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The Paradox of Dispersal:

Ethnic Continuity & Community Development Among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo¹

Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto

Communities have attached individuals to the city by offering proximate objects with which they could identify, a domain where they could care about others who cared about them, and means whereby they could exercise control over the larger world.

—Howell S. Baum, *The Organization of Hope*

The topic of community development implicitly poses the question of “Community development for whom?” At its most mundane level, community development involves the allocation of land uses. But because these decisions usually commit a parcel of land to one use and thereby preclude most other uses, the deeper significance of such allocations is that they do much to determine the activities and social relationships that will be enabled or constrained there. Thus there are winners (whose social goals are enabled) and losers (whose goals are excluded). Since community development ostensibly benefits a given “community,” it follows that the “community” to be served by “development” should be specified. There can be a huge array of definitions of “community.” None are neutral. All support some practices or policies and oppose others. Many ethnic communities have served as contested terrain upon which development struggles have been waged. Throughout U.S. history, they have been sites of resistance to racial and ethnic oppression and, as Baum (1997) states, “a means whereby they could exercise control over the larger world.” The historic Japanese American community of Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles is one such example.

This essay addresses central issues of community development, particularly the question of “Community development for whom?” by analyzing the character of community development

as the outcome of political and economic struggles based on power relations between the Little Tokyo community and forces external to it, as well as those within the Little Tokyo community, particularly along the lines of the class hierarchy among Japanese Americans. Internal divisions are nested within external relations, as different sectors within Little Tokyo have each sought different external allies.

Los Angeles' Little Tokyo, situated adjacent to the downtown civic center, was one of the first and largest Japanese American urban communities to form in the U.S. Over the last 100 years, its physical boundaries and land uses, as well as the human activities upon the space, have drastically changed. While it once was a bustling center of civic, economic, political and cultural life for Japanese immigrants and their second-generation offspring from the early 1900s to World War II, the community underwent wholesale change following wartime mass internment and mid-century urban renewal.

From the late nineteenth century until World War II, Japanese Americans created Little Tokyo as a means to survive within the intense restrictions of a segregationist society.² It was then a residential enclave, the center of the regional ethnic economy, and the social and cultural center of the ethnic community. During this period, marked by racial segregation and exclusionist policies, Japanese in America had very limited economic opportunities. The establishment of Little Tokyo as the hub for a complex ethnic economy based on networks of small agricultural producers throughout the region illustrates their struggle to develop one of the few economic niches available to them. Many class conflicts within the ethnic community (e.g., between the owners and workers of the larger farming operations, produce wholesale companies and groceries), were apparently muted by the externally imposed strictures of segregation. Japanese immigrant laborers relied on the narrow niche of the ethnic economy, imposing a heavy dependence on co-ethnic business owners. Although, for example, Issei, Kibei, and Nisei labor unionists organized the produce markets, the market owners maintained a firm hand because alternatives to employment outside of Japanese-owned businesses were scarce. Japanese Americans on both sides of the class divide sought outside allies, as the businessmen reached out for acceptance by the city's ruling circles and courted Japanese government support, and as labor activists

sought allies in organized labor and the political Left. But the efforts of both were limited by anti-Asian racism permeating American institutions of that era—from labor unions to major political parties.

World War II was a landmark moment for Japanese Americans. It was also a major turning point in the evolution of Little Tokyo. The mass internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during the war led to the decimation of Japanese communities (or “J-towns” as they were often called). Little Tokyo was literally abandoned upon the mass removal following President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, which authorized the military to forcibly remove all those of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. In response to racist hysteria fomented by politicians and to intense lobbying by agricultural producers who viewed Japanese farmers as competitors, the U.S. government rounded up virtually all Japanese Americans who were living on the West Coast and confined them in concentration camps for up to four years. During this time, Little Tokyo became home to a growing African American population whose major center was located several miles to the south and became locally referred to as “Bronzeville” (Daniels 1993 and Yokota 1996).

After the war, many Japanese American residents of Little Tokyo returned, though both the population and the geographic range decreased drastically. Postwar animosity against Japanese Americans persisted, and they continued to face ethnic violence, housing discrimination and exploitation in a discriminatory job market. Some who feared racial hostilities chose not to return to rural areas, but to relocate to “J-towns” where they sought refuge in their numbers and greater assistance from mutual aid organizations. Many businesses in Little Tokyo were reestablished along with many cultural and social institutions. However, the residential community would never return. Little Tokyo became more of a way station for those seeking better opportunities in the post-war economic boom and new opportunities afforded in the post-civil rights era.

