

Sustainable Little Tokyo: Resisting Gentrification and Displacement Through Holistic Community Engagement and Development

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Founded in the 1880s, Little Tokyo is among the oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles and is the largest of three remaining “Japantowns” in the United States. Throughout its history, the neighborhood has survived waves of displacement that threatened its very existence. Those included the forced removal and incarceration of people of Japanese descent during World War II and the demolition of whole tracts of housing, businesses, churches, and temples that occurred during the city’s urban renewal and Civic Center expansion of the 1950s through 1970s. Today, what remains of Little Tokyo is roughly nine square blocks. The neighborhood continues to serve as a cultural center for Japanese Americans across Southern California and home to a diverse, low-income residential base.

The latest threat to Little Tokyo’s cultural and historic identity comes in the form of intense pressure from a hot real estate market, which is making the neighborhood less accessible to individuals and families of all incomes. In units not designated as “affordable,” residential rents are increasing dramatically. One example is Wakaba LA, a 240-unit, mixed-use building in Little Tokyo, where rent for a studio starts at approximately \$2,200 a month. Commercial rents have also risen, forcing out longtime small-business owners. Over a dozen Little Tokyo small businesses closed between 2015 and 2016. New luxury housing continues to be built and occupied, drastically changing the demographics of the residential population.

What is occurring in Little Tokyo is happening throughout Downtown Los Angeles. The Los Angeles metro region is one of the hottest and most expensive real estate markets in the United States. An extended building boom has produced thousands of new, market-rate units over the past five years.¹ During the third quarter of 2016, there were 11,797 residential units under construction. Of those units, only 71 will be affordable. Apartment occupancy is currently at 91.5 percent, and the average apartment rent is \$2,584 per month. Developers broke ground on 1,600 units during the third quarter of 2016, and over 6,000 new units have been proposed.²

1 Andrew Khouri, “As new apartments flood downtown L.A., landlords offer sweet deals,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2016.

2 Downtown Center Business Improvement District, “*Downtown LA Market Report*,” Q3 2016.

With its combination of expensive, rising rents and large populations of people in poverty, Los Angeles is the most rent-burdened market in the country.³ Further, of all the metropolitan areas in the United States, Los Angeles has the second-highest population of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) in poverty.⁴

Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a community-based organization (CBO) in Little Tokyo, is working holistically and across sectors to fight against gentrification and displacement and to ensure greater community control over the future development of its neighborhood. LTSC takes a multi-pronged approach that includes services, development, organizing, and planning and involves multiple stakeholders, including residents across a diversity of incomes, other community-based partners and institutions, neighborhood small businesses, and allies across the region. This article distills LTSC's approaches to address gentrification and displacement into a set of lessons that are applicable to the community development field as a whole. The core lessons from LTSC are as follows:

- Organizing and community planning should drive development (not the other way around).
- Organizing and community planning efforts should center around a shared vision of community that is both open to change and rooted in existing values.
- Approaches to community empowerment should be culturally specific even when tied to broader movements.
- For maximum impact, build locally and connect regionally (and nationally).
- Arts and culture help define our neighborhoods and serve as a strategy to engage multiple communities and to tie everything together.

These lessons, on their face, may not be groundbreaking. But, as described below, when applied in an integrated manner with sensitivity to the nuance and detail of local context, they can be transformative and demonstrate how community development can be effectively mobilized against gentrification and displacement.

Gentrification and Displacement Among AAPI Communities

Gentrification and displacement are particularly acute challenges for low-income and working-class AAPIs, who, more than any other racial group, disproportionately live in central cities in the hottest, most expensive real estate markets, where incomes have not risen at the same pace as housing costs.⁵

3 Rosalie Ray, Paul Ong, and Silvia Jimenez, "Impacts of the Widening Divide: Los Angeles at the Forefront of the Rent Burden Crisis," UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, September 2014.

4 Josh Ishimatsu, "Spotlight on Asian American and Pacific Islander Poverty," National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, June 2013.

