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Author

Kohaya, Brian

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Improving Community Engagement in Little Tokyo

Brian Kohaya, MURP • 2024

Issue

Little Tokyo is a culturally diverse, multigenerational community located in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles. Its 140-year-long history contains many conflicts ranging from the government-sanctioned imprisonment and forced removal of the community during World War II, to the loss of land during the redevelopment era. In the mid-2000s, LA Metro began a decades-long process to construct the Regional Connector, a significant realignment of its rail infrastructure that included the reconstruction and relocation of the Little Tokyo/Arts District Station. In 2018, Metro initiated a joint development process to build on top of the station and selected a developer for the project in 2020. Little Tokyo community members, organized by the Little Tokyo Community Council (LTCC), opposed the selected developer and cited six reasons why Metro failed to prioritize community desires. Namely, their concerns revolved around the evaluation and selection process, development team composition, affordable housing, project design, ground floor space, and parking. Ultimately, Metro decided to withdraw its offer and, as of June 2024, the station remains without additional development despite opening in June 2023 (Figure 1).

In response to the situation in Little Tokyo, this study investigates the community engagement process to help planners address past injustices and more effectively work with communities moving forward. These planners must recognize that the field of urban planning is responsible for the forceful removal of communities under the guise of “urban decay,” and is a direct cause of why some communities remain vulnerable and impoverished today. For many, this history has not been forgotten. Such historical trauma continues to

live on, degrading trust between affected communities and public agencies. In future developments, these agencies must understand this trauma as they work with communities to build a better future.

Study Approach

Data within this study was collected through two methods: archival research and interviews. Archival documents came from a mixture of LTCC’s archives and Metro’s public records. The documents reviewed included meeting notes, letters, private correspondence, and Metro guidelines and planning documents. In regards to interviews conducted, interviewees were selected due to their involvement in the joint development process. All participants held either a leadership or decision-making position and were affiliated with organizations, including the Community Redevelopment Agency, Little Tokyo Community Council, Little Tokyo Service Center, Metro, and East West Players.

Key Findings

- » **The memory of past injustices remains alive and well among community members in Little Tokyo,** many of whom were direct victims of policies such as redevelopment, eminent domain, and redlining. One interview subject even recalled the displacement of their grandfather’s business during the redevelopment of Civic Center, forcing the business to move to another part of Little Tokyo.
- » **Greater discussion is needed regarding height limits, considering various factors such as visual aesthetics, compatibility with and proximity to surrounding buildings, site limitations, the feasibility of building affordable housing, walkability to transit nodes, and**



Figure 1.

The Little Tokyo/Arts District Station, a site that remains unactivated following conflict over proposed development. (Photo credit: Brian Kohaya/2024)

other factors. Intentional conversations must be had with local stakeholders regarding sustainable development in Little Tokyo.

- » **Community entities such as Little Tokyo Community Council must continue to be a space where ideas can be openly discussed.** LTCC's origins lie within the spirit of collaboration and debate; and although many groups had different ideas and proposed strategies about working with Metro during the joint development process, organizations ultimately came together under the LTCC umbrella to oppose an unfavorable plan.

Recommendations

- » **Clarify the criteria and respective weight of each criterion that will be used to judge future development proposals.** Phrases such as "reasonable and financially feasible" should be clearly defined, especially when it comes to financing affordable housing.
- » **Create evaluative criteria that considers different uses across multiple sites within a set of complementary sites within a community.** For example, if parking is better suited for one site and affordable housing for a complementary site, this should be reflected in the criteria and its weighting.

- » **Ensure that developers are knowledgeable about the history and cultural nuances among the major population groups within the community** to avoid offensive use of imagery in murals, public art, architectural designs, and other features of the built environment. Often, these decisions are accidental but they still contribute to a larger sentiment that the developer does not understand the neighborhood and the people who live and work within it.
- » While parking may be available in the area, it may be located far from events and commercial areas. **One should consider the distance visitors must walk, specifically at night, and the high crime rates of Downtown Los Angeles.** Broader safety considerations must be made regarding the high number of seniors who frequent Little Tokyo, specifically acknowledging the high number of religious institutions and senior services located in Little Tokyo.

For More Information

Kohaya, B. (2024). "Welcome to Little Tokyo! Please take off your shoes" A Case Study on the 2018-2020 Little Tokyo Arts District Station joint development process in Los Angeles, California (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hs0r43v>

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