan is looking for Shorty, a prostitute who just got out of jail. When they last spoke by phone, the prostitute asked the priest for a cake in honor of her getting out of jail and off the streets. Callaghan has obliged by buying a big, white sheet cake from Vickman’s with glooply, red flowers and the words, “Welcome Home.” She stops to ask anyone she passes if they’ve seen Shorty.

Although the wants to encourage Shorty to stay off the streets Callaghan doesn’t expect much. “People on the row aren’t going anywhere,” she says, sounding a common refrain. “There’s no way to push them out of the row. They’re too weak to move, they’re too used to the row, they’re too much a part of the row,” she says. “People always want to ferret out the deserving poor as opposed to the undeserving poor. It’s a constant debate.” She is not naive about the harshness of life on the row: “There are plenty of people on the sidewalk that would just as soon knife you as you ask to move out of the way.”

As she passes the hustlers and their hangers-on and the street evictions of the homeless, she is like a walking encyclopedia of the neighborhood. She exudes a non sequitur, almost brusque manner, perhaps an armor she’s developed to survive on Skid Row. "The homeless are disproportionately black because 10,000 housing units
Pamela Hudson, a tenant of Callaghan's nonprofit Pershing SRO.

A tenant of an SRO not owned by Callaghan's housing trust.

were lost last year in South-Central L.A.,” she says. “People say the welfare system is teaching people to depend on it. But we are culpable in our ignorance.” Her attitude about the homeless is simple: Until you can offer people a reasonable place to go, you’re in order them and yourself.

She stops for a moment. “Look at,” she says, pointing to the New Otni Hotel, City Hall in the distance, the Ronald Reagan State Office building. “The crunch on our borders is incredible.” She is hostile to anything that brings in the “upwarders,” who, she says, are the “frustrated complainers” about Skid Row residents. Taking in this snapshot of skyscrapers and commercial development, I wonder about it isn’t just a matter of time until Skid Row is economic: “Nope,” she replies, folding her arms across her chest and smiling broadly. “Cause we’re gonna own it.

That is exactly what we’re about. Over the next few years, we’re literally trying to save every single hotel on Skid Row. Build new ones.

“It will be the first time in the history of the United States anyone has saved a Skid Row. New York didn’t save its Bowery in time, and now they’re sleeping more than 1,000 people in the armories. And they can’t get people out of the armories because they don’t have the housing people could have moved to.

“Now, we have an opportunity to stop that from happening in Los Angeles.”

AT FIRST, WHEN CALGHAAN OPENED HER STOREFRONT EMERGENCY CENTER, Las Familias del Pueblo, she oversaw the relocation of 400 newly arrived immigrant families out of Skid Row, an accomplishment that many city leaders believe helped prevent the creation of a new slum population. Callaghan merely credits her loyal cadre of pro bono attorneys, who threatened legal action against hotel owners if they continued to rent to more than one person per room. In fact, her potent weapon seems to be her prestigious army of volunteer lawyers and corporate executives — Ron L. Olson of Munger, Tolles & Olson, Robert E. Carbon of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker, U.S. Circuit Court Judge Arthur Alarcon, Robert B. Egelson, chairman of the Capital Group — who are also on her board of directors. “All of us have been called in Alice’s web and never been released,” Warren L. Ettinger of Haftkeder, Kaas & Ettinger says with much affection.

Part of Callaghan’s strategy has meant getting the city attorney’s office to enforce its laws prohibiting slum conditions. “Except for nonprofits, SRO owners — without exception — are slumlords,” explains Nancy Mintie, director of the Inner-City Law Center downtown. “They buildings are in a shocking state of disrepair.” Just that day, Mintie had been dealing with a building so overrun with cockroaches that the bugs were crawling in children’s ears and had to be surgically removed.

Stephanie Sautner, supervisor of the city attorney’s Slum Housing Task Force, uses the words of an old Jefferson Airplane song to explain her office’s relationship with Callaghan. “Go ask Alice — that’s our motto around here,” she says, laughing.

Sautner, a former NYPD police detective, first met Callaghan about six years ago, when she was responsible for building on Skid Row at 6th and Towne. “We had a health inspector over who was a problem,” she recalls. “He’s been fired. He was found to be doing business with defendants owning property.

“At the time, the inspector reported repairs were made. Then I got a call from somebody named Alice Callaghan about this building. I said that building’s been fixed. She said, ‘No way. This building’s a mess.’ Then I got calls from Alice’s lawyer. They said, ‘This building’s a mess.’ I said, ‘My inspector tells me otherwise. But I’ll meet you out there.’