5 Chris Fuchs, "Squeezed by rents, stagnant incomes, communities find solutions," NBC News, May 11, 2016.

AAPI Poverty and Wealth Increase

From 2011 to 2015, after five years of modest economic growth, the total number of people in the United States living below the federal poverty line decreased from 48.4 million to 46.1 million, a drop of almost 5 percent.⁶ Over the same period, the number of AAPIs living in poverty increased from 1.99 million to 2.14 million, a rise of over 7 percent. All other major racial/ethnic groups, as tracked by the U.S. Census—non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics, African Americans, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives—saw decreases in the total number of people in poverty that were comparable to the national trend. Of all major racial/ethnic groups in the United States, only AAPIs saw an overall increase in poverty from 2011 to 2015.

Over this same period, AAPI median household income grew at a rate greater than the household income of any other racial/ethnic group.⁷ With many AAPIs enjoying economic success and the AAPI poverty population growing, there is significant economic inequality within the AAPI community. Many fail to recognize this inequality, rendering invisible millions of poor and working-class AAPIs.

Low-Income AAPIs and Hot Markets

The majority of poor AAPIs live in the most expensive and hottest metropolitan rental markets.⁸ Overall, those markets house roughly 30 percent of the U.S. population but only 26 percent of the nation's poor people. In contrast, 55 percent of poor AAPIs live in the nation's hottest and most expensive markets. In general, most other racial/ethnic groups tend to have higher proportions of poor people who live in rural areas or in less expensive and cooler real estate markets (e.g., metropolitan areas, like Detroit).

The geographic distribution of AAPIs concentrated in the Pacific Coast and urban Northeast/Mid-Atlantic correlates with poor AAPIs being concentrated in the most expensive urban markets. This overrepresentation of poor AAPIs in expensive and hot markets means that they are disproportionately burdened by high housing costs and rising rents, and that AAPI communities are especially at risk for gentrification and displacement.

AAPI CBOs as Anti-Displacement Innovators

Because AAPI economic need is largely invisible and generally not recognized as a problem, CBOs serving low-income AAPIs themselves tend to be under-resourced and invisible. Out of necessity, AAPI CBOs have become creative and resilient in how they

6 Poverty data from U.S. Census, 1-Year American Community Survey (ACS), 2011 and 2015.

7 Median household income data from U.S. Census, 1-Year ACS, 2011 and 2015.

8 "Most expensive" is defined as median gross rent equal to or greater than \$1,000 (2015 U.S. median gross rent was \$959 per 2015 1-Year ACS), and "hottest" is defined as an increase equal to or greater than \$100 in median gross rent over the past five years (increase of \$88 in U.S. median gross rent from 2011 to 2015, per ACS). Of the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan statistical areas, 23 fit this definition of expensive and hot. These 23 markets contain approximately 30 percent of the total U.S. population and 26 percent of the U.S. poverty population but 55 percent of all AAPIs in poverty. That is, the majority of poor AAPIs live in the hottest and most expensive housing markets.

innovate to survive and serve their communities. This generalization is true for the current displacement crisis facing low-income AAPI communities. In 2016, the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (CAPACD) and the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement released the report “Asian American & Pacific Islander Anti-Displacement Strategies,” which profiled different anti-displacement strategies from more than 25 member organizations located in seven different states and the District of Columbia, including LTSC.⁹

LTSC and Sustainable Little Tokyo

Founded in 1979, LTSC is a social service center and community development corporation whose services reach over 18,000 persons per year. LTSC is the primary bilingual Japanese social service provider in Southern California, but it also provides a diverse array of services in five languages to low-income individuals and families in Los Angeles. As a community developer, LTSC preserves and strengthens Little Tokyo’s physical, cultural, and social assets through real estate development, community planning, small-business assistance, and community organizing. LTSC also collaborates with other organizations across the Los Angeles region to develop community-driven, service-enriched affordable housing. To date, LTSC has partnered with over 15 CBOs to develop 25 projects with over 950 units of community-driven, service-enriched affordable housing and over 130,000 square feet of nonprofit community space and community-oriented retail.

