

# Ibasho: A Place of Belonging<sup>1</sup>

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Little Tokyo is a 135-year-old community that recognizes arts and culture as an integral part of its growth—and a critical strategy in the fight for its future. One of three remaining historic Japantowns left in the nation, Little Tokyo survived three waves of displacement because of decades of community organizing;<sup>2</sup> it has been and continues to be the cultural home to Japanese Americans in Southern California and our historically multiethnic community.

In 2009, plans for the Metro Regional Connector transit hub<sup>3</sup> sparked speculative development and rising property values. Faced with what could become another wave of displacement, Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), Japanese American Cultural & Community Center (JACCC), and Little Tokyo Community Council (LTCC) partnered to develop the Sustainable Little Tokyo (SLT) Community Vision with over 200 stakeholders.<sup>4</sup> The vision focuses on the equitable development of three remaining pieces of public land in Little Tokyo and prioritizes affordable housing and commercial space, cultural space, and green space. It also advocates for cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability, rooted in the Japanese principle of *mottainai* (“do not waste”). SLT then evolved into community-driven projects that strengthen the neighborhood and support the longer-term community vision—with a focus on arts-based strategies. Through the ArtPlace Community Development Investments (CDI) program, LTSC developed the +LAB project, which leveraged the existing SLT partnership and increased capacity in our creative placekeeping work.

JACCC is SLT’s arts organization partner and one of the largest ethnic and community centers of its kind in the nation. As a hub for Japanese and Japanese American arts, culture, and community, JACCC exemplifies Little Tokyo’s longstanding commitment to the arts and creative placekeeping. Amid rampant redevelopment and the displacement of important cultural spaces in the 1970s, community leaders fought for the construction of JACCC as a permanent institution for Japanese American culture. JACCC continues this work, in part, through SLT by advocating for the development of new, permanent cultural spaces and integrating artists into our community organizing. LTSC +LAB and a Surdna Foundation

1 The Japanese word *ibasho* roughly translates to a place where one exists, expresses one’s abilities, and feels at home. I am borrowing this title from the ART@341FSN exhibition *Ibasho: Arts Activism in Little Tokyo*, curated by Jonathan Crisman and designed by Yuji Sakuma.

2 Kelly Simpson, “Three Waves of Little Tokyo Redevelopment,” *KCET Departures*, July 31, 2012, [www.kcet.org/shows/departures/three-waves-of-little-tokyo-redevelopment](http://www.kcet.org/shows/departures/three-waves-of-little-tokyo-redevelopment).

3 For more on Metro Regional Connector and its impacts on Little Tokyo, see Gwen Muranaka, “Metro Breaks Ground on Rail Project,” *Rafu Shimpo*, October 2, 2014, [www.rafu.com/2014/10/metro-breaks-ground-on-rail-project/](http://www.rafu.com/2014/10/metro-breaks-ground-on-rail-project/).

4 For more on the development of SLT, see Chris Komai, “Introducing Sustainable Little Tokyo,” *Rafu Shimpo*, July 5, 2015, [www.rafu.com/2015/07/introducing-sustainable-little-tokyo/](http://www.rafu.com/2015/07/introducing-sustainable-little-tokyo/).

grant allowed the creation of my position as JACCC's Lead Community Organizer. In this role, I act as a creative strategist in SLT's advocacy work, leading our community-driven arts programs and organizing artists of all disciplines to become advocates. Simultaneously, I am a community organizer, more traditionally a role within CDCs, embedding LTSC's and LTCC's development and planning expertise into our arts organization.

In 2017, the City of Los Angeles began implementing plans to dispose the First Street North (FSN) block, one of the land parcels in the SLT vision. In response, SLT and FSN block stakeholders launched the first formal campaign and petition.<sup>5</sup> With JACCC's existing arts community and LTSC's expertise in planning, SLT began by hosting a series of artist convenings to integrate artists and arts-based strategies into the campaign and educate artists about FSN-related civic processes, such as city land disposition. Artists from these convenings formed the Arts Action committee: an intergenerational, multidisciplinary group of 13 artists of color—a majority Nikkei (Japanese American) and new to Little Tokyo organizing. At the same time, LTSC +LAB converted a vacant storefront on the FSN block into an experimental community space and invited SLT to use it. The Arts Action committee renamed the storefront 341 FSN to identify it within the FSN block and advocacy campaign.

The Arts Action committee developed ART@341FSN, a two-month takeover of 341 FSN with art programs that temporarily realized the vision for FSN. The artists organized 23 programs, three pop-up stores, and an exhibition and showcased over 70 local artists. Programs included intergenerational Nikkei music performances; a night of newly commissioned South Asian American mini-plays about displacement and solidarity; and art workshops for low-income residents. The project was bookended by two revivals of the Atomic Café—a beloved Japanese American diner-turned-infamous punk-rock venue, whose historic site was demolished for Metro Regional Connector. The programs attracted over 2,100 people, and 341 FSN became one of the neighborhood's most popular destinations.

ART@341FSN was transformative in ways that we could have never anticipated. The Arts Action committee set a goal to support artists, build awareness, and collect petition signatures, yet we had not expected that the most powerful impact was inspiring a broader community to care about Little Tokyo. When the activist coalition Nikkei Progressives organized a First Street North group in the Nisei Week parade, more than 75 supporters participated, including residents, youth, elders, artists, and even puppeteers—many of whom learned about the campaign from ART@341FSN. Care and personal investment are necessary for advocacy and mobilization, and we had achieved these by creating inclusive, engaging community art—and a space to house it. These artists expanded and strengthened the SLT movement with a vital new base of advocates and incredible new art works. They also re-energized a community exhausted by the endless issues and work by reminding us of the future we are fighting for. As Tomi Kunisaki, one of the Arts Action artists, explained:

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5 For more on the FSN campaign, see Kenji Liu, "Fate of Little Tokyo's First Street North to Be Determined This Year," *Rafu Shimpo*, March 4, 2019, [www.rafu.com/2019/03/fate-of-little-tokyos-first-street-north-to-be-determined-this-year/](http://www.rafu.com/2019/03/fate-of-little-tokyos-first-street-north-to-be-determined-this-year/).

*For me, working with our committee members [...] and learning alongside my peers and elders gave a sense of belonging and connectedness to my heritage—and our responsibility to continue its legacy—that I understand now more than ever before. As someone who has always been fairly disconnected from the Japanese American community, being a part of this project felt like an important first step into efforts to reclaim our cultural identity and physical creative space.*

ART@341FSN and the Arts Action committee exemplify SLT's strength as a cross-sector and, of course, creative approach to community development—one that harnesses the diverse expertise of our artists, LTSC as a community developer, JACCC as an arts organization, and LTCC as a community coalition to further a shared goal for community and cultural sustainability. Perhaps more important, ART@341FSN reminds our community that, more than a campaign for land and development, we are fighting for the unpredictable, ever-expansive possibilities for Little Tokyo as *ibasho*—a place to hold our joy, our memories, our art, our culture, and our future.

*Scott Oshima is the Lead Community Organizer at Japanese American Cultural & Community Center and project manager for the Sustainable Little Tokyo creative placekeeping initiative since 2017. Scott is an artist, arts organizer, and community activist who has been working in community arts nonprofits for over 10 years. As an administrator and artist, they use art to re-center the voices of marginalized communities and advocate for the cultural sustainability of our communities of color. Their writing and reviews have been published in X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly, Capital & Main, Entropy, and Orlando. Scott holds a BFA from the California Institute of the Arts.*