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AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/48t229mh>

Journal

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 10(2)

ISSN

1545-0317

Author

Nakaoka, Susan

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.36650/nexus10.2_23-36_Nakaoka

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Peer reviewed

Research Article

Cultivating a Cultural Home Space: The Case of Little Tokyo's Budokan of Los Angeles Project

Susan Nakaoka

Abstract

Little Tokyo is a unique case exemplifying the evolving nature of community economic development in Los Angeles. In-depth interviews with key community leaders identify the need for the importance of a place-specific, contextually relevant development approach in order to maintain an ethnic presence in the neighborhood. Faced with new threats of gentrification, the complications of a global economy, and a new phase of transit-oriented development, community members are banking on a multisports complex in Little Tokyo to rejuvenate a sense of cultural home space for the now geographically dispersed Japanese Americans.

Introduction

In this issue, Lena Sze describes the needs of Manhattan's Chinatown to redefine and maintain a sense of ethnic presence in the neighborhood. In Manhattan's Chinatown as well as Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, issues of working-class displacement and gentrification are of pressing concern. In reality, these historically Chinese and Japanese ethnic enclaves are multiracial and multi-ethnic neighborhoods in which economic development strategies range from small business development to tourism and place promotion initiatives. These two case studies indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all policy paradigm for Asian American communities. Instead, a sensitive development approach to Asian American communities should recognize the shared sense of historical attachment to place that undergirds the contested nature of development. The notion of home space, a powerful sense of ethnic attachment to place based on historical, actual, and/or perceived experience, is operating in the policy ideas for these communities.

The important role that place plays in claiming rights to urban space has long been discussed in the urban theory and place-making literature (Anderson, 1987; Harvey, 1973; Hayden, 1997; Soja, 1999). Dolores Hayden's seminal *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1997) argues that cultural claims to space are often tied to the memory of marginalized and displaced communities. Moreover, she suggests that identity politics (around race, gender, class, and sexuality) are pivotal to issues related to urban design, history, and the built environment and cannot be separated from those discussions.

In proposing the idea of spatial justice, Edward Soja (2010) asserts the need for a definitive spatial perspective in discussions about changing geographies and politics. Hilary Jenks (2008) eloquently elaborates on this as it relates to Los Angeles: "Japanese Americans' claim to Little Tokyo is essential not only to their collective identity as an ethnic group enduring the shifts of domestic racial relations and global political and economic flows, but also to their efforts to understand the national political significance of their own history and their contemporary responses to questions of national belonging" (242). The meaning and memory of place is especially salient for communities of color, often historically subjugated to segregation, displacement, and other types of involuntary movement.

Los Angeles's Little Tokyo

Little Tokyo is 125 years old, If [people] see Little Tokyo as historic, that we've contributed to building of community then it is a visible and physical reminder that we didn't just get here, we helped LA become what it is . . . that's why it is important to keep this as a historic symbol, as a piece of the fabric of LA. (Watanabe, March 2010)

The Little Tokyo area of Los Angeles, one of three remaining Japantowns in the United States, is entering a new phase as it transforms the meaning of the historic ethnic neighborhood. Years of planning and community development have resulted in a unique ethnocultural milieu of services, museums, a theater, restaurants, and mixed-income housing. These place-based approaches have been relatively successful in revitalizing and preserving the neighborhood, but community development in the new global economy

will need to counter the pressures of continued trends in gentrification, shifts in industry, and the sociospatial realities of Japanese Americans. As the meaning of the cultural home space shifts, unique and interesting strategies to community economic development are manifested. The dreams of a continued ethnic presence as a cultural neighborhood in Little Tokyo are embedded in the fruition of the current flagship development project, Budokan of Los Angeles (BoLA). Interviews with key community practitioners provide a glimpse into the strategies, values, and design of this new wave of community economic development.¹

Other scholars have extensively documented the history and meaning of Los Angeles's Little Tokyo (Jenks, 2008; Kitano, 1993; Smith, 2006; Takahashi, 1997; Takaki, 1989; Toji and Umamoto, 2003). Important to this history is the neighborhood's origin as the location of the ancillary services needed for the Japanese immigrant labor force during the early 1900s. A very complete ethnic economy evolved as Japanese immigrants were excluded from mainstream services and as restrictive land laws governed ownership and use of land (Smith, 2006). The World War II incarceration and subsequent resettlement of Japanese Americans in the area provided for swift demographic shifts. Although Little Tokyo never returned to its prewar vitality, it remained a safe space for ethnic residents and businesses.