The post-war dispersal of Japanese Americans was fairly rapid. This was partly due to the concurrence of two trends: the coming of age of the Nisei generation and the most robust and steady period of industrial growth the nation had ever seen. This was particularly true in Los Angeles as the manufacturing and in-

dustrial sector quickly expanded. Young Nisei entered the labor market as a whole generation during the post-war boom that carried a wave of Americans into “middle class” status. Combined with the gains made as a result of the Civil Rights movement such as the end of legal residential and employment discrimination, Japanese Americans were well-poised to benefit, and probably did to a relatively greater degree than many other historically subordinated groups due to the temporal coupling of demographic change and economic expansion. The post-war economic boom and suburbanization carried many inner-city dwellers further out to the “edge cities” of their time. In the case of Japanese Americans, many migrated to former farming communities where there was an established presence of Issei and Nisei farmers. The Little Tokyo population during the 1950s and 1960s moved outward to areas such as Monterey Park to the east, the Crenshaw district to the west, and Gardena to the south with some migration further southward into Orange County. Among Japanese Americans in Los Angeles, it was those with the least mobility who tended to remain in Little Tokyo. As Little Tokyo’s population declined, so too did its physical boundaries as the remaining residents and businesses concentrated in a shrinking geographic area.³

Despite its residential decline, Little Tokyo remains a center of activity among Japanese Americans throughout the region. It is home to numerous non-profit groups that serve or strive to represent Japanese Americans and Asian Americans regionally or nationally. These include the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, Little Tokyo Service Center, Japanese Chamber of Commerce, East-West Players, Visual Communications, Japanese American National Museum, Japanese American Citizens League, and Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (formerly National Coalition for Redress and Reparations) among a host of others. It is the major venue for annual programs and festivities, such as Oshogatsu (New Year’s celebration), Kodomo no Hi (Children’s Day), Asian Pacific American International Film Festival, and organizational fundraisers such as the Tofu Festival and Chili Visions. It is a common gathering place for taiko performances, calligraphy competitions, art exhibits, historical and pictorial exhibits, educational programs, craft fairs, political rallies, and various commemorations and ceremonies related explicitly to Nikkei (those of Japanese ancestry). The *Rafu Shimpo*, the country’s most influential and popular

Japanese American daily newspaper, continues to publish from Little Tokyo where it began in 1903. The Nisei Week festival, first started in 1934, continues to bring tens of thousands of Nikkei to Little Tokyo every fall. Various churches still attract a largely Nikkei congregation, including the Nishi Hongwanji Temple, Centenary United Methodist Church, Higashi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, Union Church of Los Angeles, and the Maryknoll Japanese Catholic Center. Some of the churches also house Japanese-language schools and hold well attended religious activities, such as the Buddhist *Obon* festivals. While there are other cultural centers and related activities located in the outlying areas,⁴ Little Tokyo continues to be the hub for region-wide Nikkei activities as well as pan-Asian events.

In this article, we posit that the post-World War II developments demonstrate a “paradox of dispersal.” On one hand, as Japanese Americans experience greater mobility and disperse regionally, the early spatially concentrated centers such as Little Tokyo become less important in the daily matters of livelihood and existence. Yet, as the ethnic population becomes spatially less concentrated, these historic centers become ever more important as sites for the maintenance of ethnic identity and a sense of ethnic community. Little Tokyo’s symbolic significance as a center for the widely dispersed Japanese American population grew because it ceased to “belong” to any particular segment of the community since relatively few remained there. But because most who grew up in the region had some experiential or family connection to it, the place remained a common touchstone regardless of mobility. As the population dispersed, ethnicity was its shared significance rather than any lived territoriality. Organizations situated there served the larger Japanese American community and were seen as being all-inclusive, as Little Tokyo was “neutral” of any local or suburban domain. Its growth as a “gathering place” for the broader Japanese American population can be seen as an emergent space of ethnic connectivity and continuity amidst distance and diffusion. With the establishment of many ethnic institutions there, its meaning continues to resonate to those who are generations detached and who may not have any direct memory of living or working in the place itself.⁵ Little Tokyo’s existence as an historic center grants an ethnically bounded continuity. It is as if activities and institutions in that space become part of an historical legacy that is

reinforced, not only by the place itself but also by what it has come to signify.

We further argue that the course of community development in Little Tokyo in recent decades has been shaped by the nested nature of community power relations. Class and socioeconomic hierarchies within ethnic communities can often be seen in the dynamics of internal conflicts within communities. But these differences within the Japanese American community are usually not played out apart from external influences. In fact, many of the most severe conflicts among Japanese American organizations have historically been linked to actions by the government or other non-Japanese American institutions in pursuit of their own goals. In other words, the power struggles within the ethnic community are often nested within larger political, economic or cultural struggles in the broader region or nation.

Conflicts over the vision and goals of community development have emerged between Japanese Americans active in the affairs of Little Tokyo, differentiated largely by class and social status. Some groups caught in the crossfire of development controversies had ties to non-local, non-Japanese American business, social, and political organizations. These extended networks, whether initiated from within or without, were often utilized to advance the interests of external entities that planned development in Little Tokyo regardless of desires expressed locally among Japanese Americans. Various factions within Little Tokyo were themselves active in creating networks among allies in other social sectors with which they felt political or ideological affinities.

There are three major forces influencing the history of community development in Little Tokyo. These include Japanese corporations, the region's elite development regimes, and local Japanese American organizations. Many Japanese corporations and powerful business and political elites pursued their development agendas through partnerships with local Japanese American organizations. Rather than taking public form as direct conflict between "outside" development interests and local Japanese American organizations, conflicts often manifested between Japanese American organizations themselves, as local organizations fronted the initiatives of more powerful entities and gave them the appearance of having solid local ethnic endorsement.