‘I toured the building from the top to bottom. I had seen a lot of slums in New York. I didn’t really believe L.A. were as bad as New York buildings until I went into the Simone Hotel. We got the building shut down; Alice paid to relocate all the families. Then, through my prosecution of the owner, I got her reimbursed.”

It was a fateful first meeting. As the city attorney’s office continued to condemn buildings in the area, they were so devalued Callaghan eventually could afford to buy and then renovate them. For years, however, Callaghan resisted getting into the housing business. But she saw that was the families she relocated, the more SROs were lost. Hotel owners, rather than spending on buildings into compliance with new earthquake safety codes, demolished them and put in parking lots. Between 1969 and 1986, about 2,300 units were destroyed.

The conflict between upscale developers and advocates for low-income residents escalated. By 1984, Callaghan and other service providers were growing increasingly concerned about the CRA’s interest in promoting more commercial growth, it was back from its policy of taxing the expansion of the Skid Row housing. A 1976 Blue Ribbon Mayor’s Committee report that became part of the downtown redevelopment plan called for the creation of a safe residential area on Skid Row. But CRA board members were siding with business interests, wanting to dispense with the Skid Row population.

Convinced that the only way to save the housing was to make an end run around City Hall, Callaghan hopped up with Jill Halsey, then director of the Downtown Women’s Center. Together, they lobbied Mayor Bradley to bring in outside consultants who might pressure the CRA.

They drafted a widely publicized 1987 report by a panel of the Urban Land Institute, a prestigious Washington, D.C.-based research organization, that favored preserving SROs and developing low-cost housing.

The pressure was on.

Halsey and Callaghan, believing that suburban churches and synagogues had a stake in caring for Skid Row residents, in 1988 persuaded a group of parishioners from All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena and Leo Baeck Temple in Bel-Air to incorporate and create an organization dedicated to saving Skid Row. The Church and Temple Housing Corp. became Callaghan’s organizational base from which to proceed. But the real cornerstone of her campaign was laid in 1989. Having recruited the help of a young attorney named Patricia Friedel, then an associate at O’Melveny & Myers, Callaghan lobbied City Hall for an ordinance prohibiting SRO demolitions or conversions for five years. A similar moratorium in New York had been overturned by a state appellate court because it prevented private owners from determining the use of their property, so Friedel was careful to draft the L.A. ordinance to sidestep constitutional challenges.

Callaghan relishes retelling the backroom strategy of that victory. “What really got us there was that the businesses were so pro-corporation with the move of the Union Rescue Mission that nobody was paying attention to what we were doing,” she says. “But we also needed an unanimous vote. Getting [the late City Councilman] Gil Lindsay’s vote, he was always supportive of the business interests — was tricky.

“Well, the mayor’s office was great. They said, ‘When Lindsay gets to town, call us and we’ll tell him to vote for it.’ Just as the vote came up, Lindsay wandered in. If you’re in the room but don’t vote, your vote counts as a yes. So, everyone got him on the phone with the mayor about the issue at the exact moment the vote came up. He was recorded as a yes — and the unprecedented way we got the demolition moratorium.

“It was a fluke. A pure fluke — a combination of hard work and incredible luck.

Still, Callaghan was growing increasingly critical of the redevelopment agency. Although the agency’s SRO Housing Corp. was buying up properties, delays in renovating them created the added irony of hotels standing vacant: as the numbers of homeless people swelled.

“They expected what they would save all the hotels,” Callaghan says of the SRO Housing Corp., headed by Andy Ruabeson. “But they were saving two a year and at that rate, we were going to lose them.” She formed the Skid Row Housing Trust and hired Candy Rupp, Santa Monica’s housing program manager, who secured financing for SROs from a variety of lenders — the CRA, the state and corporations that receive a tax break in return for their investments. And with financing from ARCO, Continued on Page 42
The smoked chicken breast recalls that smurer the dresser mentioned. The meat has a pleasant smokiness and a moist, tender texture. By contrast, the lamb tagine—a Mediterranean dish of layered lamb, carrots, mushrooms and spinach—has a topping of sliced lamb piled as nearly as apple slices in a tart.

Two desserts mean serious business, chocolate-woe. The warm chocolate tart, served with the fluffy-accented plum, is intensely chocolatey and satisfyingly melted inside. Unlike most white-chocolate desserts, Riexgenen's white-chocolate mousse has a full chocolate flavor.

