

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

Centenary United Methodist Church, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles

September 17, 2005

Summary of Comments by Gail Dubrow

Bill introduced Professor Gail Dubrow as one of the most knowledgeable experts on JA historic preservation. She is the author of "Sento and Sixth Place" in Seattle, Washington, which describes the need to ascribe cultural and community values to the significance of historic properties.

Gail explained that she had lived in Seattle for 16 years and is now in the Minnesota. She has worked on preservation of Seattle's Nihohmachi for many years. According to an issue of a Rafu Shimpo newspaper in 1937, there were 70 Nihonmachis listed but now, most are now gone.

Gail and her colleague Donna Graves are starting a new survey of old California Japantowns, and what were the forces that led to their disappearance. She is seeking insights from Nikkei on their perspectives of this question.

In the past, Issei settlements throughout the state led to a clustering of people, which became communities. She has studied the "cultural remains" of community, such as old bath-houses and former Japanese language schools. Many people today in the historic preservation field who do historic resources surveys don't know what to look for in terms of ethnic cultural places and buildings. Community institutions come in various forms and uses, often unfamiliar to outsiders who cannot recognize their significance.

How to preserve culture was a concern even to the Issei as they considered building gyms next to their temples and churches – how do you keep the youth connected. Community institutions became more family-oriented. Japanese language school buildings have occasionally survived though no longer used as language schools nor even having a community nearby.

The 1920's – 1920's were the heyday of the rise of cultural institutions and buildings as evidence of a high-level of activity. People were coming off the farms to build urban facilities and diverse businesses. This active community life was all interrupted by the World War II internment. Loss of people and loss of property sapped vitality of these communities. People faced hostility as they tried to re-build after the war. Businesses could not be re-established and the base of support had moved. Internment had a big impact on J-town's survival. In Tacoma, the property remained but the people did not return after the war.

There were wider forces at work that also contributed to the demise of J-towns. The rural to urban to suburban shift was a major contribution. People faced a decision to come back to J-town or make the move to the suburbs. All of America was involved in this move away from the cities. There also factors such as the rise of the supermarket over the small markets which include the ethnic markets.

Also urban renewal reduced J-towns in size and activity, as well as other large-scale forces. National and local growth policies had an impact. International investments had an impact too. The cities planning processes were top-down and did not engage communities in determining their future. Downtown revitalization, urban renewal and building of freeways, often in old under-represented neighborhoods like Japantowns destroyed many communities. People must seek to re-build Japantowns for new shopping and visitor experiences.

EMPOWER THE COMMUNITY TO SET IS OWN COURSE:

Gail feels that nonprofits are trying to preserve what they can – and build a residential base. They are trying to gain community control of J-town and its future. Seattle's International District does a good job of this. San Jose has an active community effort. This is the key force – to expand community capacity to plan for its own future. Preservation of affordable housing has led to saving historic buildings based on need.

The community must move beyond physical planning to cultural resources. Preserving traditions and vitality of community life too. Damage to ethnic communities by racism, immigration laws have had long impacts.

- The remaining surviving Japantowns in California have a particular responsibility and mission to preserve these resources. Who will be the stewards of these places?
- Who will raise their voices to preserve historic resources outside such historic communities like the Holiday Bowl in the Crenshaw area?
- What are the forces at work today? I need your help to identify these.
- Should we oppose new investments in LT? Especially if they don't respond to the scale and historic heritage of the area? How do we negotiate new developments? Are there other issues at work?

QUESTIONS

1) Will new residents moving in to Little Tokyo come into conflict with the current direction and focus of resident concerns? Will they support the historic preservation work?

Answer: There are such conflicts in every community with new developments. What is the long-range mission of the community and how do new projects fit in? Seattle has discussed whether they want market-rate housing. New produce markets won't come in to a neighborhood without a proven residential base. New development creates conflicts between different groups like the Uwajimaya project in Seattle; Uwajimaya is a robust market that serves the larger community – would you want to keep them out?

2) How strong will JA identity endure within changing demographics and multi-racial leading to multi-identities?

Answer: Identity and generational change always occur. The JA children have their own ideas about their futures and identities. Many children do not want to continue ethnic businesses so this is a community challenge. How will this change be managed? Holiday Bowl is an example of the decline of the Nisei cultural community. How do you balance change and yet try to maintain tradition?

3) Is there a conflict between traditional culture versus community culture? Sometimes girls have to choose between basketball practice and cultural dance practice. Girls have to choose and they choose basketball. Not cultural but it definitely is community.

Answer: This time-use conflict includes skateboarding and etc. We will need to discuss this more in the workshop. Again, are there strategies to balance?

We need to build capacities to plan for and confront and resolve these conflicts. We need to preserve cultural practices and traditions within fixed and real contexts. Making plans, design guidelines, making noise, alliances with preservationists and other resources are all part of the mix. What do we want the future to be? Where should our planning capacity head? What outcomes do we want to see?