Introduction: Disaster, resilience, placemaking

How is a place made? This chapter argues that places – and especially ethnic and immigrant places – are made through continual negotiation between disastrous forces and grassroots responses to those forces. Certain cultures of participation, collectivity, and futurity ensure that a place and its community will be resilient in the face of disaster, while communities lacking these cultures – what some have lumped under the term ‘social capital’ – often succumb to external pressures too great for a brittle place to endure (Putnam, 2000; Chetty et al., 2014; Chetty et al., 2016). This quality turns out to be far more important for a place’s resilience than the often more-visible technological and infrastructural attempts to prefigure disaster. As the case of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles demonstrates, while disaster is not something to celebrate, it is also the bad seed that has in part made these places what they are today.

In this chapter, after providing a short introductory history of development and disaster in Little Tokyo, I will share three stories of contingent placemaking in this historic Japanese American community, micro histories which demonstrate the link between things falling apart and community coming together. First, shared elements between the development of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) and the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) demonstrate how the coincidental timing of community development and urban destruction created avenues for building local power. Second, the disastrous decline of Los Angeles’ economy during the 1990s enabled Little Tokyo to recentralize as the cultural and spiritual home for Japanese Americans throughout the Southland. Third, a land seizure, of the historic Union Church in Little Tokyo, gone wrong ultimately led to its rebirth as one of the most important sites for Asian American art and culture throughout the US.

In sum, these narratives point toward a theory of urban placemaking that is likely to make any urban planner or designer uneasy: many of the most critical urban developments that make place and define community are contingent phenomena. The urban designer, understood for a long time now to lack the ‘master planner’ capacity valorized in narratives of modernity, might even lack what little agency is left within urban plans. But this reality ought to be seen as liberatory; rather than toil over plans that might remain on paper or, worse, cause harm, urban planners and designers are invited to enter into a participatory and dynamic exchange between the vagaries of life and the resilience of communities to make place and sustain the future.
From the dust of bad stars

Little Tokyo: A history of development and disaster

Little Tokyo, a historically Japanese American neighborhood of about 6,000 residents and workers in Los Angeles, is a community forged through concerted responses to crisis and disaster. From redlining and discrimination, to the wholesale uprooting of the community during the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II; from urban renewal and redevelopment to the gentrification of today, Little Tokyo is a neighborhood that should not still exist. It is a beautiful aberration to the inexorable processes of urbanization under neoliberal capitalism, contingent upon the ad hoc responses to unexpected challenges (Brenner et al., 2009; Brenner, 2013). Urban scholar Dana Cuff has termed this quality of the city, its never-ending process of destruction and rebirth, as being ‘provisional’ (2001). Who could have predicted Executive Order 9066? Or that Little Tokyo would end up today sandwiched between some of the highest real estate values in Los Angeles? Yet Little Tokyo abides, standing as an example that other communities, desperate from the impending threat of gentrification, look to for inspiration and survival tactics.

From the Latin for a ‘bad star,’ the word ‘disaster’ originated from astrological explanations as to why bad things happen without apparent reason. Chalk it up to troubled alignments between the planets and stars. We now know, of course, that there is no such thing as disaster from the stars: bad things happen because people will them to (Cazdyn, 2007; Stabile, 2007). Poorly designed buildings, mismanaged food supplies, the unexpected consequences of new technologies, greed and caprice from those in power: Katrina and Haiti taught us that these are the reasons why disaster strikes (Virilio, 2007; Smith, 2007; Frye, 2007). We are the bad stars. In our contemporary moment of hyperrational management and regulation, it takes an alignment of bad stars for multiple redundant systems to fail – or, as some might argue, for them to succeed beyond their wildest expectations – for disaster to truly befall us (Cazdyn, 2011). Disaster has been befalling Little Tokyo since its beginnings.

So how is a place made? People, embodying the weight of gender, race, class, and history, interact with space to give it meaning and life (Lefebvre, 1991; Tuan, 1977; Massey, 1994; Massey, 2005; Lipsitz, 2007; Rios et al., 2012; Rios and Lachapelle, 2015; Kaplan, 2018). In the case of Little Tokyo, it begins with a single immigrant entrepreneur, a former sailor, Hamanosuke ‘Charlie Hama’ Shigeta. Shigeta opened the Kame Restaurant on East First Street in 1885, acting as a beacon that drew in additional Japanese immigrants who opened businesses, started families, created temples, churches, and other cultural institutions. This immigrant urbanism flourished even through the Great Depression, where second-generation Nisei took their business savvy to their parents’ flagging shops and restaurants, launching Nisei Week in 1934. The week-long festival unified the community, bringing a new generation of customers to Little Tokyo’s shops, along with a distinctly Japanese American culture – neither Japanese nor American, but a hybridized third culture – which married, for example, traditional Japanese odori street dances with American beauty pageant queens. Thus, the place of Little Tokyo was made through daily life, commerce, and culture, growing to a thriving community of some 30,000 Japanese Americans who lived, worked, and commingled in the several city blocks just to the east of Los Angeles’s downtown.

