

JAPANTOWN SAN JOSE
Culture and History

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I. The Importance of Cultural Identity

When we look around ourselves that which surrounds us did not just spontaneously appear. History confers present identity. People have created spaces and have changed them over time. Through time and social interactions, culture and customs have become more established. The importance of identity adheres to the principle of an individual (or individual culture) wanting to be classified as being something rather than being forgotten, thus considered not important within the fabric of society. If the past dictates the present identity, then it becomes important to identify oneself with the series of movements and interactions that brought the present into existence. If the past is forgotten then the present seems unsubstantiated and ill founded:

...To say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity...as defined to some extent by the community of which they are part. For them, community describes not just what they have as fellow citizens, but also what they are, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment of their identity. In contrast to the instrumental and sentimental conceptions of community, we might describe this strong view as the constitutive conception. (Sandel 1982, p. 150)

Japantown San Jose is a neighborhood where the present has a substantial link to the remembered past. Many of its people share a strong Japanese-American identity, a wealth of historical memory, and a consensus that this history is important. Japantown residents do not need their neighborhood to “look” Japanese, since their sense of heritage comes from actual memories linked to the shops, restaurants, churches and homes clustered around Jackson Street. In our transient society, such a personal and direct connection to the past is rare and valuable. This historical memory and pride cannot be forced, and in it Japantown has an asset that many other neighborhoods seek. Because this cultural identity is linked to a

physical place, it also has the tangible effect and economic benefit of drawing people to shops, businesses, cultural groups and festivals.

While recognizing the neighborhood's core of Japanese-American pride, it is also important to acknowledge the other constituencies in Japantown. Non-Japanese-American residents of this very diverse neighborhood have historically provided crucial support to Japantown and shared a belief in its cultural value. The fact that the majority of the area's residents and newcomers are not of Japanese descent can be a source of tension, but is in fact central to the neighborhood's success. Without a sympathetic group of "outsiders" who value the specialness of the neighborhood, the Japanese-American residents could not economically support the businesses, the street life, or the cultural activities on their own. The challenge for Japantown in the future is to recognize this fact and integrate diversity while keeping the direct connection to the history of the place. One of the community members we surveyed said it well: the neighborhood needs a "diverse populace who can appreciate the ethnic flavor of Japantown."

Development and Cultural Education

There is no easy answer about how to accomplish this, but we hope the materials we have compiled will provide some ideas. We quickly learned that it was not our place to collect information on the history of Japantown. Neighborhood residents have done an impressive amount of work to memorialize and document their history through the Japanese American Museum, the preservation of Okida Hall and the Issei Memorial Building, the passage of State Senate Bill 307, and planning the 5th and Jackson landmark. Members of the Japantown Community Congress (JCCs), the Japantown Business Association (JBA), and

the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) are better positioned than we to collect the oral, visual, and recorded history of the neighborhood.

Because the sense of identity in the neighborhood is so strong, we also do not need to market the importance of history to non-Japanese-American residents and visitors. Whether in surveys or town hall meetings, many residents make it clear that they love Japantown for its cultural character and want to respect it – although their definition of acceptable uses in the neighborhood may differ from that of the Japanese-American community.

Our challenge was, then, to help insure that future development in Japantown respects this history and *all* residents. Developers will likely be aware of the advantages and character of the neighborhood, and may try to design and market their projects with a Japanese-American “theme.” But any “theming” – defined as design elements, architecture, or tenancing with a specifically Japanese influence or look – must be based on knowledge and understanding. The Redevelopment Agency’s RFP will have only limited power to ensure that this occurs. Since Japantown’s authenticity and uniqueness comes from shared historical identity rather than easily replicable design elements, developers must be fully educated so they have the *desire* (as well as the economic motivation) to engage with the community and create a culturally appropriate project.

