

EDITORIAL: Inundated by Scenes of Homelessness, People Can Lose Sight of the Homeless

A statue of a homeless man who bears a striking resemblance to Westernized depictions of Jesus Christ was an obvious choice for the cover of our last issue before Christmas, but the meaning of that image is far more complicated than it would have been just a few years ago.

Before rampant homelessness became the No. 1 news topic for Santa Monica and West Los Angeles, the statue might have been a vehicle for awareness: a simple reminder of the basic humanity of those less fortunate than ourselves.

But for many who've experienced or witnessed negative encounters with the homeless — open drug use, public defecation and worse — the statue presents as tone deaf at best.

Of course people are aware of the homeless! By the beach, under freeways, along busy sidewalks, in public parks and right outside many people's doorsteps, homelessness is pretty much in your face 24/7. And with local governments taking a hands-off approach to managing encampments while espousing slow-moving housing and services solutions, public patience has worn incredibly thin.

"We've heard many opinions about the statue," an employee of the New Balance store directly behind the statue at 26th Street and Wilshire Boulevard tells us. "None have been positive."

The owner of O'Brien's Irish Pub, a few blocks west along Wilshire, tells us the statue has gotten mixed reviews— "Mostly negative!" — from customers.

“In light of the two major homeless attacks this week — the 84-year-old woman who was almost choked to death by a homeless man on Ocean Park Boulevard, and the 87-year-old doctor who was punched in the face and knocked unconscious by a homeless man near Reed Park — I feel that the statue depicting the homeless man as a ‘Jesus figure’ with a Solo cup is a misrepresentation,” he wrote. “I think most of my customers feel the same way, angered by the glorification of what is becoming a threat to our most vulnerable residents.”

Of course, not all homeless people engage in violent and antisocial behavior. And not all of those who are vocal critics of the outsized homeless presence in local neighborhoods would oppose assisting homeless individuals. More and more, locals tend to be sympathetic to individual homeless people while feeling increasingly outraged about the entrenchment of anonymous homeless hordes in their neighborhoods.

Earlier this month The Argonaut published a column by Tani Elliot, a 26-year-old homeless woman who’s four months pregnant, about being threatened and harassed by a Taser-wielding homeowner while sleeping on the beach south of the Venice Fishing Pier, close to paying work on the Venice Boardwalk and health care services at Venice Family Clinic. Nobody condoned those threats, but otherwise reaction was split. Online commenters, most of them anonymous, tended to be critical of Elliot’s choice to relocate (and expectation to be welcomed) to an area already inundated with homelessness and where not even many working people can afford housing. On the other hand, several people contacted The Argonaut privately to offer her cash, clothing and other assistance. Though grateful for those who reached out to help her and responsive to her critics, Elliot nonetheless wondered why nobody was discussing the reason she wrote the piece — to advocate not just for herself, but also for other homeless people who experience harassment but don’t have the presence of mind to speak up for themselves.

There was nothing wrong with the column, I told her. Rather, it appears our community's prolonged frustration with epidemic homelessness and its relentless quality of life impacts has worn people down to the point that people can have compassion for homeless individuals even as they are fed up with homeless encampments and furious about homelessness.

And maybe that's why the statue of a "homeless Jesus" at Wilshire Boulevard and 26th Street strikes a chord. The issue isn't that simple anymore, but sometimes it is.

— *Joe Piasecki, Managing Editor*



Artist Ed Massey hopes the statue's prominent location will provoke constructive dialogue about solutions for homelessness

Photos by TED SOQUI

SANTA MONICA RESIDENTS REACT TO ‘IN THE IMAGE’:

Daniel Jansenson, architect: “I like it very much. ... It’s a wakeup call for everyone. I think it’s generated a lot of discussion, and it’s a good discussion to have.”

Phil Brock, community activist and city arts commissioner: “I believe in supporting public art. Is it my type of public art? No. ... The cynical way of looking at this is it’s a ploy by the developer to get the city to allow him the opportunity to develop the site quicker. ... One question is: Are we acquiescing that the streets are going to become campgrounds?”

Rick Cole, city manager: “It’s unfortunate that the issue of homelessness is so polarizing. Art can be challenging, and that is even more true of art in public view, even if it is on private property. I hope the statue will cause people to think rather than react. But in today’s environment of instant feedback loops, it may be too much to ask that art spark a dialogue rather than evoke thumbs up or thumbs down responses.”

Diana Gordon, attorney: “I haven’t heard any reaction to it, positive or negative — unlike the anger and consternation over the loss of the Millard Sheets building mosaic that was on the site, without the required notice to the Arts Commission or informing the public.”

Jerry Rubin, political activist: “Art is a way to touch people in a way that words can’t. This is going to get people talking and hopefully into conversations that lead to positive solutions.”

Ashley Powell, event planner: “I’m still upset they took the mosaic down. How cool would these both be together? I think this is great, but I imagine the NIMBYs don’t like it.”

— *Responses compiled by Gary Walker*