

## Ties That Bind 3: Strategies for the Preservation of Little Tokyo as an Historic Heritage Community

*Centenary United Methodist Church, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles*

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### Summary of Comments by Linda Dishman

Bill introduced Linda Dishman as Executive Director of the Los Angeles Conservancy, the largest local historic preservation group in the country. Linda helped to register Little Tokyo's north First Street into a National Historic Landmark (NHL).

Bill shared a popular sentiment back then questioning whether these old buildings were worth preserving and he gave the example of Far East Café, which evokes deep feelings and cherished memories by many and has the potential for making cross-generational connections. Irreplaceable historic buildings like the Far East have protections and are examples of the important work of the Conservancy and the leadership of Linda Dishman.

#### Buildings and Stories:

Linda has been thinking about how we can preserve not just the buildings but the culture. The Conservancy has been focusing mainly on old buildings and they need to think more on how to this.

L.A. Conservancy started in 1978 to stop the demolition of the Central Library in downtown. People back then didn't even know we had historic buildings, so they had to educate people about why buildings should be preserved. Little Tokyo has the advantage of being an NHL but now it needs to go beyond that.

Linda was very excited about the renovation of the old Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple to house the Japanese American National Museum. It illustrates how through diverse activities, buildings "reach out" to exhibit other parts of culture like food, dance, music, literature.

There are layers of history to Little Tokyo, such as African American contributions, that tell different stories within a community. All of these stories should be told. In the past, Mayor Hahn has talked about the Far East and how he grew up coming to the Far East Café, and Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard has spoken about how buildings can bring diverse people together.

When the Conservancy was working on the preservation of Santa Anita Park, Japanese Americans who had been interned at the racetrack did not want to participate in a press conference regarding its preservation but wanted that sad episode to simply "go away". However, the younger generation wanted to speak out against the injustice. It is important to celebrate history, but not to whitewash it. These stories must not "go away" but must become part of the vernacular.

Linda felt that LTSC has been doing a good job bringing old buildings back to life, which is important because empty or abandoned buildings are the most vulnerable to destruction.

The Conservancy has been working on a citywide survey of historic resources and she has been working to include a cultural component. She felt that Little Tokyo should add the diverse stories and unique stories of our community to these resources. Little Tokyo needs to pull together its own stories that impart and educate people about values that the community holds most dear.

The Conservancy is starting a new educational program called "Stories in the City". They chose Wilshire Blvd. as a spine of the city. They are doing tours of Wilshire, which they do regularly. They have quarterly tours of Little Tokyo as well. But one of the things they are doing is collecting stories of life on Wilshire. They are asking for contributors to share their memories about buildings on Wilshire. They have solicited feedback such as:

- How did the name "Miracle Mile" come into being? People wrote in tidbits and recollections on how this name to be.
- The tar pits was undeveloped in the early days and they got stories of how kids played in the tar pits and got covered with black goo. These stories would engage new children of today.

LT needs to craft its own stories to engage people and visitors and non-ethnics. These stories could be woven into the buildings, streets, arts, activities of Little Tokyo.

#### Planning Guidelines:

In Seattle, they actually regulate the kinds of businesses they want to have. They wanted streets that were vital and so they encourage sidewalk activities, not ban them. They want appropriate small business entrepreneurs and not the big chain stores and they actually restrict the national chains from coming in.

What kind of stores does Little Tokyo want and what cultural attractions?

- How many sushi stores are too much? In Carmel, they actually put a limit on the number of ice cream stores because of a plethora of such stores.
- How important is tofu and mochi to be made in LT?

The Conservancy tries to focus on the next generation and new uses of existing property. She acknowledged the gentrification taking place in Little Tokyo, but there is also opportunity with the available vacant land. Little Tokyo needs to be concerned about gentrification and let city officials know it. Little Tokyo is caught between two pressures of new housing being built and a large homeless problem in downtown.

She was happy that Ozomatli performed at Tofu Fest. Bringing in cultural diversity to Little Tokyo is such a strong statement as a part of downtown's overall future.

She mentioned Anthea's comments regarding work being done in response to the recent destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. There is a strong effort to re-build what is an historic cultural neighborhood in New Orleans so these developments should be watched closely.

Linda also urged that Little Tokyo convene representatives of other ethnic communities like Koreatown and Chinatown and stress the importance of stories and community values. These ties will be helpful for gaining more strength in pressing common goals of community preservation.