An example of the challenge comes from the promotional website of the ROEM Corporation, which is planning to build a mixed condominium, office, and retail development on East Taylor Street. Named Ajisai Gardens, the project’s location in Japantown is being used as a marketing and design tool. The promotional copy states, “The

Japan Town in San Jose is one of the two Japan towns [sic] that still remain within the U.S. continent.” In this opening sentence, the copywriter reveals a lack of fact checking: Japantown is actually one of *three* recognized historic Japantowns in California. The developer of Ajisai Gardens has met with community members and city staffers and so presumably has access to accurate information and citizen input. But this knowledge is not reflected on the website. Many new residents may have their first – or only – introduction to Japantown’s culture through the promotional literature of a new housing development, so it is crucial that developers make this information as accurate and sensitive as possible.

To encourage that historical accuracy is the standard for development, especially in the Corp Yard, we have created a brochure that specifically highlights cultural and historical resources (see Appendix D). Since we wanted to keep the brochure concise and attractive, the text only hints at the wealth of historical information and cultural activity that exists in Japantown. It is meant to serve as a gateway that will lead developers to seek out more information and community interaction. We hope that the City and the community can use this product, or some of its elements, to ensure that the effort that has gone into historical documentation and cultural promotion feeds into the development process. We have also compiled an annotated bibliography listing all of the reports and written sources we encountered when researching Japantown (see Appendix A). We intend for this list of resources to be shared with developers, residents, and future students and contractors doing projects in the area.

Cultural Identity – Recommendations for SJRA

Include language in the RFP that underscores the importance of historical knowledge and cultural sensitivity; direct developers to sources of information. While language such as “development should be sensitive to historical context” is important, it is not binding. If possible, the RFP should include specific instructions such as:

- “Developers should consult with community groups such as the Japantown Community Congress, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the Japantown Business Association.”
- “Project proposals must include a section explaining how the project adheres to the seven development principles outlined by the Japantown community.” Include the JCCsj principles in the RFP.
- “Development teams should familiarize themselves with the reports and studies available about Japantown’s history and culture.” Name several specific sources and attach our cultural resources brochure and bibliography.

We also recommend that SJRA:

- Print the brochure we have produced and distribute it to Japantown community members, developers, business owners, and visitors.
- Use our brochure as the basis for a website and/or for the brochure planned by the JCCsj.
- Promote education by providing our bibliography to developers, posting it online, including it in the RFP, and making it available to city staff, community members and outside researchers who are working on related projects.

II. Symbols and Theming

When you walk down Main Street in Disneyland, you first notice this long promenade lined with two storied buildings with overtones of Small Town America, yet when you walk into a building with a sign that reads “firehouse” it does not take you long to figure out that it is actually a candy shop. Main Street USA is supposed to everyone’s hometown, however how many people that come from the depression grew up with a town that had drawn horse carriages, and a Main Street with a castle on the end. Main Street USA represents at best selective elements of a midwestern town, ignoring the experiences of groups such as African-Americans, rural Southerners, or urban workers. As unrealistic as it sounds, people

are still attracted to the fantasy of Disneyland, even if the symbols used are considered by many to be unrealistic or suggestive.

The “Disneyization” of society has submerged individuals into a land of fantasy and imagination represented by symbols, whimsy, and sometimes inaccuracies. Although themes can often be nostalgic, international in flair, or colorful, they can often lack the thought and research necessary to give symbols or other elements their proper meaning or place.

Theming does have an important place in design. It visually reminds one of a place’s special identity. However, there are good themes and bad themes. A good theme moves beyond just using symbols to visually depict the importance of what it is trying to emphasize. A bad theme can be selectively inclusive, and thus steps away from being realistic. Themes are not to make statements or suggestions, but should to tell stories. Whether it is the story of the roaring 20's, or a sports team, or a particular culture, themes should use symbols that are placed and used in a way that gives an honest description that is respectful of identity.

Encouraging Authentic Theming in Japantown – Examples and Reflections

We hope that our work will encourage developers to create projects that respect the identity of Japantown – but what exactly does this mean? The easiest way for developers to claim their project “fits” in Japantown is to add symbols or design details that they believe are Asian-influenced. The RFP can encourage such touches. But because elements such as tile roofs or lotus motifs are simple to require and implement, they also can easily become empty symbols. Japantown never resembled a Japanese city architecturally, and to drop a pagoda in the middle of it may do more to dismiss local Japanese-American history than to honor it.

