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Practitioners Essay

Cultural Preservation Policy and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders:

Reimagining Historic Preservation in Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

Michelle G. Magalong and Dawn Bohulano Mabalon

Abstract

Historic and cultural preservation is a significant issue for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) seeking to safeguard important historic places, preserve unique cultural practices, and receive official recognition of civic contributions. However, few sites associated with AAPI history and cultures have been recognized as landmarks. With the fiftieth anniversary of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service have embarked on an Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Initiative to explore how the legacy of AAPIs can be recognized, preserved, and interpreted for future generations. To understand what we could be commemorating on the act's fiftieth anniversary, this essay will offer policy recommendations for preserving, landmarking, and interpreting AAPI historic and cultural sites into 2040 and beyond.

Introduction

The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks Program, the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. The National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources. National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) are nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior because they possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States.

But whose histories are being preserved through historic preservation? Whose histories matter? Whose histories are considered significant to the larger American narrative?

Clearly, the rich histories of the diverse and multifaceted Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities can be found in the varied places where AAPI communities have made their homes across the islands and the continent, including Pagat Village in Guam; historic Chinatowns, Little Manilas, and Japantowns; and newer, emerging communities like Little India, Thai Town, Little Bangladesh, and Cambodia Town. Nevertheless, few sites associated with Asian American and Pacific Islander history and cultures have been recognized as landmarks on municipal, state, and federal levels.

With the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, there is substantial movement forward by federal agencies and national organizations in developing a more inclusive and diverse approach to traditional standards and policies in order to reflect the growing numbers of underrepresented sociocultural groups, including AAPIs. The Department of the Interior and the National Park Service recently embarked on developing the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Initiative, which explores how the legacy of AAPIs can be recognized, preserved, and interpreted for future generations. Part of this initiative includes the AAPI Theme Study, which investigates the stories, places, and people significant to AAPIs and assists in documenting and preserving AAPI heritage sites across the country.

In AAPI historic sites and neighborhoods, there is a long history of racial discrimination, displacement, demolition, and dispersal. For example, Sikh temples, or *gurdwaras*, have played a significant role in the community and culture of Sikh immigrants from Punjab, India; the first *gurdwara* was established in Stockton, California in 1912 and still thrives. However, since 9/11, there's been an alarming increase in violence and vandalism at *gurdwaras* across the nation. Much of what should be preserved is being demolished and vandalized, and, at other times, gentrified.

Indeed, in some cases, AAPI communities face difficulty in establishing a distinct and identifiable place, while other AAPI cases have experienced success in gaining recognition or designation as a historically significant site. For instance, newer immigrant populations, including Southeast Asian refugees, do not qualify for historic preservation consideration nor do they have a significant, long-term commercial or resi-

dential concentration, at least in the ways “long term” has been interpreted. This stands in stark contrast to the places that are preserved because they’ve played a role in U.S. military history.

Historic AAPI Neighborhoods and Sites

Indeed, it is important to recognize that ethnic enclaves have long played a critical role in building a sense of community for AAPI immigrants in the face of discriminatory policies and practices, such as residential segregation and wartime and post–World War II displacement.

For example, the impact of American imperialism, immigration exclusion, race-based naturalization laws, alien land laws, and rigid Jim Crow segregation in most cities was powerful and wide-ranging, especially upon patterns of AAPI settlement, community formation, political power, and landownership in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was also a shared history of exclusion, a denial of citizenship, landownership, and voting rights; segregation; and widespread displacement that occurred in AAPI communities before the mid-1960s, when key pieces of civil rights legislation were passed (Chan, 1991; Lee, 2015; Takaki, 1998).

These experiences are in addition to the oppression experienced by those AAPIs in the American empire: Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, and Filipina/os who were racialized U.S. colonials. The 1790 Naturalization Law denied naturalized citizenship to all except “free whites.” Successive laws either excluded or circumscribed entry of AAPI groups; by 1924, all immigrants ineligible for citizenship were barred. Several states enacted alien land laws, which prohibited landownership for non-citizens.

Despite these challenges, AAPI enclaves became a significant part of virtually every major city in America before 1965. Early Filipino migrants toiling on Spanish galleons in the Gulf of Mexico established shrimping villages near New Orleans in the eighteenth century. Chinese immigrants established small towns such as Locke in the San Joaquin Delta in California and Chinatowns in San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle in the mid-nineteenth century. Native Hawaiians and Samoans settled in Iosepa, Utah, in the late nineteenth century. Japanese immigrants established Little Tokyos, Japantowns, and Nihonmachi in every major West Coast city by the 1910s and 1920s, and smaller Japanese American rural settlements in such areas as Livingston in the Central Valley and Historic Wintersburg in Orange County, California. Filipina/o immi-

grants created Little Manila and Manilatown districts in Stockton, Los Angeles, and San Francisco before World War II. However, policies such as restrictive covenants and alien land laws blocked AAPI home and landownership in many states. New Deal housing policies created the practice of “redlining,” in which the Federal Housing Administration made loans only in all-white subdivisions and officially refused to guarantee loans in neighborhoods that were black or racially mixed (Mabalon, 2013).