As most Japanese Americans moved out of the area and into the suburbs during the period from the 1950s through the 1970s, urban renewal efforts targeted the supposedly "blighted" area being scouted for the new Parker Center police station. Community activists, through such groups as the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization and the Japanese Welfare Rights Organization, worked to save low-income housing. The residents, many of them elderly, had never left Little Tokyo or had moved back because of lower rents and access to ethnic foods and cultural institutions. Despite their efforts, investment from large Japanese companies led to the elimination of much of the low-income housing that existed in the area (Watanabe, January 2011).

During the 1980s and following years, displacement and gentrification left a mixed group of residents, including low-income Japanese American seniors, diverse groups of Asian and Latino immigrants, and African Americans, alongside neighboring com-

munities of artists and young Asian professionals. Japanese restaurants and cultural institutions remained in the area, but they were no longer the center of ethnic life because similar amenities were also spread across other clusters of Japanese American neighborhoods in the suburbs. Cultural institutions such as the Japanese American National Museum, the Union Center for the Arts, and the World War II war memorial were solidified at the same time amenities catering to those living in the artist or financial districts emerged. Now, ethnic specialty stores are located next to yogurt shops and Starbucks, while many of the remaining low-income residents work in the low-wage sectors of the neighboring toy and garment districts. Parking lots, that were left after Japanese investors abandoned plans for large developments, are transitioning to low- and market-rate housing developments, attracting yet a new mix of professionals and artists.

Currently, the Little Tokyo area residents are ethnically diverse—23 percent white, 27 percent African American, 42 percent Asian (with 19% of the population of Japanese descent and 13% of Korean descent), and 20 percent Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although the dispersal of the ethnic community to outlying suburbs may trigger a shift to move toward people-based approaches to building a community, a specific, place-based approach may still be the answer. Community development efforts are now being directed at reinforcing the ethnic authenticity of the historic space by attracting Japanese Americans back to Little Tokyo as visitors and consumers of their ethnic culture. This strategy is unique in two ways. First, it pushes Richard Florida's idea of the creative class to consider that attracting visitors (not necessarily residents) can be enough to create economic development.² Community leaders are hoping that these ethnically authentic visitors are an amenity that can attract potential residents to the area. Second, because of the history of oppression and displacement of Japanese Americans, the need to maintain place is almost defensive. A need exists to assert the contributions and commitment of Japanese Americans to Los Angeles, so that their right and entitlement to the city and to citizenship will never again be questioned as it was during World War II.

Longtime community activist and Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) board member Alan Nishio (2011) hopes that centering

Japanese American culture in the neighborhood does not mean shunning the non-Japanese residents: “How we evolve as a community is not going to be tied to being Japanese. The community will be based upon our values, culture and our network of associations. We are trying to build a new paradigm that centers on an evolving Nikkei culture and values that is inclusive of diverse residents in our Japantowns, residents from Japan, other racial groups, LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] populations and others who make up the diverse community that is Los Angeles.”

The Little Tokyo Service Center

Founded in 1979, LTSC has surfaced as the key player driving development from within. Formed as an outgrowth of the community groups fighting to maintain low-income housing in the area, LTSC initially focused on providing direct social services to the Japanese and Japanese Americans in the area. LTSC’s first low-income housing projects were city collaborations to address blight. For example, the city of Los Angeles approached LTSC to take over the dilapidated San Pedro Firm Building (Watanabe, January 2011). Currently, it owns and operates more than five hundred units of affordable housing, and operates the Asian Pacific Islander Small Business Program (1,000 micro- and small businesses), the Little Tokyo Wireless project, the Union Center for Arts, and tenant services (e.g., counseling, job referrals, and the “Discovery” technology center).

LTSC is at the forefront of organizing to preserve the unique character of small businesses, historic landmarks, and cultural institutions of the neighborhood. The idea of a creative milieu is defined by Charles Landry (2000) as a place where “face-to-face interaction [among a critical mass of entrepreneurs, intellectuals, social activists, artists, administrators, power brokers, or students] creates new ideas, artifacts, products, services and institutions and, as a consequence, contributes to economic success” (133). In his popular book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida (2003) identifies characteristics such as creativity, individuality, diversity, and merit, which define a new class of worker and city resident.