This does not mean, however, that symbols and design themes cannot be useful in encouraging respect for history. Our research has led us to the following conclusions:

Ethnically themed cultural landmarks and symbols can enhance the sense of neighborhood

identity and history if they have a real use. Because the refurbished streetcars on San Francisco Municipal Railway's F-Market line actually carry passengers, they provide a far more engaging and tangible connection to history than stationary streetcars preserved as museum pieces would. The Iko-No-Ba planned by the JCCsj will inform people about Japanese culture, but unlike historical plaques, they may be more appreciated because they will serve a *function* in street life – providing seating, shade, and visual variety. To be authentic, themes do not have to replicate the past exactly; they just have to reflect the input of tradition and have practical uses.

Symbols should not define a neighborhood, but should capture its essence while drawing

people to the substance behind the theme. We studied the example of Chinatown in Washington, D.C., where street signs and businesses such as Starbucks, Subway, and even Hooters have Chinese characters next to English lettering. The effect is mixed. The signs certainly increase the visibility and marketability of the neighborhood by telling tourists they are in Chinatown. However, the cultural barrenness of the area is only emphasized because attention is drawn away from the few remaining local and Asian-owned businesses. Many visitors may leave with the inaccurate notion that there is nothing in Chinatown except for Chinese calligraphy on global corporate logos.

To take a closer example as a point of contrast, Oakland also has Chinese characters on the street signs in its Chinatown. These signs, unlike those in Washington, have actual meaning for the many Chinese-speaking immigrants who still live in the area. The street signs symbolize the borders of Chinatown, but draw visitors to discover the markets and restaurants of the area. The 5th and Jackson landmark should serve this same function. By straddling all four corners of a key intersection and drawing attention to neighborhood businesses without overshadowing them, it literally and figuratively draws people into Japantown. It also points to traditional Japanese artistic concepts in “its asymmetrical configuration of design elements, its attention to ground plane patterns and textures in the arrangement of ...stone.” (Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, *Landscape Design: A Cultural and Architectural History*, 2001)

Symbols and Theming – Recommendations for SJRA

- **When evaluating development proposals, Japanese-themed symbols should not be rejected outright as inauthentic but evaluated for their ability to engage people and draw them towards cultural knowledge. Symbols and markers can be a useful way to extend the identity of the neighborhood, but they must have a function.**
- **Use the 5th and Jackson landmark as an excellent example of a themed product that incorporates substantial research and community input. See Appendix B for case studies of other neighborhoods that successfully rebuilt around a cultural or ethnic theme.**

III. Cultural Organizations

Some ethnic neighborhoods gain authenticity from unique architecture; others retain it from an influx of immigrants. Japantown San Jose does not have these two assets. But it does share one crucial advantage in common with other strong and well-known ethnic neighborhoods such as Chinatown in San Francisco, Fruitvale in Oakland, or the

International District in Seattle. All of these places have active *community cultural organizations* that make cultural and historical preservation a key part of their mission.

These cultural organizations play an important role in merging social and spatial areas. They are institutions that collect people with similar goals, interests, and values with the ideas that solidarity will ensure survival of their own identity. People's need to preserve their own identity stems from the resistance to having one's cultural changed by the forces of power and society. Cultural organizations are not perceived as houses of commercialism, but as amenities that harness individual artistic and cultural expression. They are where people will likely find someone who is like themselves. When you enter a theater you would never expect to come across someone who did not like cinema; instead, you enter with the expectation that someone else will value what you value. If a community is going to sustain itself then it must continue to give importance to human interaction and relations, which foster a sense of familiarity and belonging.