In 2012, in response to gentrification and displacement pressures on the neighborhood, as well as proposals for new transit infrastructure to be developed in the neighborhood, LTSC built upon decades of community organizing and engagement to play a lead role in convening neighborhood residents and community partners in the development of the Sustainable Little Tokyo plan. Sustainable Little Tokyo is also anchored by the Little Tokyo Community Council and the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, with technical and resource support from the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Low Income Investment Fund, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Enterprise Community Partners, Global Green, NeighborWorks America, Mithun, and others.

The Sustainable Little Tokyo plan is a deep, layered, and living document. It represents the community’s aspirations around equity, affordability, transit, arts, culture, environmentalism, commerce, and growth. It spans modest, small-scale goals (e.g., plans to increase residents’ use of energy-efficient light bulbs) to ambitious, large-scale plans for major infrastructure (e.g., a neighborhood-wide system for storm-water reclamation and processing). There are trackable goals around small-business and job creation, asset mapping, affordable housing creation and preservation, development of new community and recreation space,

⁹ National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (CAPACD) & Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement (CNHA), “Asian American & Pacific Islander Anti-Displacement Strategies” (Washington, DC and Kapolei, HI: National CAPACD and CNHA, May 2016).

emissions reductions, and reduction of the neighborhood’s carbon footprint. These efforts are already impacting the neighborhood, as shown by over 2,000 pounds of surplus produce donated to a local food bank, a dozen utility boxes painted with public art, over 300 residential households and small businesses receiving energy-efficiency consultations, and the activation of the historic Azusa Street alleyway, which once served as the home for the first Pentecostal church. But most important, the Sustainable Little Tokyo plan represents community consensus around the future of the neighborhood and is a tool to guide the neighborhood’s inevitable development and growth. The plan itself is a model in terms of the scope of its coverage and the ways in which it scaffolds larger, more ambitious goals from easily achievable initial outcomes. However, the real lessons here are not so much about the product but the process.

The Core Lessons

Organizing Drives Development

“It is more important to control development than it is to be a developer. If you’re a developer, you do one property at a time, but if you control development policy, you affect all the properties in your city.”¹⁰

—Gordon Chin, former executive director of the Chinatown Community Development Center

LTSC’s earliest experiences with real estate development were driven by organizing. During the periods of urban renewal and Los Angeles Civic Center expansion, whole blocks of the neighborhood were razed, and hundreds of low-income people and dozens of small businesses and community organizations were displaced. LTSC became involved in its first real estate development project—the San Pedro Firm Building—as a result of the community’s protesting the planned demolition of the building for City Hall expansion. And even though LTSC has since rehabilitated three more properties on the same block as the San Pedro Firm Building, the preservation of the historic core of Little Tokyo owes more to its designation as a National Historic District than to the development of any individual property or set of properties. The designation itself was a product of community organizing and community pressure.

Likewise, during this current wave of development and displacement, LTSC understands that, by itself, it can’t possibly buy, preserve, and develop enough properties to define the community. It requires a larger exercise of community power—the power to affect policy and to change the framework in which development and resource allocation decisions are made. It requires organizing. It requires a shared vision and set of values for the community.

10 Josh Ishimatsu, “Interview: Gordon Chin, Founding Executive Director of the Chinatown Community Development Center,” *Shelterforce*, January 29, 2016.

A Shared, Open Vision of Community Change

“Welcome to Little Tokyo; please take off your shoes.”