Attracting these residents, by offering cultural amenities, diversity, and authenticity, could be a mechanism to spur economic development. The LTSC strategy of bringing a concentration of ethnics to the neighborhood, thereby creating an ethnocultural mi-

lieu, provides an interesting twist to the idea of the creative class. Once racialized as the enemy and perceived as a threat, Japanese Americans are now the amenity, being recruited to bring back their ethnic faces in an effort to create culture and consume their heritage.³

According to Bill Watanabe, the executive director of LTSC, the organization is responding to the need to revitalize the neighborhood to a place “where people live, work and try to do normal things.” To date, development efforts created a scene that includes an art center, a restaurant/bar, and historic preservation. Under Watanabe’s direction, the LTSC strategy is “to avoid a fight with strong economic forces” (e.g., influx of Korean immigrants, gentrification, and other demographic changes), while retaining a sense of ethnic community that attracts new residents. Watanabe implies that rather than counter some inevitable changes based on global and regional economic forces, LTSC will steadily push for the maintenance of cultural continuity within this new era.

The “Gym Project”

Watanabe cites a 1994 Community Redevelopment Agency community meeting as the origins of the idea of a community gymnasium in Little Tokyo. In response to plans for economic development of the area, a clear message from young families was voiced at the meeting—a gym would bring them back to Little Tokyo on a regular basis. LTSC began to devote staff time to the project during the late 1990s. Scott Ito was involved in these early planning stages and (after a brief absence from LTSC) returned as the BoLA project director in 2008. Thus, LTSC has been expending valuable staff time, event planning, and community organizing resources on the project for more than fifteen years.

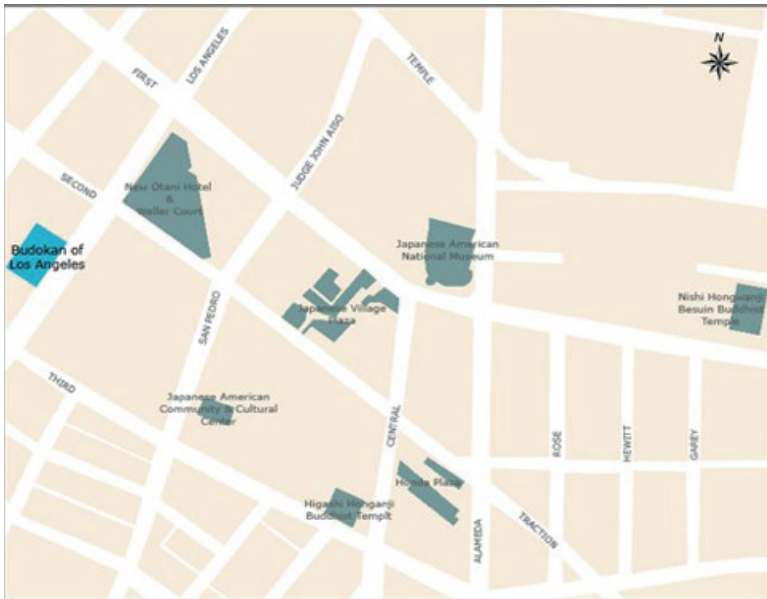
To outsiders, the idea of youth basketball as central to community economic development may seem far-fetched and downright odd. However, the importance of ethnic-specific sports leagues in the history of Japanese America would not be contested by community insiders.⁴ It is estimated that the basketball leagues have as many as ten thousand youth playing year-round in leagues and tournaments and that the volleyball leagues involve approximately three thousand adults/young adults (Watanabe, 2008). Ito (2011) fondly remembers, “For me, like many of my Japanese

American friends, playing in the Japanese American basketball leagues was our main form of exposure to Japanese American culture while growing up.”

The potential economic impact on the Little Tokyo area could be huge. Estimates include local annual benefits of more than \$1,200,000, which includes \$1,081,857 in job creation (Little Tokyo Service Center, 2008). This figure excludes the secondary benefits from hotels, restaurants, and shops that would experience increased revenue on a weekly basis, with some larger profits from large tournaments and events. LTSC estimates that BoLA will attract more than one hundred thousand visitors annually.

The current plan deems BoLA a thirty-six thousand square feet “multipurpose sports complex” with room for meeting space, basketball/volleyball courts, and a fitness center. Hopes to become the “premier venue for martial arts” are brewing as Watanabe suggests that there is no other comparable space in the United States catering to this sports genre. The cultural ties between martial arts such as karate, judo, and kendo provide a unique opportunity to

Figure 1. The location of the Budokan of Los Angeles. Courtesy of the Budokan of Los Angeles, 2009.



blend these distinctly Japanese sports to the Japanese American complex. The case statement in the BoLA brochure envisions this reality by stating the project “is the realization of a community dream to revitalize the 100 plus year old Little Tokyo as a unique gathering place by bringing the energy of community sports and recreation to Little Tokyo” (Little Tokyo Service Center, 2010).