Some of the other desserts flirt coyly with avant-gardish. For instance, a warm apple "piz-za" on puff pastry—a "fresh-apple Danish," one of my guests said. Hans' baked Alaska is a standard (though very neat) model except that the grapefruit flavor of the ice cream sort of knocks out the meringue and the pastry. Grapefruit? I mean, is this Alaska, or is this Arizona? It's neither, of course—it's Santa Monica. Look at the people shopping for hip gifts.

THE WINE LIST

Rickenagen lists 70+ excellent wines at mostly fair prices—nine of them in half-bottles and another 10 by the glass. I'd stick to Californi-ana wines, because the import list is a bit odd, and some producers' names are not listed.

You can't go wrong with a glass of 1990 Frog's Leap Sauvignon Blanc, $4.25, or a bottle of 1989 Vichon Cheverignon, $16. Among the reds, try the 1989 Qupe Syrah, $19, with heftier dishes or, with lighter food, a half-bottle of 1989 Santabury Pinot Noir, $14.

The main drawback of the wine list is that nothing on it fits the nature of the place: casual. There's nothing you can simply quaff with a sandwich for a modest price. No red table wine in a carafe for $12. No Louis Martini or Pedroncelli Zinfan-del, no Chateau St. Jean Chardonnay or Beaujolais or a perfect wine that could be sold for well under $15.

Callaghan

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Callaghan put together a slick videotape documenting her noted persona, which was supported by some but not all. There have been some setbacks, too. Callaghan's romance with the Church and Temple Housing Corp. was punctured last year when it was revealed that the company is a partner in one of two hotels. Although Callaghan maintains that her board decided that the group lacked the sophistication necessary to manage the minu- tiae of running hotels, others say that the problem had more to do with a clash of egos between Callaghan and George F. Regas, rector of All Saints. In either case, the situation occurred when Callaghan alienated her longtime friend and colleague, Bill Doulos, associate editor for the urban magazine at All Saints, who had moved into the Gene- sis Hotel as a manager. While Doulos insisted that the hotel should be responsible for the upkeep of their building, Calla- gan denied it determined otherwise. Days before a group of potential hotel fenders were to tour the hotel, Callaghan decided that the place was a mess. Not only did she begin painting the hotel, but she also got down on her hands and knees to scrub the floor. The episode was repeated before a visit by key leaders at another hotel, when, hours before their arrival, Cal- laghan was showing a mop and bucket into a closet.

The lowest moment came at a meeting between the Church and Temple Housing board and Callaghan's Skid Row Housing Trust. Callaghan's very being seemed under at- tack. She was criticized for her insensitivity to the work of panhierons, for her ego, for being too headstrong, for her de- fensive comments about "underlings" serving pathetic dinners. Others suggested that her zeal to buy properties was blinding her to the needs of the very people for whom she was working. She promptly re- signed from the board and transferred her membership to All Saints' Beverly Hills.

Callaghan's mission to save the Skid Row hotels was turn- ing into a Pyrrhic victory. "What is at work is not just Al- ice's entitlement," Regas says in a telephone interview. "A deeper reason is that Alice's strong, unyielding, unbounded, missing self is that both her strength and her weakness.

What is also at work is two people [Doulos and Regas] who have opposed ideas of what Callaghan's mission is — more than anybody around." Asked if a rapprochement is possible, Callaghan replies: "I'm still mad.

WE ARE SITTING IN THE CALI- fornia Pizza Kitchen on South Hope Street in the Wells Fargo Bank Building. Callaghan is trying to explain the significant issues, issues, issues. Personal questions make her squirm, roll her eyes, hunch over her pasta. Her closest friends say she's not the kind of person who's interested in heart-to-hearts.

This has always been the rule. Callaghan's darkened psyche, the fierce si- sem when she looks at the world around her, the most in- timal vision when she is forced to look at herself. As if to give me insight about her, she loaned me her book, "Give Me My Word," a memoir by French novelist Françoise Giroud. It reads: "Childhood is something so close, so special... It's something you ought to keep to yourself. The way you keep back tears.

