Little Tokyo: History, Memory, and Community Change

a report compiled by CTSJ 257: “Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory and Community Transformation,” Occidental College
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Executive Summary

“Meanings of Community in Little Tokyo” is a report created through collaboration with the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) – a community development corporation – and a class in the Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice (CTSJ) at Occidental College – CTSJ: 257: Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory, and Community Transformation. Through a series of sixteen interviews with business owners, residents, and individuals from community organizations, this research aims to paint a picture of the Little Tokyo community’s collective voice. In light of continuing and future redevelopment of the area, developing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and views of one of Little Tokyo’s most vital assets – its people – is a piece of a larger effort to document the landscape of the neighborhood at the outset of major changes that are set to occur.

Little Tokyo is a small, yet deeply complex community, and the wide variety of opinions expressed by interview subjects in the report reflect this. Each interview reveals a different perception of the community’s major stakeholders, its needs, its significance, and how it should evolve in the future. However, what ties these narratives together is a genuine sense of loyalty and care for protecting Little Tokyo so that it can exist for the next generations to live, work, and play in for years to come. In order to provide a comprehensive account of the community’s voice, this report is organized into five thematic sections – history and memory, working and living in Little Tokyo, participation in the life of the community, perception of changes in Little Tokyo, and visions for the future – which are then concluded by an analysis section.

The first section of this report expresses how Little Tokyo has a very complex history that is not well known to many both within and outside of the community. Those who are familiar with the history however, tend to emphasize Little Tokyo’s historical connection to the Japanese American experience, the impact of the economy and development, the importance of local institutions, as well as the overall idea of community. It is also a widely held view that more should learn about Little
Tokyo’s history and the reasons why and how it was created.

Moving into the present day, the experience of working and living in Little Tokyo is detailed next. Interviews from community members from diverse walks of life highlight how daily routines differ considerably based on peoples’ roles in Little Tokyo, and these schedules also tend to change depending on the day of the week and the time of day. One main similarity between them all however, is the fact that working and living in Little Tokyo entails interacting with a variety of different people, businesses, and organizations everyday. Since being a part of the daily life of Little Tokyo holds a lot of meaning for each person interviewed, many also express their hope for being able to communicate that significance to visitors.

Perspectives on participation in the life of the Little Tokyo community are described in the third section of this report. While many interview subjects are involved in collective community efforts such as the Little Tokyo Community Council and the Business Association, their enthusiasm for community participation is not held by all. However, most do agree on the necessity for all sectors of the community to participate, and so the kind of individuals and organizations who do and do not participate, as well as the amount of effort they put in, is a matter of much debate.

The fourth section focuses on perceptions of change in Little Tokyo. In the past five to ten years, Little Tokyo has gone through many physical and demographic changes. Community members particularly note a rise in Little Tokyo’s number of high-rent apartments, its developing nightlife scene, an increased sense of safety, and more variety in businesses. The community has also gone through much change recently as residents are becoming more ethnically and economically diverse, and the amount of participation coming from certain sectors, particularly the youth, is also starting to increase.

Finally, the fifth section of this report illustrates the varied visions for the future of Little Tokyo held by community members. Many interview subjects emphasize the belief that supporting small businesses and the arts are important aspects
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of sustaining Little Tokyo into the future. In addition, Little Tokyo’s future identity in relationship to the Japanese American community is a particularly critical topic of discussion because while many stress the importance of Little Tokyo remaining a safe space for the Japanese American community, others put more focus towards developing the area into a multicultural space. How the future sees these two dynamics connect or come into conflict will play a key role in determining the future direction of Little Tokyo.

This report concludes with an analysis of the major themes that run throughout each of the five main sections of this report. Little Tokyo is currently at an important crossroads where outside development and internal change are forcing community stakeholders to contemplate how Little Tokyo can move forward into the future in such a way that also preserves its long-developed and complex identity. Balancing respect for its history with acceptance of change is especially complicated by the fact that Little Tokyo’s diverse stakeholders bring perspectives to the table that do not always meet in agreement. As a broad collective however, the Little Tokyo community grants great value to multiculturalism, preservation of history, youth involvement, openness to visitors, positivity, diversity, and community symbiosis.
“Meanings of Community in Little Tokyo” reports on a collaborative effort between Evelyn Yoshimura, Community Organizing Director at the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), and a class in the Department of Critical Theory and Social Justice (CTSJ) at Occidental College. LTSC is a community development corporation that works to empower the community and provide critical necessities such as affordable housing services. CTSJ is an interdisciplinary department that provides students with critical analytic tools, theories, and methods, centered on social justice. This collaboration was facilitated by the College’s Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL) due to mutual interests and concerns about changes the community faces as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) moves forward with plans to build a Regional Connector in Little Tokyo. The class, “Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory and Community Transformation,” brings together theory and practice as students learn about Little Tokyo through academic readings and interactions with the community.

For the project, nine students, from frosh to seniors, interviewed sixteen community members based on a list compiled by Evelyn Yoshimura. Interviewees included business owners (local and chain), residents (market-rate and affordable
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housing), and individuals who work in a variety of non-profit community organizations (including service, arts, and religious organizations). This report maintains anonymity of the interviewees. Our objective has been to develop an understanding of the changes the community is experiencing and what Little Tokyo means to community members. Here, we are port on the themes and insights from the interviews. As people who are coming from outside the community of Little Tokyo, we attempt to reflect what we have heard back to the community. As we acknowledge that what we hear is shaped by our own experiences and positions in society, we strive to avoid taking ownership over what the interviewees say.

