MacArthur Park to strike up the band

A 30-concert series starts tonight and is aimed at helping revitalize an area that had become a drug and crime haven.

By Tiffany Hsu
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Los Angeles city officials are pinning their hopes for revitalizing troubled MacArthur Park on a 50-year-old band shell and its series of free summer concerts, the first of which will be tonight.

The city has spent nearly $2 million updating the stage in a bid to use the performing arts to help erase the park's reputation as a crime magnet. The concert is expected to draw more than 2,000 people, organizers said.

"The band shell has become that symbolic landmark of everything here that was abandoned by the city for years," said Councilman Ed Reyes, who was heavily involved in reconstruction planning. "This is about the rebirth of MacArthur Park."

The band shell, at the northwest corner of the park near 6th and Park View streets, now has dressing rooms and amplified acoustics, as well as ramps for the disabled. It is built like a smaller Hollywood Bowl, said Mark Marsikal of the Department of Recreation and Parks.

The concert series will kick off at 5:30 p.m. with a ribbon-cutting ceremony with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Colombian folk music by La Internacional Sonora Show.

Thirty free concerts — five a week — are planned for the summer season and will conclude Sept. 16, said Sharon Yazovski, executive director of the not-for-profit Friends of Levitt Pavilion-MacArthur Park.

The band shell renovation was a joint effort over several years by the city, the Mortimer Levitt Foundation and the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion.

The foundation, which restored the band shell at Pasadena's Memorial Park in 2003, offered seed money for band shell renovations around the country. The city covered the renovation costs, and the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion will pay for the concert series for five years through donations and funds from the Levitt Foundation.

Though reconstruction is not complete, Reyes said organizers wanted to get the band shell in operation as soon as possible while public interest in the project has momentum.

After the summer concerts end, the band shell will close until November. The arch will be reinforced and final touches applied to replicate its 1950s "glory days," Marsikal said. At least 50 concerts a year will be held there.

The park's original bandstand was built in 1896, city officials said. The existing band shell replaced it in 1957 and was heavily used for many years, Reyes said.

But since the 1980s, the city used the site as a maintenance facility and storage center until it was closed around 2000, Reyes said. Its infrastructure deteriorated as wood beams rotted and stucco chipped.

At the same time, MacArthur Park area was plagued by drug deals, prostitution and gang activity for years.

Those crimes drove families away.

"It took a lot of will — politically, economically and socially — to reestablish a priority, to take back control of the park for the community," Reyes said.

Renovating the band shell is only the latest step the city has taken to clean up the park, Reyes said. Lights and security cameras have been added to discourage crime, and the lake's water has been refiltered. Parts of the dirt landscape will soon be transformed into green turf.

Victoria Ramirez, who has visited the park since she was 11, said she planned to take her two children to the inaugural concert. She hopes the series will help replace the area's crime with culture.

"It's another place for the families to go," said Ramirez, 35, who lives several blocks from the park. The band shell "looked nice back then, but it looks much, much better now."

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