New post–World War II opportunities to citizenship, voting rights, and increased access to education and jobs were tempered by continued residential segregation throughout the nation and urban redevelopment projects and freeway projects that destroyed ethnic neighborhoods. In the case of Japanese Americans, World War II incarceration destroyed the heart of many of these Japantowns (Toji and Umemoto, 2003). To obliterate blight, the federal government gave \$1 billion in loans and grants to cities for urban redevelopment, with “blight” defined as any area that was in economic decline or racially mixed. By the 1960s, urban redevelopment destroyed Stockton’s Little Manila and Chinatown; San Francisco’s Manilatown; Delano, California’s Filipino/Chinatown district; and Los Angeles’ Little Manila. San Francisco’s Manilatown and the eviction of elderly Filipina/o and Chinese seniors from its International Hotel in 1977 is perhaps the most famous casualty of these urban postwar policies amongst AAPI communities (Habal, 2007). Massive postwar freeway construction resulted in more than forty thousand miles of highways and freeways, which uprooted and displaced communities, particularly the neighborhoods of AAPIs and other poor people of color across the nation (Mabalon, 2013).

With the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act and continuing displacement as a result of the deterioration and depopulation of the urban core as a result of suburbanization, urban redevelopment, and freeways, the structure and locations of AAPI enclaves changed dramatically. Rapid population growth and the growth of AAPI social justice movements resulted in a mushrooming of small businesses, community-based organizations, and cultural institutions to meet the growing needs of AAPI immigrants and their families. Nonprofit organizations in these neighborhoods provided direct services like affordable housing, social services, and small business development. From the 1960s onward, amidst continued threats of displacement, demolition, and discrimination, local residents and organizations have fought to save historically and culturally significant sites, structures, and buildings.

Given these changes, the future of AAPI historic and cultural preservation will be rich and challenging (Lee, 2003). Historic sites important to AAPIs in 2040 might include Daly City and Southern California's San Gabriel Valley, which have spawned new Little Manilas and new Chinatowns. Southeast Asian American communities have established sites such as Cambodia Town in Long Beach, California; Thai Town in Los Angeles; and Little Saigon in Orange County, California (Võ, 2008). South Asian American communities and businesses flourish on Pioneer Boulevard in Artesia, California, as well as in Jackson Heights/Richmond Hill in New York City. AAPIs have established communities far from the traditional cities of AAPI settlement on the coasts, in places like the Midwest and South. Families of Filipinos who served in the U.S. Navy have changed the demographics of unlikely places like Virginia Beach, Virginia. Vietnamese families maintain a strong presence in the fishing and shrimping industries in East New Orleans and throughout the bayous of Louisiana. Hmong refugees and their families are organic farmers in Fresno and city dwellers in Minneapolis. In 2040, tourism and development will likely continue to threaten sites sacred to Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, such as *heiaus* and burial places, like Pagat Village in Guam, an archeological site that contains remnants of a large *latte* village.

Reimagining Preservation

Policy Recommendations for America's Past, Present, and Future

As historic AAPI neighborhoods continue to deal with changing economic and sociocultural dynamics and threats of redevelopment and gentrification, many community residents, small businesses, and local nonprofits turn to planning and policy approaches for help. However, marginalized groups, like AAPIs, still perceive the preservation movement as not representing their interests, particularly as discussion moves into the politics of race and place in historic preservation. To address this, we offer four policy recommendations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 1

DEVELOP A BROADER APPROACH TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Traditional standards in historic preservation have been challenging for AAPIs and other underrepresented groups to preserve and protect their historic and cultural assets due to the lack of understanding in the field of structural forces that have shaped AAPI historic sites and cultural resources. In particular, the incredible diversity within the AAPI community—and the diversity of the places that are special and unique to our communities—demands that a framework for cultural preserva-

tion take into account the history of U.S. immigration policy to the AAPI experience; the diverse backgrounds, class, regional differences and ethnicities of AAPIs; the diverse labor experiences of AAPIs; the unique settlement patterns and lifestyles of early communities; and the urban and suburban experiences of AAPIs in the mid- to late twentieth century. Important sites amongst diverse communities such as the Filipino communities in Stockton, California, and Daly City, California; Little Saigon in Orange County, California; Thai Town in Los Angeles; Chinatown in Salinas, California; Asian American suburban centers in the San Gabriel Valley, California; Cambodian cultural sites in Long Beach, California; Hmong communities in Minneapolis; and Samoan community sites in San Francisco are as significant the San Francisco Chinatown buildings and Japanese American concentration camps that have been preserved and landmarked. For Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, there is limited understanding of traditional cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices and their value in the preservation of indigenous historic properties in Hawaii and the Pacific.