The third of four children, Alice Dale Callaghan was born in Canada and moved to New- port Beach where she was raised. Her father, who is deaf and now retired, was an engineer. When she speaks of her early years, it is with great reserve and some disdain, especially for her teenage years. "I had a hard adolescence," she says. "I hit it at 11, stayed enraged for years." Her mother, Olga, concurs. "Anything that had the slightest bit of danger she loved," she says by phone from her home in Greenville, Calif. Callaghan says she first decid- ed to become a nun in sixth grade as she walked out of church. It wasn't an epiphany that called her so much as a vague desire "to do this com- munion thing," a good stu- dent, she became bored easily and was suspended from New- port Harbor High School for not going to class or not doing her homework. She surfed in- stantly and read Nietzsche.

Following the death of her par- ents, who were Congregationalists, Callaghan became a staunch Seventh-Day Adventist. "It was a turning point in my own," she says. "My home life was a bad influ- ence." After other high schools expelled her, she ended up graduating from Cornelia Con- nell High School in Beverly Hills. After she graduated, she worked at the Junior Theater in Beverly Hills and one of the few schools in the area that would have her.

Her first day in a habit was sort of like being on a fla- ton, which she rolls up every day. But she buys her clothes at Robinson's, not Smart, and she lives off of Trader Joe's take- away. Her friends tell her of her love for fine restaurants, wine and travel to weird places. One of her favorite vacation spots, for example, is South China. On her four days, these days she's hiking in the hills, not sitting in church.

IT'S 8:15 A.M. WHEN CALLAGH- AN swings her red Volvo station wagon into her parking space across from the bus terminal and behind the Chinese take- out store. She unlocks the fro- nt gate, then rushes beneath the red savings, past a Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe poster with little Chrisma lights at- tached, into her office at Las Familias to check her fax ma- chine and catch up on some pa- per work. As she defies City Hall, so Callaghan's environs defy the grotesque realities of the streets outside. The building looks like a sub-then-day care center, with its play equipment and tables covered with puzzles and crayons. But there are also sewing machines for job-train- ing classes, a large blackboard for English classes, a makeshift area where legal-aid lawyers can counsel garment workers and, on the other side of the room, there is Callaghan's "office"—a black-top desk and swivel stool, a phone, a fax machine and a cappuccino maker.

During her 14-hour work- day, Callaghan devotes much of her time to the children of gar- ment workers. "We don't do day care," she says. "We do riot control." Never married and childless, she says she has no regrets about not having children of her own. "I couldn't do what I do row and have kids," she says. "Knowing as many kids as I do, I'm better as an aunt. Every mothering in- stinct I ever had has been worked out of me."

Just the same, it becomes clear that Callaghan's work life has a distinctly domestic flavor. "Oh, rat," she means a few hours later as a band of 4-year- olds flocks on a cassette tape of Christmas music. "Not Christ- mas music but Christmas music!" Within a span of five minu- tes, she ties a Ninja Turtle mask around a 4-year-old's head, disciplines one for slamming his buddy in the head,
comforts an overtaxed 3-year-old and lays her down for a nap on a blue mat beneath her desk, and returns a phone call from Councillor Ruth Galanter while a gaggle of 7-year-old girls beside her sings and dances to a song in Spanish called "Chin-dolete." With each chorus, they shake their hips, wave their arms in the air and wag their behinds.

The cacophony of squealing, crying, screaming children seems to propel Callaghan and even to delight her, as she tends to business on the telephone, sipping coffee and swirling here and there on her stool. "Hey, Hey, cut it out!" she yells at two boys fighting over a toy. "Kill that child," she mutters to her staff person, Nancy Berlin.

A familial bond is also apparent with the street people who filter in and out of the center to check their mail, drink a glass of water, use the phone or bathroom. There's the schizophrenic woman with the Band-Aid across her hair. "She's always getting on job interviews," Callaghan says, adding that the Band-Aid changes locations daily. Patricia, who watches windows and does some prostituting to get by, is also here to nap on the couch; she's been up for four days, afraid to sleep on the street because people steal her belongings. And a woman emaciated from AIDS looks for an apple to eat.

Rebecca, a crack addict, comes in for a cup of beef stew. Both of Rebecca's children, who have been taken away from her, were born withdrawing from drugs. Why does she stay here, living on the streets? "It's cheap," she says. "It's about the only family I got."

Drug and alcohol addiction are the worst problems of Skid Row. Callaghan says, but there's not a single drug program in the neighborhood. "If we don't try to find a safe and clean place for people to live," she says, sounding the housing drumbeat, "we can't deal with other problems."