The report is organized around five major themes. First, the report illuminates interviewees’ comments on Little Tokyo’s history. Second, it reflects on their experiences of working and living in the community. The report then looks at how interviewees participate in the life of Little Tokyo. Next, interviewees discuss changes they have observed in the neighborhood. In the last theme, community members explain their visions of the future for Little Tokyo. Finally, we collect and reflect on the memories, experiences, and voices that interviewees have shared with us in order to contribute to the image of Little Tokyo as future conversations continue to shape it. We hope this project, and the effort given by Little Tokyo community members, will spark and contribute to these further conversations.
Within Little Tokyo there are multiple, overlapping layers of history. The ways these histories are learned, perceived and expressed is different for every group and individual. From the perspective of different generations; Japanese and non-Japanese persons; businesses large and small, local and corporate; non-profits and other community organizations, Little Tokyo’s history is rich and complex. Such diverse insights produce both complementary and conflicting accounts, but everything adds to the community’s history as a whole. In the end, Little Tokyo and its complexity has come to represent an important and unique social space.

A few dominant themes found through the interviews about Little Tokyo’s history are the importance of Japanese American history; the impact of economic issues, development and change; the importance of local businesses, organizations, and religious institutions; and the overall idea of community. Many interviewees express a sense of attraction and/or belonging to Little Tokyo as opposed to other Japanese communities. As one interviewee states, there seems to be a “special community dynamic that IS Little Tokyo,” that has held the space together during difficult times.

Most interviewees discuss events that have taken place after internment. One interviewee states that “Little Tokyo was the main meeting point for the Japanese American community so it made sense to come back . . .[as] members always retained ties to Little Tokyo.” However, one interviewee notes that deteriorated conditions meant that Little Tokyo gained a “reputation [as] a bad place” which “hurt the community because people stopped coming.” Yet community members came together and “instilled a sense of pride in the Japanese American youth who had never really thought of this place [Little Tokyo] as their community . . . but . . . realized how important it was to them.” With the rise of community organizations, members
of the community came together to claim the space that had developed so much meaning for them. While most of Little Tokyo has gone under considerable development and change, much initiative has been taken to preserve its history and the heart of Little Tokyo, especially with the building of the Japanese American National Museum, public art monuments and the preservation of First Street as a National Historic District. Another aspect of the community that is highly important to all interviewees is the continuation of local “mom and pop shops,” Japanese restaurants with their “comfort food,” and religious institutions. These features of Little Tokyo are just as important to the preservation of the community and its history as the actual physical space that they occupy.

Despite the depth and importance of the past, interviewees raise concerns that not enough people know Little Tokyo’s history or have interest in increasing their knowledge about it. Interviewees state that most of the history they know was found through research and participation; some feel they should know more. The interviewees who do know a lot about Little Tokyo’s history are typically involved in some kind of community organization, but each individual’s views are quite unique. Interviewees hold a range of opinions on topics such as the early years of community development, the role of Japanese corporations and their investments in the commu-
History and Memory

nity, as well as the flow of different cultures in and out of the area. For example, some are opposed to non-Japanese businesses, but others, including “youth[,] are] more open to multiculturalism” and non-Japanese experiences in Little Tokyo. There is greater collective agreement in terms of the desire to keep larger chain stores out of the historic community. Everyone agrees that change is good and inevitable, but how that change happens and what is lost, transformed or incorporated into the community is always a complex topic of dispute and negotiation. Despite these differences, most feel loyalty to the area and believe that “it is important for people to know how and why Little Tokyo was formed.” Without its history, there would not really be a Little Tokyo; interviewees indicate that it is vital to continue to share and understand both the “positives and the negatives.”

Key Points
- Knowledge of history is important for the continued existence and meaning of Little Tokyo
- Despite its importance, sometimes not enough is known or shared about the community’s history
- Majority understand change is necessary and inevitable All hope that as change happens, community history continues to be respected
- All hope that as change happens, community history continues to be respected
- Connect future to the past
Depending on whom you ask, a typical day in Little Tokyo looks very different but always involves interacting with others. Interviewees bring to light various intra-group contrasts, including daily pace, amount of community interaction, and sentiment towards Little Tokyo, as well as other differences. Most of the information we collected reflects the daily agenda for community organizations, residents, and two types of businesses (those open during regular business hours and those with longer hours) but does not necessarily reflect the lives of community members in general, although many of the contributors have multiple roles as members of the Little Tokyo community.

According to the nine people involved in community organizations (religious, cultural, youth and social service) we interviewed, their daily pattern can be unpredictable because of its fast pace and the variety and quantity of activities that go on. Many subjects express involvement in a multitude of meetings and opportunities to network on a daily basis. As one interviewee explains, he meets with his staff, community members, and business people as well as writing emails, organizing, and
working on simultaneous projects. While many subjects express that there is a certain amount of routine built into their schedules, others are constantly faced by new tasks posed by the needs of the people whom they serve, including visitors and community members. Every day holds new and old challenges so that the “typical day” for the community organizations is a day that is always rewarding but is unique from the previous and from the next.

As explained earlier, many involved in community organizations must work with other businesses and community members in order to most effectively meet their own goals as well as common goals they have with other community entities. While this is a central aspect of organizations, one new youth organization stands out by saying that their ties to the community did not happen automatically. They say that just because they are a Japanese American organization did not mean that everyone in Little Tokyo accepted them when they formed. Overall, though, most express positive opinions about the community of Little Tokyo and their organizations’ relationship with it. One interviewee who works in a social service organization describes a common sentiment about working in Little Tokyo: “[There is a] good sense of community, when you go to work you feel like you are going to your ‘second family’ because everyone is working towards one goal.”