Services to the local community are also included in the plan. Because there is limited green space or other opportunities for recreation for Little Tokyo residents, BoLA provides a new option. LTSC has committed to approximately five thousand hours of facility time for low-income youth and families. This would include open court time, after-school programs, and senior recreation classes. The estimated annual service value for health and fitness for local residents is \$127,024.⁵

Since 1994, LTSC efforts around BoLA have been focused on community organizing, fund-raising, and the daunting task of securing a site for the complex. Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto (2003) describe the internal conflict and power dynamics inherent in an initial battle over a potential site that was located next to the Geffen Contemporary Museum, the Japanese American National Museum, and the Go for Broke monument to the revered 100th Infantry Battallion/442nd Regimental Combat Team and the Military Intelligence Service veterans of World War II. “Similar to the earlier period of redevelopment in the 1970s, the vital question arose concerning who has a right to shape community development in Little Tokyo” (Toji and Umemoto, 2003, 37). Most disturbing to some were the heated debates and visual images that included elderly Japanese American veterans in their military uniforms “against” Japanese American youth in their basketball uniforms. Thus, although this development is emerging from within community, there is not always a monolithic view of who should occupy and design authentic spaces.

In September 2008, the Los Angeles City Council approved the new site for BoLA on city-owned property located on Los Angeles Street, at the Southwest perimeter of Little Tokyo. The approval was seen as a major victory, as LTSC had previously considered twenty sites and offered unsuccessful bids on four sites. On May 17, 2011, the city council voted to approve the lease. Ito (2011) commented that this was “a historic achievement for Little

Figure 2. Architects rendering of the Budokan of Los Angeles.
Courtesy of the Little Tokyo Service Center, 2009.



Tokyo, because we now finally have a site for the project, which the community has been waiting for many, many years . . . LTSC will be receiving a 25 year lease, with the option to renew for another 25 years.” Construction is slated to begin during the spring of 2012. Ito (2011) details the next phase of the development, “the next challenging aspect has been to prepare a capital campaign in the middle of one of the most difficult economic times since the Great Depression. . . . With this in mind, we are currently making adjustments to our campaign strategy.”

Watanabe and Ito are committed to seeing the project to its completion and for Watanabe, who started LTSC on scant grant funds in 1979, BoLA may be his final and crowning achievement. Speaking about the importance of attracting young Japanese Americans to Little Tokyo, Watanabe (January 2011) states, “If they come here, they are here. It doesn’t mean they live here—if they work here, shop there, play basketball here, it will feel authentic. To the visitor from Kansas it will have a ‘Japanese American feel.’ I don’t think we can ask for anything more than that.”

In the 2003 edition of *AAPI Nexus* about community development, Toji and Umemoto highlight the unique needs of Little Tokyo and suggest that ethnic continuity be considered in community development. Nishio, however, hopes that a new para-

digm will not only include ethnic continuity but also will include all of the diversity of Los Angeles in its plans. Nishio (2011) states, “We are trying to build something new. What other models exist? Chinatowns and Koreatowns have an infusion of ethnic residents due to continued immigration. We are trying to build a community that is real and valid for fifth, sixth and even seventh generation of Japanese Americans as well as others who live here. The Los Angeles Budokan is an exciting way to further this vision.” The project symbolizes the creation of a neo-Japanese American identity, one that is tied to cultural values and history while embracing the arts, sports, panethnic restaurants and entertainment, and racial diversity that occupies the space of Little Tokyo.

Because Japanese Americans have been racialized as the “other” and have suffered social and economic discrimination as well as mass incarceration based on this status, the idea of maintaining an ethnic presence and preserving a historical place in the history of Los Angeles can be viewed as a social justice project. The history of displacement is also at the forefront of community member’s minds. The latest threat to the area surrounds two public transportation initiatives—the Regional Connector, an underground rail line that will connect the various corners of Los Angeles County and includes construction and a station in Little Tokyo, and a high-speed rail that would facilitate transportation from Northern California. In talking about a community asset mapping project, Evelyn Yoshimura (2011), Director of Community Organizing for LTSC, says “the Regional Connector is the primary issue that Little Tokyo Community Council is dealing with right now. It is resulting in heightened probability of hyperdevelopment in Little Tokyo. Our mapping and plan are tools, weapons, for the community to hold on as much as possible.” Other transit-oriented development could become an issue as the construction of a statewide train occurs. Thus BoLA could also position Little Tokyo as a major gathering place as it prepares to be one of the busiest hubs for high-speed rail in California.⁶

The once humble “gym project” has turned into the promise of an impressive, premier multisports venue. LTSC has gone from small social service organization to a significant player in the development of downtown Los Angeles. As BoLA prepares to break ground for construction, several questions remain. How

can development respect and support the (non-Japanese American) low-income community that now resides in Little Tokyo? Is cultural maintenance a viable community economic development strategy? Does the drive to retain authenticity of the neighborhood displace the needs of current low-income residents? Finally, can the attraction of the ethnic community be the amenity that invigorates Little Tokyo—if they build it, will they come back?

