

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

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Introduction to Historic Preservation workshop

Presenters: Ken Bernstein, Director of Preservation Issues
Los Angeles Conservancy
Lamber Geissinger, Deputy Historic Preservation Officer
Los Angeles Department of City Planning

Summary Recommendations:

1. Conduct a historic survey of Little Tokyo and tie it in with the Los Angeles city-wide survey.
2. Keep protections for Little Tokyo's historic district and buildings strong by maintaining community support.
3. Train new advocates in historic preservation.

Historic Sites

Ken had a number of interesting and informative handouts for the group.

Ken and Lambert stated that the process of getting a site recognized as an historic site begins with the City Planning Department, who does the initial investigation of the merits for recognition.

There is a 5-year Los Angeles city-wide survey being planned at this time which is funded by the Getty Foundation to categorize all the historic sites in the City. Ken suggested that Little Tokyo may want to do its own historic survey and tie it in with the City-wide effort. He thought this might make a good internship project.

Controversy Over Historic Sites

The Conservancy is in a constant struggle between preservation efforts and those who would oppose it (such as developers). Ken stated that the preservation movement is very dependent on the will and support of community groups, and Lambert also stated that community groups like the Los Angeles Conservancy provide the impetus.

Ken also warned that historic designation is not an absolute protector of a building; if the will of the neighborhood or of community support changes, then an historic building can be torn down by the city. It is important for Little Tokyo to maintain community support for its historic district and buildings in order to keep those protections strong.

The Neighborhood Councils now being formed in the City may be a new player in the historic preservation movement as they become a stronger neighborhood voice. It would be important to help train these new advocates in the value of historic preservation.

Movement Is Growing

The Historic Preservation movement is still growing. There were 700 historic monuments in the City in January 2004, and today, there are 823. The National Trust was established in 1949, and the City established the Cultural Heritage Ordinance in 1962. The LA Conservancy, which is now the country's largest local preservation chapter, was formed in 1978 and thus is less than 30 years old.

The tremendous construction surge in downtown Los Angeles, the site of many old buildings, has been both positive and negative in terms of preservation. Many old buildings have been renewed through loft conversions along Broadway, for example. Also, there are now neighborhood preservation districts and cultural corridors that are sensitive to these issues.

Lambert said that LA City Cultural Heritage staff only numbers two people and needs to grow to keep up with the needs.

(notes by Bill Watanabe)