Similarly, for businesses that are open mostly in the daytime, working in Little Tokyo means that they, their employees and their customers are a part of a comfortable daily pattern. Everyone who is a part of that pattern, including employees from neighboring businesses and even the mailman, chat throughout the day sharing local news; there is constant community bonded mostly through oral interaction. For these types of businesses, working in Little Tokyo provides a safe and familiar community atmosphere mirroring that expressed by most community organizers. As one eatery owner explains, by developing relationships with other businesses all parties involved will benefit and if they are all thriving then his establishment will also be thriving.
In contrast to the regularity of businesses primarily open during the day, the speed for businesses that are open more often and for longer hours varies from day to night and within the week. These businesses see different types of clients. One coffee shop owner within the community states, “There are three specific groups of customers: office workers, weekenders and the dinner crowd.” A restaurant owner gives another example of the changing appearances of the neighborhood. On a typical Friday, according to him, lunch time is populated by mostly businessmen and businesswomen from the downtown area who usually do not come by except during their break, but at night there are many more people who are younger and who come to Little Tokyo for fun. The coffee shop owner previously mentioned says that the Little Tokyo Roots Association is one of the leading organizations within the community to promote nightlife. Another resident agrees, saying that their
project, the “Tuesday Night Café[,] is a space that is helping revitalize Little Tokyo.”

While most community members express positive feelings about Little Tokyo, some offer areas for improvement. One interviewee who works in a social service organization comments on the community trying to “get rid of the smoke shops and other stores with mature products” in order to improve conditions for children in the community. Another believes that it is “not a friendly place for young people,” while others comment on the continuing struggle to reduce crime. Yet the individual who works for improvement for families also comments that while (nearby) “Skid Row is a huge challenge in the community, it is [our] neighbor, and they are a part of the Little Tokyo community,” pointing attention to the need to improve conditions for all. This expression of the need to connect to others is reflected by another interviewee who states, “Little Tokyo cannot survive by itself. It needs to reach out and create larger connections.” One resident of the community comments, “Some of the tenants [in my complex] don’t even know about the organizations and programs within Little Tokyo and greater downtown LA,” while another comments that it’s really difficult to be a resident because there are certain amenities that aren’t available in the immediate area.

Still, other interviewees find what they need and opportunities to make significant connections within Little Tokyo. One business owner and resident explains that her family had settled in Little Tokyo originally because they didn’t have much choice, but now she has sentimental reasons for living in Little Tokyo and keeping her business where it has been for over 60 years. Many residents express a similar emotional link to Little Tokyo. Two religious leaders comment that their congregations’ places of worship have not changed since their return to Little Tokyo because most people feel a link to their own personal history as well as a link to the community. One interviewee says that Little Tokyo is like a “Japan away from Japan,” with a strong sense of togetherness: “You are able to come here and get things you can’t get anywhere else.” Another says, “I love the fact there are some places you can buy
Japanese things. Like a kimono shop and you can even buy a Japanese saw.” People within the community appreciate not only Japanese products, but also the unique environment of the community. As one business owner and resident explains, “[Little Tokyo is a] safe, clean, quiet, pleasant place to live. It’s really cute here.” Most residents believe that Little Tokyo is a safe and friendly neighborhood. A resident and an employee of a community service organization says, “There is a good sense of community.” She goes to work and explains that on an ordinary day she goes out, walks, and talks to business owners because for her it is “nice to keep that friendship going.”

Interviewees express the desire for Little Tokyo to be a place infused with meaning for community members and visitors, not simply somewhere that people treat “like a food menu,” picking items from the community without understanding their significance. Another interviewee states, “It must be a state of mind not just a location. There needs to be a conversation about what Little Tokyo is so that people are really aware of it. It should be about the visitors and the business people who know what Little Tokyo is and being able to take something meaningful away from
their experience within Little Tokyo.” A business owner expresses a concern about the long-term viability of the businesses that are at the heart of the community: “We do bring in a lot of people and tourists. But you always wonder about the economic realities as far as supply and demand: Do the people who come here want to patronize our small businesses? Or do they want to come look at all the Japanese-y things and go to the Johnny Rockets?” Another interviewee mirrors concerns about what Little Tokyo is in the eyes of those who visit: “People need to realize this is not their personal Asian fantasy land! I mean (Little Tokyo) just looks like any other part of the city, and so it’s so funny to see people trying to construct something that isn’t quite here.” An individual who works in a social service organization brings the concerns back to the importance of maintaining the qualities of the community: “Little Tokyo has been around for 125 years and we don’t want it to disappear because it is a part of our history, it is a part of our heritage and legacy, a lot of people care about the community, and want to see it continue for another 125 years.”

Key Points
- Different schedules. Range and contrasts in routines
- Organizations: Fast pace, busy. Challenges but overall sense of community
- Businesses: Comfortable pattern / Busy, with different kinds of people
- Residents: Room for improvement, but many have strong sentimental ties
- Establishing lasting meaning for visitors and community members
The sixteen interviews within this study provide a wide range of perspectives on community participation. Many members contribute to the well-being of Little Tokyo through the Little Tokyo Service Center, the Little Tokyo Community Council, sports, religious organizations and youth programs. One community member says of the Community Council, “[It] pulls people together and provides a space to talk and build relationships.” A noted restaurant owner on First Street participates via the Little Tokyo Business Association, with ties to the now-defunct Community Redevelopment Agency.