Post-War Corporate-Dominated Community Development

The post-war years ushered in the age of city redevelopment or “urban renewal,” as it was euphemistically called, and opened the door to Japanese corporate capital. Enabled by the Housing Act of 1949, “urban renewal” was a national campaign to ostensibly revitalize “blighted” central city areas by offering monetary subsidies to businesses that bought and built on property within locally designated redevelopment areas. This act authorized local governments to establish local planning agencies with the power of eminent domain to forcibly acquire property in redevelopment areas. The bill gave no authority to residents living in those areas to share power in any decision-making regarding the future of their neighborhoods. Los Angeles City officials established the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) as the local planning agency and launched an urban redevelopment plan for the central city. The original futuristic sketch included a monorail system that linked an “International Zone”—including the historic ethnic communities of Chinatown, Olvera Street and Little Tokyo—into a circular loop that connected these tourist and commercial “amenities” to the civic center and financial district. The grand vision was to remake the downtown area into a world-class financial center poised to capture economic growth in the post-war era of U.S. global dominance.

One of the first large-scale projects during this period was the expansion of Parker Center, the headquarters of the Los Angeles Police Department. This led to the displacement of over 1,000 residents in the 1950s, with the eviction of a large block of land that comprised the northwestern section of Little Tokyo adjacent to City Hall.⁶ Many more evictions would follow, further displacing the remaining largely low-income and aging residential population.

In 1970, the seven-block, sixty-seven-acre core of Little Tokyo was officially designated as the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project Area under the supervision of the Little Tokyo office of the CRA (referred to hereafter as the LTCRA).⁷ The redevelopment project was approved as Japanese corporate investments in real estate and commercial development projects in Southern California were accelerating. The Kajima Building was one of the first new large-scale developments in Little Tokyo, financed by the then fourth largest construction company in the world and built in 1967. Little Tokyo

was becoming an entry point for Japanese corporations as they ventured into the Southern California regional real estate market.⁸ With the assistance of the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles and hundreds of thousands in tax incentives and subsidies, the flow of investment capital rose. The New Otani Hotel and Weller Court development projects followed and were also developed by Japanese capital.

These developments marked a turning point in Little Tokyo's transformation, as Japanese businesses envisioned a commercial area for Japanese tourists and for the growing number of Japanese corporate employees stationed in the region. Small, locally based Japanese American business owners grew concerned that they may be forced out of the area with Japan-based corporate development and increasing rents. One source of tension between Japanese corporate businesses and local Japanese American businesses was the CRA's selection of the developer for the first LTCRA project in 1972. The LTCRA chose Kajima International, Inc., a large Japan-based multinational corporation that had proposed to build the New Otani Hotel, over several local Japanese American consortiums that included Nisei landowners of the proposed site. Redevelopment policy favored the developer that would deliver the greatest tax returns, as the increase in tax revenues, or "tax increment monies" as they were called, were recouped by the CRA for future development projects. Many were incensed that longtime members of the Japanese American community in Little Tokyo were bypassed in the selection process over "outside" Japanese corporate interests. This raised the question as to whether Little Tokyo should be built according to the image of Japanese multinationals or the local business owners, residents, and workers who had an established role in its historic development.

The eviction of residents and community organizations to build the New Otani Hotel and Weller Court in the 1970s prompted a wave of protest. Many Asian American Movement activists took up the cause to stop evictions in a campaign to preserve Little Tokyo as an historic Japanese American community for workers, low-income residents, small businesses and community organizations. The Little Tokyo Anti-Eviction Task Force (1976) was formed and, later in 1976, the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization (LTPRO) was established. LTPRO was largely a third-generation or Sansei activist organization that worked with tenants and many of the com-

munity organizations to physically resist evictions and to win concessions from the City's Community Redevelopment Agency.⁹ Under the slogan of "maintaining Little Tokyo as an historic Japanese American community," LTPRO demanded the development of low-income housing, affordable space for community organizations, adequate relocation benefits for small businesses and a greater voice for workers, residents, and small-business owners in the planning process. In 1979 another group that formed as a result of these evictions was the Little Tokyo Service Center, when various social service groups were evicted from the Sun Building. Many community leaders and activists from this period would remain or return to further build community-based institutions thirty years later.

Meanwhile, a community-minded group comprised mainly of Nisei had been focusing their efforts on the 301-unit Little Tokyo Towers low-income senior housing project which was completed in 1975. Others raised funds for the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC), completed in 1980. Community organizers and activists also secured some concessions in their fight against continuing evictions. Through public protests and negotiations, evicted former tenants of the Sun Building won subsidized rents in the JACCC, which would otherwise have been unaffordable to them. Approximately half of the evicted organizations eventually moved to the new facility. There were also a number of developments led by local investors, including some Japanese American investors and their partners. Some of these include retail complexes such as the Japanese Village Plaza, Honda Plaza, and Yaohan Plaza.

The machinations of Japanese corporations in collaboration with local government officials created internal tensions within the local Japanese American community. Particularly in the midst of evictions, divisions emerged between those who allied themselves with Japanese corporate desires and those allied with long-time community organizations and residents displaced by development. Landowners and developers enjoyed increasing property values, while tenants faced increasing rents. And many Japanese corporations established a visible regional headquarters while well-established community organizations lost affordable space. To quell protests, Japanese corporations began to make sizeable donations to local efforts such as the building of the JACCC. But there were

long-term obligations that accompanied these monetary contributions. Financial dependence pushed programming heavily toward Japanese performing arts brought from Japan to “bridge east and west,” particularly in the JACCC’s early years. In fact, the JACCC’s name in the Japanese language, which translates as “U.S.-Japan Cultural Center”—connotes a different meaning than “Japanese American Cultural and Community Center,” its name in English. The Japanese name emphasizes its role as a bridge of understanding between two countries as compared to a cultural and community center for a U.S. population sharing a Japanese ancestry. These and other controversies sharpened the questions of who should have a voice in the development of this community, whose vision of community the City should honor, and who should be given the platform to speak on behalf of the affected community.

