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Sento at Sixth and Main: Preserving Landmarks of Japanese Heritage

SL Would you speak to Sento and Sixth? When I read it I was just incredibly moved by the depth of the research. ALS I think this is a prime example of research that is completely

collaborative. This is important to the experience of groups that are not necessarily visible or that have been marginalized. Particularly with Japanese Americans, there is a lot of history

that is completely hidden or destroyed. It's just a very extensive collection of materials that show everyday life. SL And at the end it talks about the implications for designing

A woman bathing, chin buried under the still water, folded washcloth balanced delicately on her head, eyes shut to the world. The image, on its cover, is typical of the portraits of people and places presented in *Sento at Sixth and Main* by Gail Dubrow and Donna Graves. The book uses such intimate views to re-imagine the sense of calm, of ritual and normalcy, that imbued the everyday built environment of Japanese-American communities in the early/mid-twentieth century. In seeking to recapture such moments and places, the authors hope to bring home racism's effects on place—not only in the development and existence of certain institutions and neighborhoods, but in the process of selecting places of architectural and historical significance to remember and protect.

As most Americans are now aware, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 led the federal government to order the removal of all Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. Their forced relocation to isolated inland internment camps caused once-vital communities, from Seattle to Los Angeles, to be scattered—their property seized, their heritage irreparably endangered.

Since the 1980s, various attempts to recognize and redress this injustice have largely involved commemorating and memorializing the experience of relocation. Indeed, in the National Register of Historic Places internment camps are the most frequently listed landmarks associated with Japanese Americans.

Dubrow and Graves agree such sites are powerfully important to U.S. history, but they see them as inadequate representations of the people displaced. The tragic power of internment is still evident in *Sento at Sixth and Main*. But it is conveyed by unfolding a deeper story of exclusion

and discrimination, and by making us care about places that once sustained a community, but which have now been lost.

By questioning what has been set aside as representative of Japanese-American history, their book also raises the issue of how places of historical significance are identified. In particular, Dubrow and Graves criticize official preservation initiatives for failing to adequately include the views of represented communities. Only such a policy can combat the “lens of our cultural biases,” they write.

A Surprising Discovery

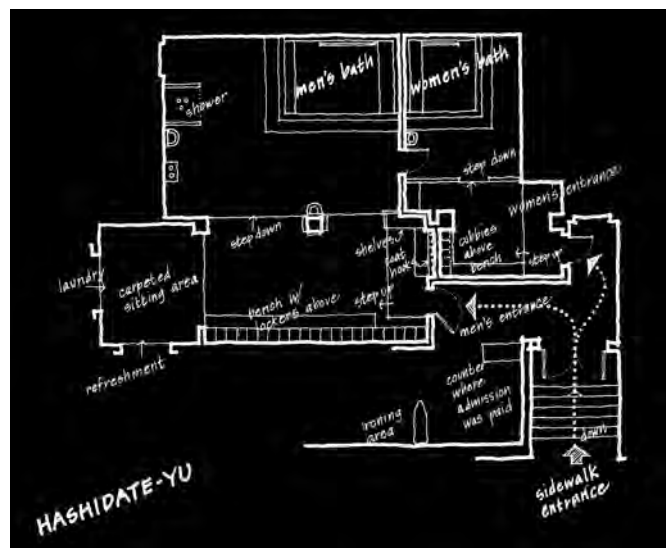
Sento at Sixth and Main evolved out of Dubrow's involvement with planning projects to protect and document Japanese-American cultural resources at both the state and local level. A professor of history at the University of Washington in Seattle, she had read of the hundreds of bathhouses built by Japanese immigrants, but she had never seen evidence of one. Finally, someone pointed her in the direction of the Hashidate-Yu in the basement of Seattle's Panama Hotel, one of only two such spaces still known to exist. That was when she realized she had some work to do.

“What struck me [was] that such an extraordinary resource could exist in the International District, right at the corner of what had been Japantown, and that it had never been documented in all the preservation planning work done.”

