

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 Anthea Hartig

Bill Watanabe introduced Anthea Hartig, the Western Regional Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Anthea greeted the audience and conducted a quick survey of the generations of Angelenos in the crowd. She hoped to convince everyone to be activist-preservationists, i.e. activists who actively think about how to preserve community and place. Anthea felt that Bill has successfully created a framework for recognizing Little Tokyo as a historic place and compared the work to building a house and that the discussions at TTB3 are about how and what should fill that house.

In Anthea's view, preservation is a prism providing many ways to understand the variety and complexity of historical landscapes. Social justice is one example of an angle of historic preservation. Although preservation has not caught up with social and cultural shifts, Anthea has seen some shifts in historiography, or the way in which history is written. In particular, the idea of a monolithic American story is finally giving way to the understanding of multiple narratives.

One of the things that makes the Los Angeles region both amazing and frustratingly undervalued is that our spaces often have an overwhelming number of stories—a single site may have been occupied by several different ethnic groups at different times—that may include very traumatic events. Our sites are all the more engaging and all the more important to save.

In Anthea's experience, ethnic communities are often sites of incredible community-building because they are concentrated, whether by institutional racism or by choice. Vehicles such as educational and religious institutions, and other buildings where cultural activities take place enrich the sites' sense of shared heritage. Anthea shared a few examples from an exhibit of temples in Hawai'i as well as the Bok Kai Chinese Temple in Marysville.

Ethnic communities have complex histories because they are places of beautiful things and painful things. They are often hotbeds of movements toward a more just and equitable place. Contestations ranging from generational differences to the uprisings of 1992 may arise. Change, adaptation, assimilation and retention happen simultaneously, making ethnic communities vibrant, but difficult for preservationists to think about where or how to take a snapshot of that space in history.

Anthea gave background information about the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is the largest private, nonprofit membership-based organization dedicated to saving historic places and revitalizing communities nationwide. The National Trust was chartered by Congress in 1949 and provides leadership and resources in education and advocacy as well as seed grants for physical projects.

The National Trust operates from the understanding that when historic buildings and neighborhoods are torn down or allowed to deteriorate, part of our past disappears forever and we lose that history that helps us know who we are—we lose the ties that bind us. Through the efforts of Gerry Takano, the Trust's Western Office launched the Mosaic of Western Heritage program to promote awareness of the contributions made in the West and to the West by a diverse population. The initial focus of the multi-year initiative was on sites associated with Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage.

Lately, the National Trust has been focused on addressing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina by pushing Congress for homeowner tax credits and other forms of disaster relief for impacted historic properties. Anthea noted that Katrina has brought the confluence of race, place and class to the fore. The Western Office recognized that this confluence is an important part of the ethnography of the Western Region, which comprises the 6 continental western states, Alaska, Hawai'i and the Pacific Island territories.

Anthea mentioned some of the National Trusts work with the Japanese American community, including internment buildings at Poston, AZ. She showed pictures of the Castroville Japanese School, which got grants from the National Trust and Proposition 12 from the State. It is the only physical reminder of the Japanese American community that once thrived there, and will primarily be used by Latinos, making it another example of the layering of place.

Anthea has also been involved with the preservation of the Harada House in Riverside since 1994 when she worked as the city's preservation planner. The Harada Family purchased the and placed the house in their children's names 1915 due to the California law prohibiting aliens from owning land. The Harada's rights were upheld in a legal battle, which was one of the most important cases challenging the Alien Land Law. She was excited to see the preservation of the Harada House gaining momentum.

According to Anthea, the key to good projects and working with communities is having a high quality of resources, not necessarily in an architectural sense but in depth of cultural history, and having people committed to saving and continuing to use existing resources. Seattle is a model city in preservation. Residents, planners and academics have successfully captured and sustained community in the International District using various tools.

One of the most important lessons and tools from the example of Seattle is historic surveys. It is difficult to be proactive about preservation without identifying your resources. Unfortunately, cities don't have money for such surveys and the Nation Preservation Fund does not give grants for surveys anymore, but the National Trust recently gave a grant to San Jose Japantown for a historic survey. SB 307 was a great start in the right direction and Anthea made a pitch for reinvigorating the survey process.

Anthea showed a different example from the Cambodia community in Chicago. Although the Cambodian American Heritage Museum is not an actual historic site itself, they have come up with creative ways to commemorate and tell the story of the Killing Fields. Many ethnic communities are finding ways to engage the pain they've experienced. Japanese Americans still struggle with this too.

Another resource besides the National Trust is the National Park Service and the information they maintain online about ethnic communities across the country. The Little Tokyo community should continue to engage City Hall in conversations about specific plans, conditional use permits, overlay zones and other planning tools for preservation.

Anthea closed with an affirmation, saying that she thinks the community has done a remarkable job of capturing both the spirit and ties of Little Tokyo in creative, multi-modal ways from children's programs to housing. She encouraged everyone to continue talking to each other and sharing across disciplines, time, place and identity.