—Christina Heatherton, *J-Town Voice*

Anti-displacement and anti-gentrification movements can easily become antagonistic as people’s justified anxiety and anger over the threat to their homes channels into fear and hatred of any perceived outsiders. Negative emotions often translate into hostility toward newcomers. For LTSC, the challenge was to frame a vision of anti-displacement work that did not reify NIMBYism (“Not In My Back Yard”) and that moved beyond a culture of “no” and an insular vision of a neighborhood that never changes, never grows. There is an inherent tension between a vision that recognizes that history must be preserved and remembered and one that acknowledges that culture is always changing, that cities are always changing, that newcomers are not enemies, and that Little Tokyo has always been diverse.¹¹ How do we honor the past, prevent erasure, AND welcome the new in respectful ways, and how must we adapt and change? And, most of all, how can we do all of this in ways that are equitable, sustainable, and empowering?

Many Japanese Americans (and many other AAPIs) have retained the cultural practice of taking off shoes at home or when entering somebody else’s house. The slogan “Welcome to Little Tokyo; please take off your shoes” expresses the ethos that newcomers are welcome, but people need to acknowledge and respect that they are entering a place with a pre-existing identity and normative culture. In this spirit, the Sustainable Little Tokyo planning process not only includes the participation of longstanding community stakeholders but also involves new residents who appreciate the role that the neighborhood has played (and continues to play) as a cultural hub and in supporting the community’s most vulnerable.

Culturally Specific Movement Building

“Start where people are at.”

—Shelley Poticha, former director of the HUD Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, giving advice on community engagement to promote sustainability¹²

LTSC, as a CBO working in a historically Japanese American community, constantly innovates new ways to apply culturally relevant concepts in its work. These culturally relevant concepts apply both to how LTSC works internally (i.e., informs the manner and approach of LTSC’s work) and externally (i.e., applies to the content of messaging and outreach).

For example, as an operating value, *nemawashi* is a Japanese term that Evelyn Yoshimura, director of Community Organizing, likes to use. It literally means to work around the roots to help a plant grow. In Japanese corporate culture, *nemawashi* is about the process to build

11 See, for example, Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

12 Ben Brown, “The revolution will not be organized (but the food and drink will be pretty good),” *New Urban Network*, July 22, 2016.

consensus in which a proposed change or new project is circulated through the corporate structure. Applied to community organizing, LTSC-style, *nemawashi* means the grassroots always need to be involved, that good process is at least as important as a good result, and that those affected by a policy always need a voice in that policy.

As an example of how this culturally relevant approach works in outreach and messaging, consider *mottainai*, which comes from a Buddhist concept about showing respect for the interconnectedness of all things by not being wasteful. Japanese American grandmothers say “No *mottainai*” when they fill their cupboards with empty tofu containers or save (pre-plastic-bag ban) and re-use plastic bags from the grocery store. For Japanese Americans, *mottainai* is instantly recognizable, instantly resonant. It’s a holdover from the immigrant experience, the community history of living through war, dislocation, and economic hardship, of having once needed every little thing to get by, which shows up today as a pack-rat mentality. LTSC is creatively applying the concept of *mottainai* to environmentalism. For some segments of the Japanese American community (and likely for segments of other communities of color), environmentalism is not resonant. For these individuals, environmentalism is perceived as what crazy white hippies and hipsters talk too much about. Talk about carbon footprints and global warming makes folks tune out. But say “*mottainai*,” and people instantly understand. It re-contextualizes why sustainability is something that Little Tokyo should care about as a community. It connects to deeply held values of respect for life (and all things) and to the value of modest, frugal living.

This type of culturally specific messaging and engagement—this intimate knowledge of what themes and narratives move a community—is essential to building authentic and durable movements. And this cultural knowledge relies on being of and from the community. This comes naturally to LTSC because of its longstanding bond to its community, which has been cultivated over decades.

Build Locally, Connect Regionally

“We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously.”

—Grace Lee Boggs, *community activist*

In a city as large as Los Angeles, one neighborhood—even if that neighborhood is organized—can’t change city policy by itself. And, increasingly, important decisions about resource allocation and infrastructure development are happening on a regional level and require regional advocacy, not just at the city level. For these reasons, LTSC actively participates in a number of different coalitions across the city and the region (and also in national coalitions, such as National CAPACD) and has a well-deserved reputation as a strong collaborator.