Thus, the period following World War II and through the height of urban redevelopment was a time of transition that remade Little Tokyo. The modernist wave of the 1950s “City Beautiful” movement converged with the globalization of international finance capital. Little Tokyo ceased to be a residential center, and by 1980, the total number of Japanese American residents dwindled to less than 1,000,¹⁰ with almost half living below the poverty level.¹¹ Instead, Little Tokyo began its incarnation as a business, finance and commercial center geared largely for Japanese corporations. Though Japanese multinationals dominated land development during this period, several locally led developments were also completed. This period was marked by a tension between Japanese American and Japan-based business interests paralleled by a simultaneous conflict between low-income residents and the dominant corporate interests. Strategic alliances between residents and locally led businesses were tenuous, as locally led business interests straddled between sympathies toward their longtime associates and the lure of financial benefits posed by Japanese corporations. The onslaught of Japanese capital would have continued were it not for the crash of the Japanese economy in the 1990s. At the end of the century, the burst of the Japanese “bubble economy” left one corpse that lay as a reminder of the aborted process—a parking lot nearly a full city block in size facing the JACCC where the Japanese corporate Toda project was once slated for development.

Community-based Development from the 1980s to 2000

By the late 1980s, the Japanese American community was strong enough to more assertively shape Little Tokyo community development in its own image. Fifty years after release from the camps, it had rebuilt financial resources and had acquired the political voice, skills, and cohesiveness to create larger scale community institutions. Many Japanese Americans reached middle-income status and were integrated into the larger regional (and thereby global) economy, no longer reliant on an ethnic enclave economy. These institutional and financial resources increased their ability to affect municipal decision-making regarding new development.

However, the ability of community-based institutions to determine the character of future development hinged on their ability to agree upon common goals and work cooperatively, despite class and other differences. During the 1980s, many local organizations were able to unite in a broader effort to preserve the last remaining historic section of Little Tokyo and to build several important institutions on the block. This marked an important turning point in the substance and character of community development.

By the 1980s, there were only a few remaining areas in the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project area available for further development or renovation. One area was a megablock mixed-use parcel in the northernmost section. The south border of this parcel was First Street, a major corridor through Little Tokyo. The north side of First Street (hereafter referred to as First Street North) contained the last remaining cluster of buildings from old Little Tokyo still left untouched by redevelopment.

It was along this block that Japanese American community organizations initiated efforts to preserve its historic character. In 1995, a decade-long effort led to the recognition of First Street as an historic district on the National Register of Historic Places.¹² Locally initiated developments along First Street, along with several other projects, signified a rise in the level of power and organizational capacity among community leaders and community-based non-profit organizations. These organizations grew to play a prominent role in community development, as the economic recession in Japan and the spatial diversification of Japanese investments slowed the surge of Japanese corporate investment and created momentary space for other development alternatives.

The history of controversy over the development of this megablock and the southern side of the block along First Street began as Los Angeles City Council member Gilbert Lindsay began to explore possible uses in the early 1980s.¹³ The City owned ninety percent of the megablock, including four buildings in the historic row along First Street.¹⁴ Sitting across from Parker Center police headquarters, the block included a large parking structure, a large warehouse structure, a row of commercial and residential buildings, and two churches. Various community organizations put forth proposals for use of the row of city-owned buildings on First Street as possible sites for their activities. These proposals generally complemented each other, and a consensus soon developed among the various segments of the Japanese American community, some of whom had previously been at odds.

Political consensus leading to the designation of First Street North area as an historic district emerged for a number of reasons. One factor was the coalescence of a broad range of community associations in Little Tokyo along with the rising influence of Asian Americans in local politics. Another factor was the banding together of Japanese American small and medium business owners on the block who recognized the value of working together and gaining an historic district designation. Another political and social influence was the historic movement among Japanese Americans and their supporters for redress and reparations, culminating in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. The lessons learned from this movement had an empowering influence on many Japanese American community organizations, including some involved in the efforts to develop First Street North (Kitayama 1993 and Maki et al. 1999). Finally, the LTCRA had accomplished much of what it wanted to in Little Tokyo, having increased the tax base, garnered business investments and raised land values, perhaps making it open to proposals that would do more to enhance its public image.

According to the plan, the new Japanese American National Museum (JANM) would be built in the old Nishi Hongwanji temple building. The old Union Church building would house two renowned Asian American community organizations in partnership with the Little Tokyo Service Center: Visual Communications, a media arts organization, and East-West Players, the nation's oldest Asian American theater arts organization. The businesses located between the two churches would remain, and their build-

ings would be preserved to maintain their historic character. Housing activists were assured that the low-cost housing units above these businesses would remain. In 1982, the City of Los Angeles granted a five-year renegotiable lease with the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) for what was then seen as a temporary facility located on the mega block, suddenly giving an organization without any significant social or cultural ties to the Little Tokyo community a substantial position in the area.