Callaghan's motherly control is also evident in her fierce refusal to acknowledge the concerns of the area's business interests, who formed the Central City East Assn. in 1985. The CCEA, in opposing additional housing and services for the area's "undesirable element" and arguing that it already has its "fair share" of low-income residents, became an ogre that has served her well ever since. Her standard act is to stay polarized to keep her own agenda focused.

"We're just looking for a way to coexist so everybody gets something and no one gets everything," says CCEA president Charles Woo, owner of ABC Toys. "Alice's vision—a ghetto concept—might be beneficial for many people but would demoralize any business and economic development and would provide a place that offers no hope for people."

Callaghan's eyes flash fire. "I'm Charlie Woo willing to help us move an SRO next to his house?" she asks. "Of course he's not. In an ideal world, these people wouldn't be living here like this. They'd be taken care of by family. They'd be taken care of by government. But they're not."

"All I can do is work with what we have, and, realistically, the only option is to save the housing. If we lose the housing, the sidewalks are the only other place they're going to be. Charlie Woo and others came to Skid Row because of cheap rents and why were the rents cheap? Because it's Skid Row. I'm not sympathetic to their complaints. If they don't like it, go away."

Kids are trailing her out the door like baby chicks as she escorts me to the play area outside. The kids run up, dozens of them reaching for her, grabbling, hugging her. She insists on walking me out to my car. She wants to make sure I get there safely.

A FEW DAYS LATER, CALLAGHAN, marching with her characteristic fast pace, leads me upstairs in the Senator Hotel, a dilapidated four-story brick building with broken windows at 726 S. Spring St. Technically, this is not part of Skid Row, but Callaghan is interested in scooping up properties that border it. Her Skid Row Housing Trust is in escrow on this hotel, which she plans to gut and remodel.

"This is the one where they dragged out a body this morning," she cautions me. In fact, I later learn that the rundown hotel has been visited by police 87 times this year, with two homicides and one attempted murder. In September, a Los Angeles Superior Court fined the hotel's owner, Young Kim of Hollywood, $24,000 after he pleaded no contest to eight violations of fire, health, building and safety codes, including cockroach infestation, crumbling plaster, broken plumbing and no heat. An injunction forbidding the owner to permit prostitution in the building was also issued.

Inside, it is dark and scary—room after room is boarded up with plywood. "People," Callaghan says, sounding disgusted, "are living here." The lights in the hallway do not work, the carpeting smells like urine. Up on the third floor, she stops to point out the bathroom, its sinks stuffed with toilet paper, its shower plugged up and its floor mired in excrement.

In the stairwell, two men and a woman are so zoned out on drugs that they barely notice us walking by. In one room, a man naps in a chair with the door wide open. Painted in large black letters on the wall behind him is "Smokey, I Love You."

She begins to walk up to the fourth floor. "Don't go up there," a resident cautions her. "It's too dangerous."

But she drags on. Callaghan has come here to drum up a little business—to tell the remaining tenants of this 90-room hotel that they can move into the Genesis, one of her hotels, which looks like a small college dorm, on Main Street.

She knocks on a door. No an-

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The Battle Lines in Callaghan's fight for housing are not simply drawn, especially among Skid Row service providers who vie with her for money, political access and public recognition. But it is more than petty jealousies and the requisite internal bickering that fuels their ire.

"Alice has made a lot of people uncomfortable with business as usual on Skid Row," says Mintie of the Inner-City Law Center. "She's always questioning and challenging to see if there's a better way, a more just way. She's raised a lot of hard questions for all of us. In a way, she acts like a conscience." Acting like a conscience, however, requires distinguishing between right and wrong and seeing the world in terms of black and white, friend or foe. Many accuse her of over-simplifying a range of issues by wearing a manteau of moral superiority as she hangs her housing drum and ignores the need for other social services.

"It sounds easy, it sounds ideal—if we build enough housing the people of Skid Row will be off the streets," says Mike Neu, director of the Homeless Outreach Program. "But that's bullshit. No drug addict will stay in an SRO. You cannot pay the dope man and the landlord at the same time. Something gets screwed up in the translation." Callaghan counters that housing is only the first step that will enable other services to take root.

But when Alice Callaghan became a Christian zealot with a mission to change the world, she didn't become an easy person to get along with. A very effective activist with an unswerving devotion and drive, certainly, but one personal level, many say she can be selfish, pushy, aloof, power-hungry and sometimes downright mean to those who oppose her agenda. Feelings have been hurt along the way.