As an example, associated with its Sustainable Little Tokyo initiative, LTSC is a founding member and the fiscal sponsor of the Alliance for Community Transit–Los Angeles (ACT-LA), a regional coalition for transit advocacy, with an emphasis on assuring that transit and

transit-oriented development promote sustainability and equity. A big win for ACT-LA was the recently passed Measure JJJ, a voter initiative to create affordable housing and encourage local hiring. The measure also requires that a percentage of any new project that needs a discretionary decision around entitlements also needs to provide a minimum threshold of affordable housing.

Through city-wide and regional policy, LTSC has established a new floor, a new starting point from which to negotiate the future of its neighborhood. And, through local, regional, and national coalition building, LTSC connects its intensely local movement building to broader struggles, such as environmentalism, racial justice, and economic justice.

Arts and Culture Tie Everything Together

our community dies faster than our identity
when we lose sight
-not of old country
nor eye contours nor even blood-
but the way of our hearts' history
beating alongside the struggle of
the other

-traci kato kiriyama, Little Tokyo artist

For Little Tokyo and many other ethnic enclaves, arts and culture are deeply woven into the fabric of the communities and play a huge role in defining who lives there and what they represent. Local artists and cultural institutions/practitioners also represent a huge economic driver, drawing people to the area who, in turn, support the local economy by eating at restaurants and shopping at stores.

For LTSC, arts and culture are vehicles not only for defining its community, but also for connecting people while fostering empathy and inspiring action. Art, therefore, is an effective tool for activism and for community-building—for creating and preserving a progressive sense of place. In Little Tokyo, art connects the community to its past, defines the boundaries of the present, and empowers the imagination of the future. Art has always been a part of LTSC's strategy. With recent support from ArtPlace America, LTSC started a new program called +LAB, which deepens integration of arts and culture into its broader community development agenda of empowering neighborhood stakeholders and ensuring greater community control over the future development of Little Tokyo. The Sustainable Little Tokyo planning process includes specific focus groups for the participation of artists, and the overall plan includes public art, space for arts and cultural production, and affordable housing for artists.

Organizing Around a Vision of Social Change

People's decisions to participate in public life are driven by intensely personal reasons, which may or may not relate to a vision of the common interest. Community organizing is about helping people understand how their personal reasons relate to the larger public

action and how both motivations can work together to achieve community goals. In coming to scale, it is about coalescing smaller communities of identity and interest into larger movements for social change.

Resistance to gentrification and displacement is about community self-definition and control. Sustained resistance to gentrification and displacement requires more than antagonism. It requires a community organized around an open, positive alternative vision that has both big ambitions and achievable, intermediary steps. Building a shared vision that has both lofty goals and concrete specificity requires organizing rooted in local knowledge and local relationships. Effectuating such a vision requires persistence, creativity, and the ability to build and work within larger coalitions.

LTSC embodies these principles in its work and commitment to the community. And these lessons are not to say that every CBO in every gentrifying neighborhood across the country should start talking about *mottainai*. Rather, CBOs need to find the messaging and approach that will resonate locally and build their own strategic, open-hearted vision for empowering and sustaining their community. These efforts must build the power (and obtain the resources) to advance this vision in the context of the local community and the CBO's participation in broader coalitions and collaborations. These are the local building blocks that we need, now more than ever.

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Dean Matsubayashi is executive director of Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a 36-year-old, neighborhood-based social service and community development organization. With a staff of over 130 employees, LTSC provides a range of social services and youth programs to tens of thousands of clients per year. LTSC has also developed over 950 units of affordable housing and over 130,000 square feet of commercial and community facility space. Dean currently serves on a number of boards of directors and advisory boards, such as the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (National CAPACD), Western Center on Law & Poverty, and Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco Affordable Housing Advisory Council. Dean received his BA from the University of California, Irvine, and his Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University.