The vision began to come to fruition in 1986 when the JANM secured its first major planning grant of \$750,000 that later led to a commitment by the LTCRA for \$1 million toward the rehabilitation of the old Nishi Hongwanji Temple building. During this period, Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee (LTDAC), an advisory group to the LTCRA that included some of the business owners on the First Street row, worked closely with the Los Angeles Conservancy to submit a proposal to designate the First Street block as an historic district and also proposed to designate the two churches anchoring the row as historic buildings in the City register. Activists continued to lobby for the preservation of the remaining low-income housing units in the historic district.

However, a competing plan proposed by land developer J.H. Snyder emerged at around this same time. This plan would maximize tax revenues by increasing office, retail, and market value residential space, while minimizing historic preservation and Japanese American community concerns. Despite attempts to win over parts of the emerging Japanese American coalition, community-based groups came to a consensus firmly against the Snyder plan. This tight consensus was key to cinching the wavering support of local elected officials.

The Japanese American coalition secured federal designation of First Street as an historic district and the various groups proceeded with their respective development plans. The JANM secured a fifty-year lease and rehabilitated the old Nishi Hongwanji Temple building. They eventually raised public and private funds to complete a new \$30 million main exhibition and curatorial hall adjacent to it and have plans for further expansion. The Little Tokyo Service Center rehabilitated the San Pedro Firm Building as low-income residential units and, in partnership with Visual Communications, rehabilitated the old Union Church. The Union Church was redubbed the Union Center for the Arts and became home to the East West

Players, Visual Communications and the L.A. Artcore gallery. Some building owners along the row made capital improvements. The CRA and the Friends of Little Tokyo Arts installed major public art works along the block and throughout Little Tokyo. Beyond the First Street block, other major community development projects were completed. The Little Tokyo Service Center completed Casa Heiwa, a 100-unit affordable housing project that also serves as its organizational headquarters. The organization later began renovation of a First Street North building that once housed the landmark Far East Café (Hayden 1995).

Some may view these activities as piecemeal efforts of different groups to attain short-term economic and organizational goals. We argue, however, that these development activities represent a collective assertion of the right to define the meaning of place and to mark Little Tokyo as an historic and contemporary Japanese American community in a changing cultural landscape. Many of the Nisei involved in the creation of the museum and the preservation of the historic district were seeing the eclipse of their generation and felt a strong need for their version of history to be told for posterity. The millions of dollars in financial contributions and myriad volunteer hours to the JANM, for instance, were made by many in the hope that their children and grandchildren, as well as the broader public, could understand their unique experiences as Japanese Americans and draw inspiration from it. Many Sansei sought to maintain a space to express a unique cultural identity and to assert a Japanese American ethic in local politics. For many, this ethic was one that was influenced by the Asian American Movement and the movement for redress and reparations which focused on issues of social justice, civil liberties, ethnic pride and cross-cultural understanding and support.

Dolores Hayden, in her book entitled *The Power of Place*, noted that the value of the preservation efforts of First Street was not simply to add an ethnic project to the list of historic sites, but to reinforce a common membership in American urban society. Recognizing the historic significance of First Street acknowledges the contributions and inclusion of Japanese Americans in the urban fabric of society. These preserved environments are “storehouses” of social memories. The built environment becomes one form of lineage to an ethnic past, sustaining a point of entry to a collective history and a connection to others who share it.

The Recreation Center Controversy and the Future of "Community"

Following the success of First Street North, however, new divisions within the community grew over the fate of the remainder of the megablock. As in previous episodes of Little Tokyo's history, external interests partnered with locally based institutions to advance a particular vision of development. In this next phase, municipal government and members of the regional cultural elite partnered with several community-based organizations, charting a collision course with other local institutions over land use. A grassroots campaign among Japanese Americans led by the Little Tokyo Service Center requested a portion of that block for a community recreation center and gymnasium. Meanwhile, the well-heeled board of the Museum of Contemporary Art initiated a partnership with the Japanese American National Museum to propose an "Art Park" for the remaining space on the megablock.¹⁵ MOCA and JANM opposed a gymnasium on that same block, suggested that it find a site elsewhere.

The idea of a gymnasium in Little Tokyo is tied to the history of sports in the Japanese American community. Sports has always played an important role among Japanese Americans, from the early years of sumo wrestling and baseball played by immigrant Issei to the Nisei favorites of basketball, baseball, bowling and golf (Niiya 2000). Sports served different functions for each generation, including the expression of national pride in the sport of sumo to the exhibition of American loyalty through the display of baseball. Throughout all of the generations, Japanese American sports leagues have brought the ethnic community together. For Japanese American youth, Nikkei sports leagues are often their sole or primary affiliation with a Japanese American organization. In Southern California, it is estimated that some 14,000 children play in Japanese American-founded leagues and tournaments, including the annual Tigers Tournament, which alone draws together nearly 3,000 predominantly Nikkei basketball players and their families.