Multiple spiritual leaders within the community feel that participation is at a good level. In general, the interviews conducted with these leaders provide some of the best information because of their unique relationships to the community. One religious leader within the community who is also a member of the Community Council feels his organization is very active within the community and has done a lot to boost levels of participation. He is a supporter of Kizuna, a group of Little Tokyo youth who work with the older generation to increase youth involvement.
Another spiritual leader says, “We have been engaged from the very beginning [conversations about] the Regional Connector and in other things as well like the High Speed rail.” Both spiritual leaders mention work to build stronger relationships between Korean and Japanese residents, particularly among older generations. Spiritual organizations within the community are highly active with its inner workings from youth to the elderly, as well as involvement with businesses.

Youth involvement is a focal point of discussion within the community. Many members feel there is a lack of involvement, but cannot figure out why, while others have created programs to fill the void of youth involvement. One
Participation in the Life of the Community

community member has dedicated her career to youth involvement programs and has started many youth-specific summer programs. Programs do exist for the youth to participate in, despite the relatively low level of activity. A prominent business owner within the community is adamant about keeping youth programs for Japanese American youth active. A leader within the Community Council feels that more youth participation is necessary, and that youth bring important skills to the community. A spiritual leader within the community takes it further in saying that it is necessary to bridge the gap between the generations and is not as concerned about a lack of involvement. In general, the interviewees agree youth need to be represented, but one comments on negative interactions that occur between generations when youth act entitled, alienating older members of the community. This interviewee sees Kizuna as offering a positive way for youth to become involved. He says, “It’s been really gratifying to see Kizuna . . . They are getting the message out to the youth to come back whether it’s a theater performance, or a festival, or a concert. We are really happy that we are actually passing on the baton to them and that there’s a hope, not only a hope but almost a confidence that Little Tokyo will survive after we are done.”

In a somewhat more critical voice, a First Street business owner who participates in the Little Tokyo Business Association feels that community participation is somewhat lacking. This view is not singular: another noted community member and owner of a small business says, “[The community has a] strong sense of com-
Participation in the Life of the Community

munity in pockets,” meaning that the community consists of tight-knit groups and small networks, but these are disconnected from each other. The First Street business owner shares this view. He feels participation is low because community members are reluctant to make major changes within the community or because they are not able to work through disagreements..

The perception of levels of participation do vary. A spiritual leader believes that businesses and restaurants cooperate and participate together well. This leader says that what is “neat about Little Tokyo” is that for the most part, all the businesses cooperate with each other. Another leader thinks the opposite, commenting that he doesn’t hear enough from businesses, despite seeking their input. A business owner from Japan says, “Participating within the community is not a duty, but a cause.” This quote exemplifies the attitude towards participation in Little Tokyo. Participation is clearly very important to many members in all walks of life. For this reason participation is a focal point and a point of differing perspectives within the community.

Key Points
- Little Tokyo Community Council is the most popular route of participation
- Businesses participate via the Little Tokyo Business Association
- Variety of perspectives on participation
- Youth participation is an important focal point
- Religious organizations provide programs and other ways to participate
- High rent apartments/condos raise important issues
- Many more visitors and a growing nightlife
- Little Tokyo has become safer and more diverse
- Need for more parking space
- Opinions revolving around the Regional Connector are varied with uncertainty about how it will affect Little Tokyo
Over the course of the interview process, many of the participants had much to say when it came to the changes that Little Tokyo has gone through over the past five to ten years. Many of the interviewees express a change in the types of residential buildings that have been coming into Little Tokyo, including apartments and condominiums. One interviewee notes “A significant change is the new residences. They are nice apartments.” A few interviewees point out the increase in high-rent apartments in the area. One interviewee observes other changes that accompany this growth: “With all this housing, and a lot of the market rate housing, you have to be like a young professional. They moved in . . . that’s been a big change. . . . They were not here before. Before, downtown and little Tokyo were mostly old folks, and poor folks.” With the new type of living accommodations in Little Tokyo, community members are seeing new types of people moving into Little Tokyo, especially young
Perceptions of Change in Little Tokyo

people. It is not only the residential side of Little Tokyo that has seen a change in the prices of buildings, however. One interviewee talks about how the increase of price on property in Little Tokyo is also affecting businesses: “Even in just my time here, we’ve lost a lot of businesses. Just like a month ago, my favorite sandwich place just closed down because their rents were raised and they couldn’t afford it.” The Little Tokyo community is currently seeing a change in the prices, with effects for those living and working there.

Interviewees note that Little Tokyo has become much livelier and vibrant over the past five to ten years. Little Tokyo had not always been seen this way: “It used to feel really dead. It just seemed sometimes sketchy, not alive.” Many of the interviewees said this has changed a lot. Little Tokyo had previously gone through a period where it lacked visitors, but now there are people walking the streets at all times. “People are coming into Little Tokyo whether in the day time or even night time. I say ten years ago I might be here at 7 o’clock or 8 o’clock and I’d look outside and there’d be no cars parked on the street . . . but now I go out at 9 o’clock and people are still looking for parking spaces. . . . This means that people are coming into Little Tokyo.” As the community becomes more inviting, many of the interviewees comment on the night life that Little Tokyo has gained. One states, “The nightlife has gotten fairly major. Little Tokyo has gotten really vibrant as a destination.” The more-welcoming Little Tokyo is becoming is causing for an increase in foot traffic. Although most members of the Little Tokyo community that were interviewed see this as a good thing, a couple of interviewees believe that as Little Tokyo becomes trendier, it is more likely to become a tourist trap.