Such bathhouses were once known as *sento*: thus the title of the book. But as the project grew, it came to include research on nine other historic buildings/sites of importance to pre- and postwar Japanese American communities. Each was chosen for specific reasons of local significance, but the intent was also to provide an overall cross-section of cultural space. As sites of quotidian rituals and gatherings, the sites further hint at the importance of vernacular buildings to the fabric of a city or culture, and the ease with which such cultural traces can disappear.

In some cases, these places of Japanese-American identity came into being indirectly as refuges from discriminatory attitudes. Holiday Bowl in Los Angeles, for example, was one of a limited circuit of bowling alleys open to Japanese Americans—a reaction to rules which, until the 1950s, made bowling leagues ineligible for awards if they had nonwhite members.

In other cases, patterns of exclusion were more direct. For example, Dubrow and Graves document how worker housing at the Selleck Lumber Camp (near Tacoma, Washington) once included a special segregated district



Left: Plan of the sento in the basement of Seattle's Panama Hotel.

Opposite: Men's bath at the sento.

and commemorating the spaces. JC I didn't see that. SL Take a look at the end. They are talking about trying to give physical form to these memories. That is part of the struggle of this work—to give it design form. Whether or not you agree with the forms, a real imperative is to reclaim

these histories in ways that are meaningful and beautiful and important. JC When Venturi and Scott Brown did this type of thing it was much more emphatically related to design and planning practices. ALS Brown's work is primarily design and spatial analysis. It doesn't involve talking to people,

trying to realize how people utilize these spaces, how people feel about them. SL If we take as a criterion that work be forward-looking, I think both [the two research award winners] are important. It may be that the design implications of the second [Sento] aren't as clear, but I think they are just



for Japanese-Americans. They also discovered that the houses in this district were so poorly constructed they had not stood the test of time. And so, while the houses of the more privileged white workers were currently under consideration for national landmark status, the important contribution of Japanese Americans to the Northwest lumber industry was in danger of being lost.

The effects of the war-era internment are immediately evident with respect to many of the sites examined in the book. An important reason is that once their populations were removed, many Japanese-American communities never regained their previous density or significance within their respective cities. When residents of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles returned after the war, for example, they found their neighborhood swallowed up by “Bronzeville,”

now home to thousands of African Americans, prohibited from living in white areas.

The scattering of the Japanese American population also meant a dilution of demand for businesses serving specifically Japanese-American needs. And after the war a stigma came to attach to these businesses. Before internment, Japanese Americans had destroyed personal documents and artifacts to avoid being suspected of loyalty to the Japanese government. Now, upon returning to their former communities, they avoided culturally specific rituals and places that might draw unwanted attention to them.