The Role of Cultural Organizations in Japantown

Many efforts at community economic development focus on housing or on retail attraction. These elements will certainly be crucial in Japantown's future. But a third "layer" of community strength comes from non-profit organizations, places of worship, and artistic and cultural establishments. Ethnic restaurants and stores are indispensable because they act as informal arenas to experience culture and consume its artifacts. However, cultural organizations have other crucial functions. They provide both the literal and the figurative space to practice and pass on tradition. They allow for community members to form interpersonal relationships that are important to neighborhood pride, business connections,

and social health. Some organizations, like the Boys and Girls Clubs of Silicon Valley, bring together people of diverse backgrounds in a positive setting. Others, like Lotus Preschool and the JACL, specialize in reaching out to Japanese-Americans, and in doing so draw interest and business from beyond the neighborhood's geographical borders. Finally, by organizing work, applying for funding, and representing citizens in public forums, cultural organizations are bodies of political will and influence.

We believe that the cultural, educational, and religious establishments in a community should receive the same amount of attention from developers as retail profiles and demographics. With the Redevelopment Agency, we hoped to collect the same sort of "market information" from these organizations that a developer would collect for stores and restaurants. We prepared surveys that allowed organizations to define themselves (for use in the brochure) and asked for information on patronage. Showing developers, residents, business owners how many people make use of cultural organizations and how would send a powerful and concrete message about the centrality of these groups. Unfortunately, we were not able to get the type of broad response we hoped to from the surveys. We did collect some valuable insights that are summarized below; also see Appendix C for more detail.

The health of cultural organizations may give a sense of the health of the neighborhood.

Leaders of cultural organizations are committed to their neighborhoods and have their finger on its pulse. The president of the JACL pointed out one of the key challenges for Japantown when he wrote that membership has been "declining – membership has been largely seniors, who are passing away." The passing of the older generation is a concern for commercial and cultural establishments alike. But cultural organizations can perhaps offer

lessons on how to adapt to this change. The fact that the San Jose Buddhist Judo Club attracts 200 students a week after more than 30 years in existence speaks to the continued draw of Japantown's cultural activities, and its appeal to a younger and more diverse crowd.

Community organization leaders have strong ideas about how development should proceed.

The community members we received surveys from were aware of the Corp Yard plans and other recent development, and had thought about what types of development would benefit their organization and the neighborhood at large. Please see our survey summary in Appendix C for more information.

Cultural Organizations – Recommendations for SJRA

- **Follow up on the cultural survey.** Based on the high quality of the responses we received, a broad application of the survey will yield both quantitative and qualitative information that encapsulates many of the trends and opinions in the area.
- **Study and communicate with cultural organizations in other areas for lessons.** While it may be beyond the capacity of Japantown at present, the Agency or the JCCsj may want to consider if it could support a full-time staffer in Japantown who would work exclusively on cultural and historical preservation and promotion (much as Kathy Sakamoto at the JBA works on retail and neighborhood issues). Other cities can provide examples of what Japantown could aim for in the future. The Unity Council in Oakland is an example of how a non-profit in an ethnic community has been able to mobilize political clout from outside to enhance economic and cultural development (see attached case study in Appendix B). In Washington, D.C. a non-profit called Cultural Tourism DC collaborates with community organizations, museums, and educational institutions to market historical and cultural attractions (see www.culturaltourismdc.org). And in San Francisco, the Fillmore Jazz Preservation District Promotions Office specializes in marketing the historic identity of a neighborhood through cultural events (see www.fillmorejazz.com).

Cultural organizations have capabilities beyond private and retail space. Cultural organizations house the capability to create a network of communications between people who either share similar backgrounds, values, or interests.

Conclusion

Articulating the role of history and cultural identity is one of the most difficult tasks in defining Japantown's future, but we believe that it is one of the most important. Many of Japantown's residents are concerned with maintaining the neighborhood's character, and a key way to do this is to ensure that developers are well educated and cultural organizations are supported. We hope that the research we have done can help in that task.

Appendices

A: Bibliography – Resources and Reports about Japantown San Jose

B: Case Studies – Mixed-Use and Infill Development

C: Cultural Organization Surveys and Results

D: Cultural Resources Brochure