A majority of the interviewees mention that as Little Tokyo increases in popularity, the community is becoming safer. During the period when Little Tokyo did not have many visitors, the amount of crime was much higher than it is now. A business owner notes, “We used to have cars vandalized or broken into; we used to have complete security systems because of break-ins, but over the past five years we
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haven’t had any attempted break-ins . . . crime has really tapered off.” Most interviewees feel that the reason for the decrease in the amount of crime over the past five to ten years results from Little Tokyo becoming an inviting and exciting place. Crime has been brought down because now there are more people walking the streets of Little Tokyo at all hours. This has allowed for Little Tokyo to become a safer place than it previously had been.

Little Tokyo is also becoming a more diverse place. One interviewee explains that Little Tokyo used to consist of mainly Japanese people, but now there are many Chinese, Korean, Latino, and Caucasian members of the community. Some interviewees notice that there are many new businesses coming into Little Tokyo that are serving different kinds of foods, which is also adding to the diversity of the community. Another factor that people are noticing is the increase in new kinds of residents
Perceptions of Change in Little Tokyo

into the community. Most of the interviewees do not mind the increase of diversity in Little Tokyo. Most share the same mind set as this interviewee: “The world is changing, so is Little Tokyo. A lot more mixing going on and you can’t help it. We can’t just close the door and say ‘Japanese only.’” However, a few interviewees express a fear that the Japanese history and culture that exists within Little Tokyo will go away as it becomes more diverse. And because of this, they are skeptical of the diversity that is coming into Little Tokyo.

A main issue that many of the interviewees have noticed that has been emerging in Little Tokyo is parking. One interviewee expresses that Little Tokyo used to consist of many more parking structures than it does now. Five interviewees mention parking as a major issue in the neighborhood. They raise the question: if there is nowhere to park, how are people supposed to visit Little Tokyo? Many business owners believe that parking is a major issue because if people not from the community want to come to Little Tokyo to eat or spend money in any way, they need places to park. Although this is currently a huge issue for some, a few interviewees express no concern for parking whatsoever, focusing on other issues for the community.

The issue of parking is currently connected to concerns about the construction of the MTA’s Regional Connector in Little Tokyo. Amongst the interviewees, there are many different views when it comes to the Regional Connector. A majority of the interviewees express that they believe that the period of time when construction is happening will have negative effects on the Little Tokyo community. Although that might be the case, they feel that in the long run, the Regional Connector will be good for the community and that the community will be glad that it is there. Other interviewees believe that the Regional Connector will have more negative effects on the community. They believe that development around the Regional Connector may lead to changes in the character of Little Tokyo. Other interviewees are indifferent to the Regional Connector or do not really know what it is. However, almost all interviewees who are aware and care about the Regional Connector are concerned about
an increase in traffic and congestion on streets during the construction period.

As noted in the section above on “Participation,” youth involvement is on the minds of many people within the community. Five of the interviewees think that over the past five to ten years Little Tokyo has been lacking youth participation within the community. However, three of the interviewees believe that this is changing and that the youth are beginning to get involved. These community members think that this is happening because they believe that Little Tokyo has become a much more youth friendly place. They think that younger generations are realizing
Perceptions of Change in Little Tokyo

the importance of Little Tokyo and are therefore becoming involved within the community. However, a majority of the interviewees think that Little Tokyo is lacking almost all youth participation, “It’s a very interesting dilemma when you talk about who are the leaders of Little Tokyo right now and I would probably bet on it that there is no one under fifty.” Many people feel this is the case because the youth are not taking Little Tokyo as their community and also as a piece of their own identity. Although there are conflicting thoughts on whether or not the youth are involved within Little Tokyo, almost all the interviewees agree that youth participation within Little Tokyo is important. Little Tokyo is currently making an effort to get the youth involved through organizations like Kizuna. The community sees the need for new ideas and thoughts that younger generations would bring to Little Tokyo. Some of the interviewees also realize that Little Tokyo consists mainly of older people. They therefore understand the importance of youth involvement because when the older generations pass, it will be up to the younger generations to preserve Little Tokyo. It is because of this that many of the concerns of community members revolve around the youth and ways to get the youth more involved.

Key Points
- Little Tokyo has gained many high rent apartments
- Little Tokyo now has many visitors and a nightlife
- Little Tokyo has become safer
- The Little Tokyo community has become much more diverse
- Parking has become a major issue in Little Tokyo
- There are different perspectives on the Regional Connector and how it will affect Little Tokyo
- The participation of the youth has become a source of a lot of discussions in Little Tokyo
Visions for the Future

In the collected interviews, there is a strong trend supporting small businesses for the future viability of Little Tokyo. Almost all of the interviewees express a dislike of corporate-owned or chain businesses. One individual says that corporate-owned stores were “what killed small-town America” and another states that they “literally are taking people’s money and not giving back or contributing.” The residents and community organizations we interviewed support smaller businesses as well, stating that they give Little Tokyo its character; one interviewee states that the businesses are the “heart of Little Tokyo.” In support of the businesses, several interviewees express a vision of Little Tokyo with more parking, with concerns about the disruption
Visions for the Future

and loss of parking during the construction of the MTA Regional Connector. One business owner says that “Parking is already tough in Little Tokyo and a lot of spots will be lost with expansion by MTA, so hopefully they will do something to create a sort of shuttle system.”