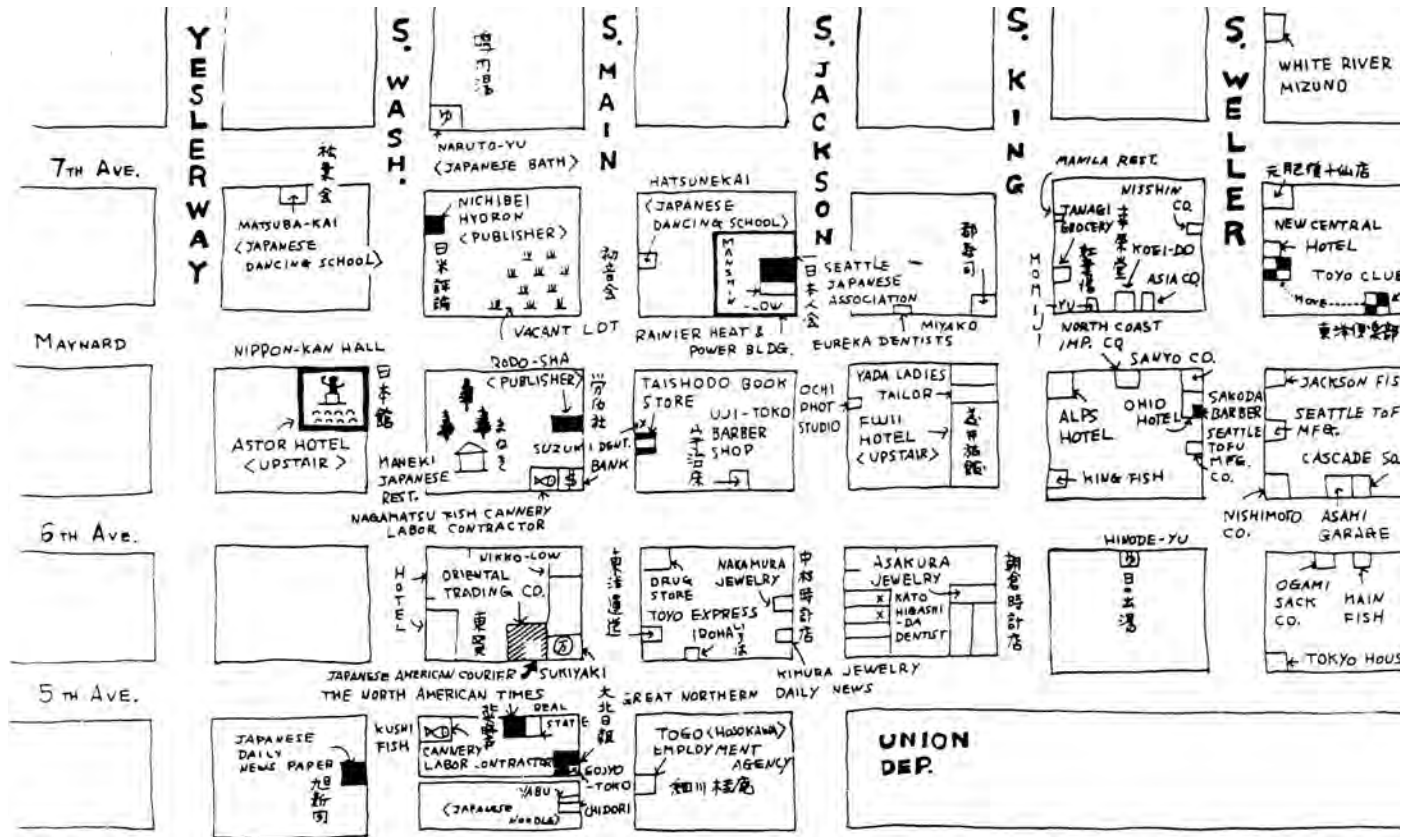
A Collaborative Method

By documenting key building types and communicating the meaning of these places in an evocative way, Dubrow

as important. ALS It concerns making things visible. A larger population may pass through some of these spaces and have absolutely no idea that they were once significant for people of a different color or race. Either by policy or bulldozers, these imprints of ethnicity have been eliminated from

the landscape. SL I know this research on Holiday Bowl is setting it up as a possible landmark site in Los Angeles. So here is a direct design and preservation outcome that is incredibly important to a community. Without this in-depth historical and ethnographic research, we can't begin to

reclaim these places and the cultural imaginations that created them. WM We preserve high-style buildings by significant architects, but there's an awful lot about cities that gets forgotten. The importance of books like this is to make you aware of the ordinary places that make up a city.



and Graves help readers personally identify with this history of displacement. In their work the authors used such traditional methods as archival research and field investigations. But the source of much of their most important material was extensive public involvement. This effort included both collection of individual oral histories and meetings with community groups.

Dubrow recounts how her first impulse in researching the history of the Japanese-American community in Seattle was to hold a meeting to introduce her mission and ask for help. But she quickly realized this was the wrong approach, since she was not known to the people she wanted to meet. Moreover, the power of historical neglect, which had endangered these sites to begin with, was so strong many people no longer cared for them. They were “those old places”—not socially important in the present; and it was certainly not worth digging up painful memories to help a stranger.