It is imperative that by 2040, we broaden traditional historic preservation standards to reflect the diverse needs and issues for the AAPI community. Culturally appropriate policies can drastically impact not only the number of historic sites and resources recognized on the national level but also encourage increased civic engagement and participation in historic preservation across generations and racial dynamics.

Moreover, the recognition, preservation, and interpretation of sites that mark important places and moments in AAPI struggles for social justice and civil rights remind us all that AAPIs have been at the forefront of movements for greater American democracy and were agents for social and political change. For example, Tule Lake, California, and Manzanar, California, remind us of the staunch resistance and resilience of internees. The Filipino Community Cultural Center in Delano, California, site of the 1965 Delano Grape Strike and early headquarters for the United Farm Workers, honors the long legacy of farm labor militancy in the Filipina/o American community.

Working alongside with federal agencies and national organizations in the field of historic preservation, it is imperative to have AAPI leaders at the forefront of this work. Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation is the first national network of preservationists, historians, planners, and advocates focused on historic and cultural preservation in AAPI communities. The organization hosts a biennial national convening to discuss issues of representation and

preservation of AAPI historic sites. Programs such as East at Main Street: APIA Mapping Project identify places across the United States that matter to AAPIs by engaging individuals and organizations to contribute by sharing their own memories, images, and related items associated with places on the project's online map. Some of the key challenges faced by historical preservation organizations include the lack of access to preservation-related funding and resources, limited access to technical assistance, and limited representation in historic preservation work on national, state, and local levels.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2

SUPPORT AAPI ORGANIZATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

There are unique challenges in preserving and establishing cultural and historic sites in ethnic neighborhoods. Local nonprofit organizations often play critical roles in developing and implementing local preservation strategies. As advocates, they often work with various key actors, including elected officials, preservation agencies, planning agencies, and other nonprofit organizations on developing preservation-related planning strategies and policies. Nonprofit organizations also act as organizers or activists by engaging local community organizations, small businesses, and residents in protecting historic/cultural sites and in revitalizing the local community.

A prime example of an Asian American nonprofit in need of organizational and leadership development is the Little Manila Foundation in Stockton, California. The Little Manila neighborhood was home to the largest Filipina/o community outside of the Philippines from the 1920s until the 1970s, until redevelopment projects and the Crosstown Freeway decimated the neighborhood. In October 2000, the Stockton City Council designated the Little Manila Historic Site, the nation's first city-designated Filipino American historic district. In 2003, the foundation successfully fought an Asian-themed strip mall development that would have destroyed Little Manila and its surrounding neighborhood. In the past fifteen years, the Little Manila Foundation has utilized innovative preservation tools, such as partnering with the musical group Black Eyed Peas on a video set in the Little Manila Historic Site, creating a free Little Manila Afterschool Program in which volunteer teachers bring Filipina/o American history curriculum to local high school students, and opening a Little Manila Center in 2014 near the historic site. However, the Little Manila board continues to struggle with issues of capacity and infrastructure, such as funding for full-time staff, resources, and technical expertise in order to apply for state and federal recognition for the site.

*POLICY RECOMMENDATION 3**BROADEN THE SCOPE AND SUPPORT FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN AAPI COMMUNITIES THROUGH EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS*

Little Tokyo is a historic cultural neighborhood in Los Angeles. From just a few dozen immigrants in the late 1800s, it grew to tens of thousands within a three-mile radius that stretched across to Boyle Heights and south of the downtown area. Over time, despite the disastrous effects of World War II internment and numerous periods of displacement and redevelopment, Little Tokyo settled into the outlines of the neighborhood today—much smaller than in past decades. A section of the neighborhood is recognized on the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district.

Local community organizations like the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) Community Development Center and the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) have more than three decades of history in the neighborhood. Assisted by a range of local and national partners, they are taking control of their own future with community-based planning strategies. LTSC and JACCC have worked in partnership with more than 150 other organizations representing small businesses, Japanese international businesses, arts and cultural organizations, temples and churches, residents, and youth groups within the Little Tokyo Community Council to develop Sustainable Little Tokyo (SLT). SLT is a collaborative initiative for long-term sustainability for the historically Japanese American neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles. This initiative envisions a healthy, prosperous Little Tokyo that maintains its historic and cultural roots for future generations.