Three interviewees see arts and other cultural forms as integral to the community of Little Tokyo. Not only do they feel that the arts draw in customers who then patronize businesses, but they also feel that developing Little Tokyo as an arts district would supply a resource currently lacking in Los Angeles. A community arts leader sees interconnections between the arts and the sustainability of the neighborhood, stating, “As an artist I would like to see more art forms . . . because art tends to bring forward-thinking people. . . . Art [also] brings in a lot of money.” Because of the Japanese American National Museum, the Geffen Contemporary, East West Players, Historic First Street, and the Tuesday Night Cafe, Little Tokyo already has a strong arts foundation to build on in the future.

Another strong pattern in the collected interviews is a vision of Little Tokyo as a central haven for Japanese Americans. A religious leaders says that he “really see[s] the need for a central place where everyone can regard it as their home in Little Tokyo. . . . We are hoping that the younger generations will buy into that, otherwise the Japanese American community will pretty much disappear with the blending into the general population.” Almost all the interviewees emphasize the need to bring youth into the community and express their concerns about youth preserving the community of Little Tokyo as well as Japanese heritage. The desire for more youth participation is shared even by business owners, one of whom talked about bringing in activities such as a bowling alley to attract kids. One movement that is well supported by business, community organizations, and residents alike is the upcoming Budokan or recreation center project. Although there are some comments of resistance to the Budokan, most of the interviewees think it is a great step forward to draw in youth. One business owner says in support of the Budokan, “I know that
they are building an athletic center here. I think that will bring a lot of families here and a stronger sense of community.” There are also several calls by community organizations and residents for places for community members and guests to hang out and where people would feel safe and relaxed. There are also repeated calls for green spaces and gardens, as well as a better library.

Interviewees interested in continuing to improve the quality of life in Little Tokyo include both small business owners and those interested in a more residential Little Tokyo, who talk about encouraging families to move into the community. Several interviewees, including business owners, emphasize the need to clean up Little Tokyo and to make it a more safe space for customers and for youth. One interviewee, who works in a social service agency, envisions Little Tokyo as a safe space for youth around downtown Los Angeles. She says that she sees Little Tokyo as “more of a community . . . not too much based on big businesses, . . . more of a safe place for the families, a safe place for youth.” However, this vision of residential Little Tokyo could raise challenges for the community because bringing in more amenities for residents, such as a grocery store, could create an influx of chain stores that goes against other visions of Little Tokyo. A small business owner’s vision of maintaining the character of the community entails making sure that Little Tokyo is known as an enjoyable, safe space that visitors would leave with “a smile.”

The interviewees also hope for better community integration and communication. Several individuals voice a hope for better communication between the different stakeholders of Little Tokyo. One community organization leader expresses concern about who is currently considered a stakeholder, stating that “There are various degrees of ownership” in Little Tokyo that are unsustainable in the future. These interviewees see organizations such as the non-profits and the Little Tokyo Community Council as leading the way towards a more integrated and well-represented future.

There is some ambivalence among the interviewees regarding how best to
Visions for the Future

preserve Little Tokyo’s Japanese heritage. The interviewees are evenly divided on the issue of maintaining Little Tokyo’s Japanese character in the future versus creating a more multicultural community space. Several of the community organizations and businesses feel very strongly that Japanese heritage is the heart of Little Tokyo and that emphasizing this heritage would bring more attention both to the businesses and to the rich history of Little Tokyo. Religious organizations especially feel that Japanese Americans need a central place they can feel at home and accepted. One religious leader illustrates this view, saying he sees Little Tokyo as “A central location for Japanese Americans to be able to identify with and . . .

to access. Even as it gets smaller, as long as the spirit is intact, I think at least for the next couple of generations it will be okay.” Many feel that the history of Little Tokyo should be preserved, and especially community activities such as Nisei Week.

Offering another view, a good number of interviewees feel that “dilution” of Little Tokyo’s Japanese heritage is inevitable. They propose a multicultural community that “can be for everybody” and emphasize the fact that Little Tokyo has always been a richly diverse community. One community organization leader says that she wants “to see Little Tokyo as more complex-- as a very layered place, with a really rich history.” She continues, saying that “Little Tokyo should never be exclusive.” The interviewees of this opinion propose a global city ideal; one interviewee references the Seattle model, and another envisions a Little Tokyo united with Skid Row and Boyle Heights. A religious leader also references a successful initiative where Korean and Japanese senior citizens breached cultural barriers by watching soap operas
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together as a move in this direction. This religious leader speaks positively about the more diverse people who come to services at his institution. Still, the interviewees who support multiculturalism also want to maintain Little Tokyo’s history and heritage. A quotation from a community organization leader best sums up this vision: “Diversity is good. It’s trying to make that balance between who’s coming into Little Tokyo and who’s keeping up the history of Little Tokyo.”