Conclusion

Los Angeles's Little Tokyo has survived multiple phases of its evolution as a relevant ethnic enclave. Current trends in development ignore the complex, place-specific realities of urban communities as well as issues of equity and concern for low-wage workers. The ethnic enclave is sometimes treated as an amenity in which diversity and eclectic dining create authenticity and recreation cohabitates with art and fashion. In the current global economy, New York's Chinatown and Los Angeles's Little Tokyo have emerged as potential centers for this type of development. However, to the policy maker simply seeking to implement a set of generic policies around the creative class, the history of oppression, social justice organizing, and ties to the historic ethnic group are not considered.

Place-specific development is more likely to be effective when it includes contextualized approaches that are internally driven as a result of cultural, historic, and socioeconomic realities of a given geography. To the outside observer, these approaches may look only like a multisport complex or a proposal to retain a specific industry. However, to the group that calls the space home, these approaches reflect long-standing place-based desires to recapture and redefine what it means to belong.

Acknowledgments

Gratitude goes to Lena Sze for her helpful edits and willingness to collaborate, and to Bill Watanabe, Alan Nishio, Scott Ito, and Evelyn Yoshimura of the LTSC for their time and commitment to community. For their advice and support, Leo Estrada and Lois Takahashi of the UCLA Urban Planning department. Special gratitude goes to the George and Sakaye Aratani Graduate Fellowship.

Notes

1. Interviews and informal conversations with four key individuals engaged in the BoLA project: Bill Watanabe, Executive Director of LTSC; Scott Ito, Budokan Project Director; Alan Nishio, longtime community activist and LTSC board member; and Evelyn Yoshimura, Community Organizing Director of LTSC. These interviews took place between November 2010 and October 2011. The process included in-person interviews and phone conversations. Interviews with Watanabe, Ito, and Nishio lasted between one to one and a half hours long, and include follow-up correspondence by e-mail and phone. Additional research included an examination of LTSC internal reports and planning documents and a brief phone interview and in-person discussions with Yoshimura.
2. Since his 2003 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida has influenced city economic development policy. Central to his ideas is the notion that providing amenities (such as bicycle paths, cultural institutions, and restaurants) can attract artists, scientists, and other members of the creative class, which in turn will spur economic development.
3. Scholars have critiqued Florida's conclusions and point out the complexities of new economy and the creative class. Allen Scott (2006, p. 4) points out the darker side of focusing solely on the creative class, "There are, then, considerable inequalities in the cities where new-economy sectors have flourished, and especially in major metropolitan areas, in regard to incomes and access to the amenities of urban space at large. This point needs to be kept firmly in mind as we begin to explore more fully the notion of the creative city and the privileged role that highly qualified and well-paid workers play in its efflorescence."
4. For more information on the history of sports in the Japanese American community see Brian Niiya, *Encyclopedia of Japanese American History: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present* (1993) and *More Than a Game: Sport in the Japanese American Community* (2000).
5. Estimate from the LTSC *Economic Impact Report* (2008). Watanabe and Ito suggest that LTSC will continue to make efforts to include local residents in the hiring and programming of the facility. This figure could increase as the plans to implement such programs progress.
6. Nishio pointed out that the construction of a high-speed rail that connects cities with significant Japanese American populations (esp. San Francisco and Fresno) will create more economic opportunity for Little Tokyo and more potential for BoLA as a center for sports tournaments. The California High-Speed Rail Authority is developing an 800-mile high-speed train system that is scheduled to begin construction in 2012 with the Los Angeles station located within one mile of Little Tokyo. See <http://www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov/home.asp> (accessed January 23, 2011).

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SUSAN NAKAOKA is a doctoral student in department of Urban Planning at UCLA and is Director of Field Education in the Department of Social Work at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Previously, she was a faculty member of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa and has more than fourteen years of community development experience in low-income neighborhoods.