Over the eight-year period from 1995 to 2002, support for the Little Tokyo Recreation Center grew.¹⁶ The concept of a gymnasium was contained in the original plans for the cultural and community complex in 1972.¹⁷ The idea was raised again at a CRA planning session in 1994. The following year, LTCDAC, the CRA's

Little Tokyo advisory group, formed a task force to explore the idea. LTCDAC asked the Little Tokyo Service Center's Community Development Corporation (LTSC-CDC) to shepherd the project. In 2000, the first meeting of a community coalition for the recreation center was held. With mobilized community support, the Los Angeles City Council approved a study examining the feasibility of building a privately developed recreation center in Little Tokyo. Over 120 organizations formally endorsed the proposed recreation center (including an endorsement by the Los Angeles Lakers). Recreation Center organizers gained promises and commitments of over \$1 million in public and private funds toward construction of the estimated \$6 million facility. Public affirmation of the idea was demonstrated in various ways such as through petitions and rallies, including a spirited "Lend A Hand" rally where more than 500 supporters gathered in team jerseys and martial arts *gi* ("Hundreds Rally for Rec Center in Little Tokyo" 2000).

Despite grassroots support, the City Council initially opposed leasing the proposed parcel of city-owned land for the Recreation Center. Former City Councilwoman Rita Walters, who represented the Little Tokyo area, was a staunch opponent of that proposal along with the MOCA. JANM joined them in their opposition, explaining that it was supportive of the Recreation Center, as long it was not located on that same block. In commentary published in the *Rafu Shimpo*, the JANM Board of Directors Chairman George Takei described the "incompatibility of such a massive structure on a block with so many cultural institutions," adding that "a huge gym structure right by the Go For Broke Monument would seriously degrade it." Spokespersons for both museums argued that there were more appropriate places for such a facility. The Recreation Center advocates responded, stating that they investigated more than twenty-five other parcels and found none feasible. Moreover, they could not fathom what would be so degrading about a recreational facility if appropriately designed.

As in the case of the historic preservation efforts surrounding First Street North, struggle over land reveals intricate power relations within a city. Scott and Soja (1996) argued that the old mid-twentieth century downtown was seen by city boosters as too modest to serve as the headquarters of the Los Angeles urban region, which had grown to encompass an enormous sprawling five-county area. Building the downtown area as the administrative, business

and symbolic center of the region called for erecting government, corporate, and cultural facilities at a density, scale, grandeur symbolic of immense power. Major cultural-entertainment facilities were built along with an agglomeration of corporate towers and the “largest concentration of government buildings west of the Mississippi.” Cultural institutions were an integral part of this grand vision. MOCA, initiated in 1979 and funded by many of Los Angeles’ elite, was well tied to city decision-makers, receiving \$23 million from the CRA to build its California Plaza facility that opened in the late 1980s. Their satellite Temporary Contemporary located on the Little Tokyo megablock was renamed the Geffen Contemporary following a \$5 million donation from the David Geffen Foundation and in 1996 was granted an extension of a fifty-year city lease at a rate of \$1 per year.

Conflicts between the Recreation Center advocates and the JANM are nested in larger power relations that include the Contemporary Museum and city officials who support their vision for development. The museums are elite-led and-funded projects, MOCA by the regional elite, and JANM by many of the nation’s most influential and wealthy Japanese Americans. This alliance between elite networks would serve mutually beneficial interests, yet collide with grassroots desires for recreational facilities on choice property. An Art Park would extend the Civic Center eastward, consistent with the vision of city boosters described by Scott and Soja. The inclusion of a recreation center would extend Little Tokyo northward, bringing a much different clientele to the site— young Japanese Americans and visitors who more closely mirror the ethnic and socioeconomic mix of the city.

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. The Little Tokyo Service Center-CDC engaged in an eighteen-month public planning process with broad civic participation at hearings, meetings, and public events from within and outside Little Tokyo. Organizers saw the resulting plan as more feasible if located on land that was leased from the City at nominal cost. Early in 2000, the museums announced they had been given a City contract in the amount of \$350,000 to develop a master plan for the megablock, which they had renamed the “Central Avenue Art Park.” But despite the generous funds allocated for planning, the museums failed to incorporate

vital input from active groups within Little Tokyo itself, including Recreation Center organizers and their supporters. Community pressure forced the museums to democratize the planning process, at least in form, but the museums have so far refused to actually implement the reforms.

Conclusion

There will always be competing interests in community development that manifest in internal conflicts within a given population but which are often nested within larger development schemes. Absent from consideration by external influences, whether global capital or elite political regimes, are the historic efforts of ethnic communities to build institutions that allow a group to maintain an ethnic identity in a multicultural plurality. For ethnic communities facing the paradox of dispersal, the idea of ethnic continuity and the perpetuation of places as symbolic centers are closely interconnected. Key to the survival of ethnic communities among a dispersed population is the livelihood of institutions that engage each generation in the process of identity formation and community building. In a study of the Jewish community in Copenhagen, Denmark, Buckser (2000) concluded:

the strength of an ethnic community will depend not on its ability to hold members to a particular set of cultural practices, but on its ability to provide a range of practices and definitions with which individual members can engage. People will affiliate with it, and ethnic identity will persist, to the extent that its symbolic system can offer a range of resources through which individuals can construct meaningful aspects of the self. (italics added)

The degree to which Little Tokyo engages the ethnic community in a broad range of activities and offers an inclusive site for the exploration of self, particularly as those who identify themselves as Nikkei, will shape the persistence of Japanese American ethnicity far into the future.