Says Martha Brown Hicks, who runs Transition House on Skid Row: "I think she does good work, but: I also think she's a witch. She's not a nice lady." Adds And/ Rauschen: "I have felt Alice adopted the attitude that for them to grow, they have to tear us down. I've just never understood the degree of animosity I've felt directed against me by Alice."

Some of the conflict is purely ideological. Hicks, for example, believes that homelessness shouldn't be concentrated in the neighborhood, that Skid Row is a place to leave, not to preserve. Callaghan, on the other hand, views Skid Row as a community of last resort. She is filled with righteous venom for those who want to impose a "boots were made for people in the population and has nothing but sarcasm for anyone trying to "transition" people out of the area.

Callaghan is also vociferous in her criticism of local missions for their "pimping of children" to raise money. She has a strict policy that prohibits families of the children she works with from being referred to social services on Skid Row. "We will put them on the bus and send them to East L.A. for some medical services, counseling that might exist a block from us, but we won't send a woman and child walking
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through Skid Row. It's just too dangerous."
She goes on: "There are very few families left on the row, but there's a popular perception that there are thousands of children on Skid Row. And that is fueled in large part by some of the service agencies on the row, principally the missions. At holiday times, they invite the press to film the thousands of Skid Row families they're serving."
"But on the day of any of those events, I stand on 7th Street and watch all these families exiting the row after the event. They get on the buses and drive their cars out. It's called pincing your children. It's easier to raise money if you serve children. So people want to serve children. And it's a constant battle to stop the missions from housing homeless women and children on Skid Row.

"If you want to house homeless families, I tell people to do it a block off the row or six blocks off the row. Anywhere but on the row."

Callaghan is equally forceful about SRO economics: No rent, no room. As she redresses her role as landlord, she has admitted becoming a hard-hearted businesswoman. Evictions are now a part of her life.

"People a month behind in paying rent can't make excuses for, she says. "We're not a shelter. We need money for operational costs."

She softens. "We can work with people up to a certain point. Everything depends on why they didn't pay the rent. Sometimes I'll even give 'em the money myself. But if someone has received three relief checks and hasn't paid in three months—they're out.

Although she says she'll rent to drug dealers and prostitutes, she won't allow them to ply their trades at her hotels. Not surprisingly, Callaghan has had her share of management difficulties. At the Pennington Hotel, which has gone through five managers, tenants have gotten a restraining order against the current manager for racial epithets. Until recently, the hotel manager kept a list of tenants who rent post in the lobby—a practice one tenant described as "a Gestapo approach" that has led to the formation of a tenants association.

"Management," Callaghan says, "is hell."

WHY CALLAGHAN DOES WHAT she does is a question she has difficulty with. On one day, she'll say she goes to work to be with the people she wants to be with, that it's her neighborhood more than the one she lives in. On another day, when pushed, she'll point to her radical Christian beliefs.

"That a guy could come in drunk and pull a knife on me and be welcome back the next day is what's wrong," she says. "By experiencing forgiveness on a human level, maybe they'll believe it on another level. If they can believe human beings can be that forgiving, maybe they can believe what they learned long ago, that God is a loving and forgiving.

"But how can you believe that if no one ever has you a glass of water or a bathroom to use?" She grows self-conscious, worried that she sounds corny or self-serving. "Just don't make it sound like a Hallmark card."

Her friend Robert Wycuff offers something else. "Every now and then she tells me she's going to drive off and just forget the whole thing. But I don't think she really means it. I think she'd go crazy if she weren't doing something like that. She seems to thrive on turmoil and adversity."

For now, the future of Skid Row lies in a sort of political vacuum. Much depends on how Councilwoman Rita Walters, whose 9th District includes Skid Row, will vote as she faces taking over for Gilbert Lindsay, the powerful, whose championed economic growth. In recent weeks, Walters has been conferring with city planners about Skid Row, trying to chart a course. Will the area be rezoned to allow for more housing, as Callaghan would like? Or will the Skid Row population be dispersed throughout the city?

She waits for a direction to unfold, Callaghan is gearing up for her next political battle—installing portable toilets on every street corner. There is also the issue of working conditions for garment workers, whom she is trying to make aware of their rights by passing out leaflets at job sites.

But acquiring and financing more hotels is highest on her agenda. Whether the housing tax credit will survive in Congress next year, whether the state bond measure on next year's ballot will be approved (voters rejected the bond measure for low-income housing), whether the CRA will continue to support her efforts—she worries about all.

"Our biggest obstacles are ahead of us," she says, "not behind us."