Applying this strategy is important to other communities as well. For example, more outreach and education should be done in each community to ensure that community members feel as though they have a stake in cultural and historic preservation. In addition, preservationists must have better access to resources and be better trained in the processes of cultural and historic preservation. Lastly, historic preservation funding can leverage investments through local jobs and long-term economic development in underserved communities. By working together in partnership, these community organizations can help preserve and revitalize historic places and make them important, relevant, and essential to an ethnic community's health, well-being, culture, and political power.

*POLICY RECOMMENDATION 4**THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES SHOULD REFLECT THE POPULATION SIZE AND DIVERSITY OF AAPIs*

It is estimated that less than 1 percent of all sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places reflect the history of AAPIs. Of those listed on the National Register, a majority of them are significant to Japanese Americans during World War II (including internment camps and confinement sites), military sites in the Pacific (including in Hawaii and Guam), and cultural or natural resources (including American Samoa). Currently, the National Register is not representative of the total population of AAPIs (at 5.5 percent of the total U.S. population in 2010) or of the diversity within the AAPI population. It is imperative that the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks reach parity. With U.S. Census estimates that AAPIs will be 10 percent of the total U.S. population by 2040, federal programs like the National Register and NHLs need to reach parity to be truly representative of AAPIs in the American landscape. This includes diverse historic sites like Iosepa Polynesian Archaeological District in Utah; the Filipino Community Center in Delano, California; Pagat Village in Guam; and Little Saigon in Orange County, California.

With the fiftieth anniversary of the 1966 Historic Preservation Act, the National Park Service will publish a theme study on AAPIs as part of their AAPI Heritage Initiative. The theme study is intended to identify potential sites for consideration of the National Register and NHLs by providing scholarship on AAPI history and culture. It is imperative that these efforts be supported and sustained through advocacy, policy, and funding on the federal level.

Conclusion: Historic and Cultural Preservation for 2040

The fate of AAPIs has been intertwined with U.S. immigration policy, which has determined its population size, ethnic composition, settlement patterns, and socioeconomic character. The AAPI population in the United States has grown more ethnically diverse since 1960 and also has experienced changes in geographic distribution. Policies and programs in historic preservation must be more inclusive in the representation of AAPI historic sites and resources. While the AAPI community has been majority immigrant-based for much of the twentieth century, increasing generations will be born in the United States and further dislocated from their historic cultural centers and places of immigrant settlement and ethnic enclaves. Second-, third-, and fourth-

generation AAPIs often no longer live in their traditional ethnic neighborhoods, and may sell buildings and/or close longtime businesses that are historically and culturally significant. The lack of AAPI history curriculum at the K–12 level will continue to compound the lack of knowledge of the importance of historic and cultural sites, making the movement to preserve and interpret our historic and cultural sites ever more urgent. Public and private support for the development of technology to bring interpretation of cultural practices and historic sites to a larger public and to these students will be crucial in 2040. AAPI histories must be preserved in both traditional and digital archives for AAPI communities.¹ There must be more support for the development of digital archives and platforms so that a wide variety of people can virtually visit historic sites and for audio and visual tours that take place on the grounds of the sites.

With projections of AAPI population growth from 20.5 million in 2015 to be more than 35.7 million by 2040, this population increase poses a policy challenge to the AAPI community and to the nation as a whole. This demographic trajectory will have significant social, economic, political, and cultural implications. For historic preservation and cultural preservation, federal policies and programs must reflect the demographic changes and patterns of AAPIs. This includes an increased number of historic sites and cultural resources recognized on the national level and increased support in federal programs for place-based and people-based policies that are relevant to AAPI communities across the nation.

With the projected majority of AAPIs to be U.S.-born and of mixed heritage, this is an opportunity to engage grassroots supporters to help effect change at the local, state, and federal levels. This includes advocating for preservation funding, saving historic places, and influencing key legislation that protects heritage and resources significant to AAPI communities across the nation. With an increase of multiracial AAPIs, this is an opportunity to engage across ethnic or racial lines and draw upon common or shared histories (e.g., Filipino Mexican and Sikh Mexican labor history in California) by fostering a greater understanding and awareness of heritage, history, and historic places that are not only significant to AAPIs but to communities across race, ethnicity, class, and other sociodemographics.

Building partnerships and awareness within the AAPI population and across with other underrepresented groups in historic preservation can play a critical role in civic engagement, advocacy, and leadership.

Fostering this can motivate AAPIs in becoming future stewards of historic communities, cultural sites, and landscapes; shaping policy at the local, state, and national level; and providing lasting impact on communities for generations to come.

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Notes

1. The Welga Project digital archive of the Filipino farm labor movement is one example. See <http://welgaproject.ucdavis.edu/>.

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