It is in this context that we can understand the greater significance of efforts such as the creation of the Recreation Center. As a means to engage a younger generation of Japanese Americans, such an institution can provide, as Buckser states, a “range of practices and definitions with which individuals members can engage.” Advocates have underscored the importance of a recreational facility situated in Little Tokyo to engage youth in a process of com-

munity building that links them to a physically dispersed population and that provides a venue to explore the meaning of Japanese American ethnicity. Since Japanese American sports leagues are one of the most popular forms of involvement among youth in the ethnic network, institutional space for these activities provides that connectivity. Bill Watanabe, executive director of the Little Tokyo Service Center, conveyed a sense of urgency given the rare window of opportunity to obtain a lease on city-owned land. He stated, "We need a place for all generations of people.... If we miss that, and we miss a whole generation of people who don't connect to Little Tokyo, then we will lose them forever, and Little Tokyo will just become a facade or a shell of what it used to be" (Chen 2001.) Ryan Yokota (2002) captured a Yonsei (fourth-generation Japanese American) desire for a lived rather than symbolic ethnicity as he wrote, "Most of all, young people want an opportunity to have a space where they can realize their potential and feel a sense of connection to a history that is living and breathing and still in progress, not a history that is stuck in a museum collecting dust." Chris Aihara, director of community relations for the JACCC, pointed to the link between sports and other activities within the broader project of ethnic formation as she stated, "I don't know if it promotes the continuation of Japanese-American culture or Japanese-American values, but if we can bring them in for basketball, we may be able to sell them on all the other parts" (Chen 2001).

If the construction of a shared identity among a dispersed ethnic population is to be maintained, then symbolic centers for institutions to broadly engage that community are vital. Conflicts over community development—whose vision of community for whose benefit—often reflect differences in interests that intensify with growing class stratification within ethnic communities as well as the alliances or dependencies that reach beyond it. One insight that emerges from this retrospective is the changing significance of a physical center to a dispersed community for future community development. Given the paradox of dispersal, it is prudent to assess the impacts of development on the future of ethnicity and ethnic continuity. Assuming pluralist norms where ethnic groups have rights to maintain an ethnic identity along with norms, values and practices that members might associate with it, ethnic continuity can be seen as a necessary asset to consider in development decisions.

In the case of Little Tokyo, controversy over the proposed Recreation Center on the city-owned megablock can be viewed from the vantage point of its impact on ethnic continuity and community building. In this light, City officials have an opportunity to further the legacy of community-based development that was revived with the preservation of First Street North by leasing land to the Recreation Center or by securing equally desirable space elsewhere in Little Tokyo for such a project. A new City Council representative, Jan Perry, unlike her predecessor, has demonstrated a willingness to speak with Recreation Center advocates, but so far has not given her support to a site on the megablock. The City has moved the location of its planned employee parking lot to a nearby site, opening additional space on the parcel for other uses. Meanwhile, the City has also stealthily awarded an additional piece of land on the megablock to the Japanese American National Museum for the building of a "Center for the Preservation of Democracy," funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. The many supporters who have campaigned for the Recreation Center over the past decade have not objected, but argue that democracy should reign for all.

Control over land use decisions in community-based development campaigns is usually a hard fought concession. The history of community development in Little Tokyo shows that it often takes a well mobilized and united community to sway decisionmakers in the face of other financially powerful interests. Internal conflicts that preclude any unified effort often arise when formal democratic processes fail. Development decisions in urban areas have historically lacked public review processes that give meaningful consideration to grassroots voices. Instead, development decisions normally reflect the preferences and interests of elite development regimes. The political fallout surrounding opaque political machinations often leave animosities that only cripple prospects for future inter-organizational collaboration within affected communities. In historic ethnic communities such as Little Tokyo, development decisions have impacts far beyond immediate land parcel boundaries. Given the paradox of dispersal, these choices shape the continuity and meaning of ethnicity among a broader regional community of those who, among other identities, identify themselves as Japanese American.

Notes

1. The authors would like to acknowledge (the late) Christopher Doi, Tom Fujita, Lewis Kawahara and Brian Niiya, with whom Karen Umemoto worked on a research paper from which data for portions of this article are drawn. The authors would like to thank Brian Niiya for his comments on the historical section of the article and the reviewers for their helpful suggestions. Any errors of fact or interpretation are strictly the responsibility of the authors.
2. A great number of works explore some aspect of Japanese American history. For some good short overviews, see Okihiro (2001) and Azuma (2002). One of the few books on the history of Little Tokyo is Murase (1983), see also Mason and McKinstry (1969). Ichioka (1988) is the standard work on the Issei experience, and Daniels (1977) on the anti-Japanese movement. Works addressing aspects of the Japanese American ethnic economy and labor include Yagasaki (1982), Glenn (1986), Modell (1977), and Tsuchida (1984).
3. By the 1960s, the geographic area recognized locally as Little Tokyo receded to an area approximately twelve blocks in size centered between Temple and Fourth Streets and between Los Angeles Street and Alameda Street.
4. There are approximately a dozen Japanese American community centers in Los Angeles County including the Gardena Japanese Cultural Institute, Hollywood Japanese Cultural Institute, Venice Japanese Community Center, Pasadena Japanese Cultural Institute, San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center, San Gabriel Japanese Community and Cultural Center, and the Santa Monica Japanese Community Center (“Japanese American Community Centers in Los Angeles” 2002).
5. The paradox of dispersal may be specific to those in a position of “subordinate and partial integration” as in the case of Japanese Americans. On one hand, Japanese Americans are heralded as the premier “model minority,” a claim supported in part by socioeconomic indicators that reveal high median incomes, low rates of poverty, a low level of residential segregation and high degree of occupational mobility relative to other non-white racial and ethnic groups. On the other hand, the persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination—manifested in ways such as anti-Asian violence, media stereotypes and the “glass ceiling”—reinforces the maintenance of ethnic identity and community as a resource for resistance. In response to continuing discrimination and persistent social problems, many Japanese American institutions persist on a regional and even national scale despite the residential mobility that many enjoy. See Woo (2000) and Miller (1992).
6. In 1963, the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (LTRA), comprised mainly of business owners, was formed in response to

