

## In Sprawling Los Angeles, a Swap Meet Becomes a Community's CBD

BY CONSTANTINO DURAN | NOVEMBER 5, 2014



At the El Faro Swap Meet in Los Angeles, you'll find deals, jobs and geographic integration.

A sign on the front of the building reads “Se vende chingadera y media. Barato.” Idiomatically translated, it means “We sell all kinds of stuff. Cheap.”

It's no lie. At the El Faro Swap Meet in South Los Angeles you'll find everything from bongos to bibles. Your kid can get a pony ride while you get a tattoo, or you could relax with a heated massage while your

husband gets a haircut. Need a live chicken, a quinceañera dress, or some herbal remedies? They have it all. It's like a flea market on steroids.

When I arrived, a guy in an orange vest took my car keys and gave me a ticket stub. I asked how much parking was and he said, "Nothing, it's just for tips." I felt nervous leaving my computer in the car and handing the keys to a guy I wasn't sure was actually employed by the market, but it all happened in a flash — cars were lining up behind me, and the line had to keep moving. In an open space on the side of the building, adjacent to the parking lot, children played as their parents danced to the polka beats of a Mexican "banda."



The El Faro swap meet is located in a historically high-crime neighborhood, famous for the 1992 **Rodney King Riots** that killed more than 50 people and injured more than 2,000. It's been opened since before the riots, but was almost forced to close in the aftermath, when the city imposed new permit requirements for this type of market. According to the *L.A. Times*, the swap meet was ordered to close in August 1992 because it was found to be in violation of building and safety codes.

"About 150 swap meet supporters, wearing white visors festooned with signs that read 'Keep Our Jobs,' booed — and then condemned — the decision as one that will put hundreds of families in the heart of the riot-scarred inner city out of work," **reported the Times**.





Ironically, the primary opponents of the market weren't real estate or corporate interests, but vendors at a neighboring market, the Alameda Swap Meet, which made headlines a year later when a [gang shootout](#) there left two wounded and a security guard killed. Both swap meets remain in operation today, and though I only glanced at Alameda, I could tell it offers a similar environment to El Faro, right down to the pony rides and live music. Most patrons, it seems, spend their time walking around both establishments.

Swap meets like El Faro and Alameda were once thought to be, as the *L.A. Times* put it in 1992, "a cause of urban blight." Though they may seem exotic to U.S.-born citizens, they closely resemble the informal markets that exist throughout Latin America. Those markets do more than just sell goods and provide jobs — they fuse neighborhoods and populations, filling in the gaps between communities in sprawling cities like Los Angeles. Indeed, L.A. is built much like the cities many of El Faro's vendors and shoppers come from, a relatively low-density urban plan that cries out for communal spaces to create a sense of geographic integration.



“We’re here at least once a month,” said Ileana Palma, who drove 45 minutes to get here with her husband and kids. “We buy all the basics, the kids have fun, and the food is good and cheap.” I ask her if the drive is worth it. “It definitely is,” she says, and not just for the affordable shopping. “Everything is far in L.A. You drive a long time anywhere you go, and everyone lives far away. Here it’s nice, because there’s something for everyone, and it’s about the same as driving to my brother’s house, so when we want to all have fun as family, we can come here so the cousins [referring to her children and nephews] can all spend time together and become friends.”

Crime in Los Angeles has decreased significantly in the last 20 years, and while it can’t be said that South L.A. is the safest neighborhood, it offers a very different landscape than it did in the early 1990s. Back then, swap meet attorney Arthur K. Snyder, a former Los Angeles city councilman, presented the market as a boon to the neighborhood. Arguing in favor of keeping the swap meet open, he told the *L.A. Times* that closing it would leave hundreds of people unemployed. It is clear, walking around the swap meet on a Sunday afternoon, that Snyder’s point about the positive economic impact of these markets wasn’t far stretched.

“I remember when I was growing up, no one wanted to come down to this part of town, and everyone who could was moving out,” said Palma. “Now people like us come from all over the city and I think that can help bring the neighborhood back to life.”

*Photos by Constantino Duran*

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