Key Points
- Support small businesses as the heart of the community
- Support arts in the community
- Cultivate residential areas
- Need for community space
- Continue to create Little Tokyo as a safe space
- Increase communication within the community
- Japanese culture / Multiculturalism
Analysis and Conclusions

The interviewees’ voices that speak to the themes above clearly show the rich texture of life in Little Tokyo. From what we have observed over the course of this project, Little Tokyo is currently at a tipping point in which the future of the community is in danger of being determined by sources outside of the community. From the varied perspectives of interviewees from different positions in the community, we see how the perception of past and future changes and their varying effects will impact opinions on how to help direct the future of Little Tokyo. Many residents and business owners of Little Tokyo have reacted to the prospect of change with a sense of positivity and hope for the future, indicating a positive dynamic toward change and the incredible agency that community members have in Little Tokyo because of its strong leaders and history of community organizing. There are many enthusiastic voices seeking to improve the community and to participate person-
Analysis and Conclusions

ally in that change. However, there are also many pressures to retain the community dynamics and landmarks that Little Tokyo has treasured historically. Balancing this respect for a historical space with the acceptance of change is difficult-- even more so when Little Tokyo’s vast array of stakeholders, unique history, distinct multicultural background, and precedent of community involvement pull the conceptions of what a future Little Tokyo should be like in different directions.

The changes that Little Tokyo has been experiencing are already affecting the community dynamic. There are important differences in the ways business owners, community leaders, and residential members of the community view the purpose of little Tokyo and how to help it grow. This is in part because Little Tokyo is such a diverse area that serves many different purposes. Although the concept of multiculturalism has been presented as a building block of the community, it poses its own problems because the more backgrounds that are in need of representation in the community, the more difficult it is to find solutions for problems that everyone can agree on. These differences are more prevalent lately due to the approaching MTA project. The community is at a tipping point: the MTA Regional Connector exposes how fragile a community like Little Tokyo can be when faced with the threat of large corporations, public projects, and real estate developments.

This threat has opened an opportunity for the community to work together, but doing so can be difficult because of the broad and varied impact the community has on different members. Some community members say there is an increase in communication between business, residents, and community leaders, in particular through the Little Tokyo Community Council, while others say there is not enough communication. Either way, Little Tokyo is at a crossroads and continuing work is necessary to ensure its preservation. There is a tone of optimism in most of the interviews as people see the reduction in crime, the increase in business, and the influx
Analysis and Conclusions

of youth culture as examples of the positive direction the community is going. This optimism may be coming from the hope that the community will be stronger as it faces changes together. Community members may remember the successes they have had in the past, with their responses to the proposed jail in the community and to the Office Depot project. These provide hope for both surviving and thriving amidst new changes.

Community members come from such different backgrounds that perceptions of the community can sometimes be very different. Some see Little Tokyo as a great triumph of community organizing and a crucible for bringing community members together, while others see it as just a place of business. Some view the community as divided, but this could simply point to a larger trend of community members wanting more direct communication. There are also many anecdotes of good communication currently, especially through associations, community groups, and business organizations. There are notable differences in opinion about various issues between businesses and community organizers, different generations, and residents versus business owners. Through all of the differences in opinion, though, every interviewee celebrates some unique positive dimension of Little Tokyo: a piece of the community that they value, whether other Little Tokyo participants agree with them or not.

Awareness of past changes can have a major impact on how Little Tokyo will change in the future, especially since community organizing has been a major impetus in the past. Many actions in the past, especially in the sphere of community organizing, are being mirrored currently in the attempts to band together and remain an important part of future decision-making, even while some members hope for greater communication. The past also has an impact on the perceptions of important physical spaces in the community, as places that have been important to Little Tokyo historically are considered more essential to the community.

The responses to the MTA Regional Connector by interviewees and the com-
Analysis and Conclusions

The community at large can help to characterize the nature of the community’s reaction to an uncertain future. Little Tokyo’s community response is distinctive in its positivity and its history of effective change. For example, the exhaustive history of the Little Tokyo redevelopment project offers a multitude of examples of effective community organizing, change, and collaboration, sometimes in opposition to the City of Los Angeles’s larger plans. Newer developments, including the nearby Office Depot raise additional questions about the importance of a historical urban landscape and the future of what businesses will be considered positive contributions to the space.

Finally, many interviewees complicate the nature of Little Tokyo’s unity. Many are of the opinion that in order to have a strong community, there needs to be unity. One community member states, “It’s not just the organizations, it’s not just the buildings, it’s the people that are involved in all the organizations and spaces.” One concern is that while the community is coming together now around the MTA Regional Connector and collaborating on other community concerns such as crime, they do not necessarily come together independently for positive bonding actions. In other
words, the community comes together in order to address problems to be fixed. Perhaps Little Tokyo is just the most visible in the public eye as it responds to forces that may threaten its viability. A community “coming together” can mean many different things: It can mean mutual support for businesses, regular public meetings, or other ways to continue to develop the community. The Budokan project clearly raises community hopes for continuing to come together in a positive way to continue the social bonds and resources of Little Tokyo.

Overall, Little Tokyo has community energy in abundance and an overall positive reaction in the face of uncertainty. This energy has fueled conversations and compromise in the past, and can continue to in the future. On a broad community level, it treasures such traits as multiculturalism, preservation of history, youth involvement, openness to visitors, positivity, diversity, and community symbiosis. It offers an inspiring example of a growing and changing community held together by community members and basic principles. The phrase “Welcome to Little Tokyo. Please remove your shoes” embodies a collective attitude of respect for Little Tokyo’s history and prospective future and a celebration of Japanese culture while welcoming all people from different backgrounds and walks of life.

### Key Points

- Little Tokyo is at a tipping point
- External factors
- Internal dynamics
- History and multiculturalism
- Community response to the MTA’s Regional Connector can help to shape the future
- Response to changes are distinctive, optimistic, and draw on a history of effective change
- Community energy and positive reaction in the face of uncertainty
Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Background
What is your name?
Where do you work and what do you do?