the encroachment of the civic center into Little Tokyo. Their goals were to preserve the Japanese American nature of the community and to establish future growth patterns of Little Tokyo.

7. The Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee (LTCDAC) was formed to advise the Little Tokyo CRA office. LTCDAC was comprised of sixty to seventy members, mainly small business owners. It had no formal decision-making power.
8. Davis (2002, 70) states that in 1979, 25 percent of the major properties in downtown Los Angeles were foreign-owned. By 1985, this figure rose to between 75 to 90 percent. Japanese investors comprised the majority of foreign owners.
9. Activists and community supporters were successful in a political campaign to halt evictions of the Daimaru Hotel in 1975. In 1977, activists confronted city officials in an effort to stop evictions in the Sun Building and Sun Hotel, which together housed 112 residents, forty-three businesses and twenty cultural and community organizations. After rallies and appeals to the city council failed, activists refused to vacate the Sun Building in June and July of 1977, in an effort to prevent its demolition. Three weeks later, police physically removed two members of the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization in a pre-dawn raid, ending the stand-off.
10. The California Redevelopment Law required the local planning agency to provide housing for those displaced, with the number of new units equal to the number destroyed. Due mainly to citizen involvement through non-profit organizations, approximately 750 units of low- to moderate-income housing would be completed during the official project period, from 1970 to 2000. In addition to the 301-unit Little Tokyo towers, the development and housing rehabilitation projects include Casa Heiwa, Tokyo Villas, Miyako Gardens, Far East Hotel, San Pedro Firm Building and the Maehara Oregon Building. The approximately 750 units fell short of the 1,000 units stated in earlier CRA plans which do not account for the additional 1,000 or more units lost with the development of Parker Center prior to the designation of the Little Tokyo redevelopment project area. The residential buildings named above are listed as CRA-assisted housing in Little Tokyo as of 17 December 2002 at <http://www.ci.la.ca.us/CRA/lthouse.html>.
11. According to the 1980 Census of Population and Housing, The Asian American population in Little Tokyo was 739 persons, with 507 households and 234 single individuals. Fifty-four percent of households earned an annual income of under \$5,000 (1980 dollars). Almost half of the single individuals were over age sixty-five.
12. First Street between San Pedro and Central Avenues were designated the Little Tokyo Historic District on 12 June 1995 and listed in the National Register of Historic Landmarks (U.S. National Parks Service 2003).

13. The CRA delegated planning for this block to the two local CRA offices that had jurisdiction over it: the LTCRA and the Central Business District CRA (CBDCRA). While the CBDCRA controlled 83 percent of the block, the LTCRA office took the lead on the First Street row.
14. Among these city-owned buildings on First Street are two churches and two additional mixed-use buildings. These are occupied by community non-profit organizations under fifty-year leases at \$1 per year for the establishment of educational and arts institutions and for the management of low-rent residential and office space.
15. In December 2002, the Los Angeles Children's museum announced dropping plans for a satellite museum in Little Tokyo due to fundraising difficulties.
16. During this period, the original idea of a modest gymnasium evolved into a multi-purpose, multi-generation Recreation Center. The coalition for the Recreation Center led by the Little Tokyo Service Center developed as its stated goals to: 1) provide a place for youth, 2) serve seniors, 3) provide multi-purpose space, 4) revitalize Little Tokyo and 5) bridge the generations. The facility would house athletics programs, martial arts training, a senior lunch program, leadership development activities, and some social services. The stated principles of the campaign included: strengthening an historic neighborhood, responding to community needs, and being inclusive of the diversity within Little Tokyo and its surroundings and within the Japanese American community. While plans included hosting Nikkei-sponsored sports activities, stated principles clarify that "the Little Tokyo Recreation Center is committed to the principle that the users of the recreation center should be reflective of the diverse community in which we live."
17. This idea was dropped in favor of the Noguchi Plaza, an open space featuring an Isamu Noguchi sculpture.

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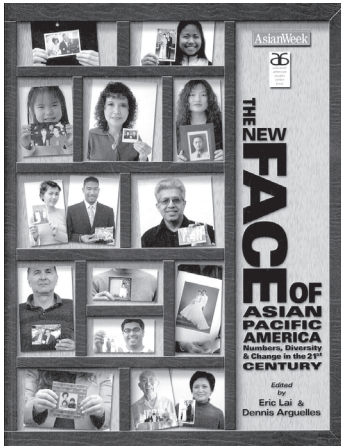
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