At this point, Dubrow changed her strategy and began to assert her position as a stranger—albeit one with credentials as a historian affiliated with the University of Washington. Rather than hosting her own meetings, she began contacting already-established community groups and asked to be placed on their agendas. She then used these existing forums

to present her case, emphasizing it as part of a larger struggle to discover, document, and protect places of importance to Japanese Americans. At this point, “people came out of the woodwork,” she says, and *Sento at Sixth and Main* came to incorporate hundreds of individual memories.

In this sense, the book embodies a truly collaborative, multifaceted approach to understanding the significance of place. Its hundreds of individual stories give body to the book’s idea of historical memory. We see pages from an etiquette book and illustrations from a supply catalogue; we hear about comfort foods of salted plums and pickled bean curd; we are presented with photos of schoolgirls doing calisthenics, and of tins of grease paint for the opera.

Parts are comic. Quite a bit is tragic. But all is tied together by a desire to re-establish a sense for the full spectrum of daily life. In this account, place is not a stage for action to occur, but a confluence of ritual, of community networks and cultural identity.

In this way, we come to understand how Seattle’s historic *sento*, Hashidate-Yu, is more than a defunct bathhouse. When women who grew up bathing there visit today, they giggle at their first-ever sight of the men’s baths. And when men see the size of the women’s areas,



they are shocked by the inequality of the space distribution. But the visits unlock memories of a daily cycle of social activities that once revolved around the site.

The importance of preserving such places as repositories of historical memory is further brought home by the trunks of belongings left behind at the *senjo* by families leaving Seattle for internment. Even today, dozens of these trunks remain unclaimed. A Japanese American museum of has expressed interested in moving these to Los Angeles. But much of the power of visiting this site comes from seeing these abandoned fragments of the past.

“You can know that Sixth and Main was the historical epicenter of Japantown,” says Dubrow. “But if all historic signage is removed, all the artifacts, it’s hard to understand viscerally how this was the case. The presence of resources in these places allows those who lived there to say ‘This was the place I grew up.’ And it allows the present visitor to understand how Japanese came, settled, and thrived. We can begin to reflect on the significance of our loss.”

Intangible Qualities of Place

In their comments, jurors noted how *Sento at Sixth and Main* offers the type of design research that is invaluable to historical preservation efforts. Without such an understanding of their less tangible attributes, important places will continue to suffer neglect. Even though they are outstanding examples of vernacular buildings, these important sites of Japanese-American identity are not one-of-a-kind

Opposite: Map of important sites to the Japanese-American community of Seattle in the 1920s and 30s.

Above: Japanese miners at the Selleck lumber camp.

buildings of overarching significance—the type of sites usually nominated for National Historic Landmark status.

Dubrow says this battle to recognize the historical importance of the fabric of a city is “one of the real challenges of our time.” And she sees herself as an activist in efforts to push preservation policy in a more inclusive direction. Several jurors applauded such efforts to identify and preserve examples of important vernacular environments, no matter what ethnic or cultural group they might be associated with.

To date, Dubrow’s and Graves’s work has also had concrete effects. Among the specific policy results of the research that Dubrow can point to is that the Panama Hotel has made it through several levels of review for National Historic Landmark nomination. But in addition to informing specific preservation initiatives, Dubrow sees her book as a tool for public awareness. The process of research itself has involved Japanese-American communities to such an extent that many are now active advocates for historic preservation.

In this regard, it has been particularly gratifying for her that the Seattle Arts Commission bought and donated 1,000 copies of *Sento at Sixth and Main* to educators, policymakers, and members of the community who participated in the research. To be able to present copies of the book to those who cooperated in gathering this history seems the best reward. The book takes us beyond “those old places” to tell a story that is funny, spooky, sad. In a word, accessible.

— Laura Boutelle

All images courtesy of Gail Dubrow and Donna Graves.