History

Community organizations:
What does your organization do? What is your organizational mission?
How did your organization come to be in Little Tokyo? Why is it here?
How long has it been here?
Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?
What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? If your family was interned, do you know anything about your family's experience returning from internment?
How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?
What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo's history?
What part of your personal history or your organization's history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and pass on?

Business:
Why did you choose Little Tokyo for your business?
How long has your business been here?
What type of business prospects did you see in Little Tokyo?
Why have you kept your business here?
Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?
What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? Do you or your business have any connection to that history?
If the business was here before internment, do you know anything about the experience of returning from internment?
How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?
What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo's history?
What part of your personal history or your business's history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and pass on?

Residents:
How did you choose to live in Little Tokyo?
How long have you lived here?
Did you grow up in the area? If yes, what kinds of changes have you seen?
What do you know about Little Tokyo's history? If your family was interned, do you know anything about your
Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

family’s experience returning from internment?
How did you learn the history of Little Tokyo?
What kinds of different stories have you heard about Little Tokyo’s history?
What part of your personal history in Little Tokyo would you want to preserve and teach the outside world of LA?

Working / Living in Little Tokyo

Community Organizations
Can you take me along a typical day working in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)
What relationships do you have in Little Tokyo with other organizations or businesses? (both formal and informal)
Whom does your organization serve?
What makes Little Tokyo special or meaningful for the work you do? For you?
What makes Little Tokyo a positive place for your work?
Are there any particular challenges to your organization’s work here?
Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders for the community?
Has the Gold Line station affected your organization? If yes, in what ways?
What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Businesses:
Can you take me along a typical day working in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)
What relationships do you have in Little Tokyo with other businesses or organizations? (both formal and informal)
Who is your clientele?
What makes Little Tokyo special or meaningful for business? For you?
What makes Little Tokyo a positive place for your business?
Are there any particular challenges to having a business here?
Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders for the community?
Has the Gold Line station affected your business? If yes, in what ways?
What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Residents:
Can you take me along a typical day living in Little Tokyo? (Where do you go, where do you know people, what places do you visit?)
Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Do you belong to any organizations in the community?
What makes living in Little Tokyo special or meaningful?
Are there any particular challenges to living here?
How do you see Little Tokyo in relationship to larger communities?
Who do you think are the biggest stakeholders in the community?
Do you commute out of Little Tokyo?
Do you use the Gold Line?
What is the heart of Little Tokyo? (business, cultural, geographical)

Participation in the Life of the Community

Business and Organizations:
What are some ways that you and your business/organization participate in the community?
Why do you do so? (Do you feel responsibility to contribute?)
Does your business or organization sponsor any events in the community? If yes, which?
Would you consider yourself an active member in the community?
What do you hope to accomplish through your participation?
What do you think of community participation by others?
Are you a member of the LT Business Association? The LT Community Council? Do you see any benefits to the community from these? If you're not a member, any particular reasons? Are there specific businesses or organizations you think would be good contributors if they were to become members?

Residents:
What are some ways that you participate in the community? (Do you attend events or classes here?)
Why do you do so?
Do you belong to any organizations here?
Would you consider yourself an active member in the community?
What do you hope to accomplish through your participation?
What do you think of community participation by others?
The Little Tokyo Community Council? Do you see any benefits to the community from these? If you're not a member, any particular reasons? Are there specific businesses or organizations you think would be good contributors if they were to become members?
To what extent do shops in Little Tokyo meet your needs? Do you shop here or elsewhere for what you need?
Are you able to find services you need here?

Changes in the Community (last 5-10 years)
Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

Businesses/Organizations
Have you noticed any changes that affect the community in Little Tokyo over the last 5-10 years? If yes, what kinds of changes? (physical, other)
How do you feel about the changes, both personally and for your business/organization?
How have changes stimulated or raised challenges for your business/organization?
Have you heard about the MTA’s Regional Connector? What do you know about it?
What changes might this create for the community? What are your thoughts about those possible changes?
Do you see any major generational differences regarding what Little Tokyo is about?
What changes would you like to see?

Residents:
Have you noticed any changes that affect the community in Little Tokyo over the last 5-10 years? If yes, what kinds of changes? (physical, other)
How do you feel about the changes?
How have changes affected you personally?
Have you heard about the MTA’s Regional Connector? What do you know about it?
What changes might this create for the community? What are your thoughts about those possible changes?
Do you see any major generational differences regarding what Little Tokyo is about?
What changes would you like to see?

Vision for the Future

Businesses/Organizations:
In 10 years, what is your vision for the ideal Little Tokyo? How would it be the same or different from how the community is today?
How does your business/organization fit in with that vision?
How is your vision of Little Tokyo connected to Los Angeles more broadly?
What role do you see for other types of businesses, organizations, residences? Do you see a role for chain stores and restaurants, corporate-owned ones?
What is the role of the community’s history in your vision of the future?
Do you feel you have input into the future of Little Tokyo? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
Do you think Little Tokyo is headed in the direction of your vision or your business’s/organization’s?
Is your business/organization doing anything to create changes in the community toward this vision?

Residents:
In 10 years, what is your vision for the ideal Little Tokyo? How would it be the same or different from how the community is today?
Appendix: Sample Interview Questions

How is your vision of Little Tokyo connected to Los Angeles more broadly?
What role do you see for different types of businesses, organizations, residences? Do you see a role for chain stores and restaurants, corporate-owned ones?
What is the role of the community’s history in your vision of the future?
Do you feel you have input into the future of Little Tokyo? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
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