That is, until February 19, 1942, just two months after the United States entered World War II, when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 calling for the forced relocation of Japanese Americans to incarceration camps in remote areas (the degree to which internment disrupted Little Tokyo is difficult to convey in this short section, and further reading is recommended; see: Reeves, 2015; Inada, 2000). This virtually erased Little Tokyo from the map as its entire population was incarcerated in faraway places, forcing leases to be broken, places of
worship to see their congregations dwindle down to zero, and business to close their doors. (While Little Tokyo was a thriving place, it did so in the face of redlining, racial covenants, and other forms of discrimination which ensured that Japanese Americans could not own land, but instead were forced to rent, making their tenure tenuous.) What happens when a place is unmade? In its place emerged Brownsville, a hotbed of Black life and culture as African Americans from Central Avenue just to the south of Little Tokyo moved up and took over the plentiful leases offered by desperate landowners. Destruction begets creation. Eventually, after 1945, when most Japanese Americans were released from the camps, the community of Little Tokyo slowly re-created their home using the shuttered temples and churches as hubs for rebuilding. A handful of sympathetic, white clergy remained as stewards of the cultural buildings which held belongings and the right-of-use for those returning from Manzanar, Heart Mountain, and the other camps that dotted remote locales in the American West.

Little Tokyo was never the same. All places change and evolve over time, but the wholesale removal of the community from its place in the city meant that change here was disastrous, sudden, and permanent. As Little Tokyo was rebuilt, it became known as a spiritual home for Japanese Americans throughout Southern California, a site for religious and cultural institutions, and a place where Japanese commerce was centered. But its residential population was unable to return to leases long given away and, instead, Japanese Americans dispersed throughout the Southland. Its geographic footprint in Los Angeles shrank, diminished to only a few city blocks. Adding salt to this recent wound, even some of these blocks were seized by the City through eminent domain to build a new police headquarters, a jail, and a handful of other administrative buildings.

But a new generation of Japanese Americans, the Sansei, came of age during the 1960s as the student and civil rights movements swept the nation. Consciousness building about community and race gave these young artists and activists tools to confront the powers which had sent their parents to concentration camps and had stolen their land (Ishizuka, 2016; Jeung et al., 2019). Moreover, the experience of internment shaped attitudes toward power, government, and solidarity: Little Tokyo had to stick together, it had to build a culture of organizing and activism, and its community were not content to accept things as they came, or to allow outside powers dictate what was to happen to their place in the city. So began a new history of resistance, resilience, and contingent placemaking in the face of challenges to Little Tokyo’s place and sense of belonging in the city.

The destruction of urban renewal begets community organizing

The Sun Building, once located in the heart of Little Tokyo, was a squat, three-story building containing spaces for community organizations, artists, and low-income residents. In interviews with community leaders and artists from Little Tokyo, the Sun Building came up frequently as a key site where local arts and culture flourished. But it also stood out as a symbol for the predecessor of what we now call gentrification: urban redevelopment of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite it being an integral part of community life and despite numerous protests from local activists, it was demolished in 1976 to make way for the New Otani Hotel and Weller Court, high-end properties designed to cater to tourists from Japan. These developments were key pieces in the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project (LTRP), a long-term urban renewal plan enacted in 1970 as a partnership between the City of Los Angeles, its semi-autonomous Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), and local and international businesses (Blount et al., 2014; Marks, 2004; Suga, 2004).

The destruction of the Sun Building happened to coincide with several other events. First, there was a new generation of young, Japanese American artists and activists in Little Tokyo who were coming of age amidst the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This generation of Sanseis were more likely to speak up and act out against perceived injustices in comparison
to past generations. They started numerous activist organizations centered around Little Tokyo including Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCRR) which advocated for reparations from Japanese American incarceration during WWII, Gidra which was a radical newspaper covering issues around race, class, and politics, and Japanese American Community Services-Asian Involvement (JACS-AI) which provided social services. Activists affiliated with the multi-generational Little Tokyo Peoples’ Rights Organization (LT-PRO) were some of the key actors in protesting the Sun Building’s demolition through marches, sign drops, and petitioning.

Second, what would ultimately become JACCC was founded in 1971 as part of LTRP. Its team began to raise funds from local and international donors, corporations, and public sources, creating a vision for the organization and its building, plaza, and theater which would ultimately open in 1980. By this time, Little Tokyo activists worked to ensure that the organization would not only be a bridge for introducing American audiences to culture from Japan but also a site for sharing the distinct Japanese American culture in Little Tokyo which had flourished for a century. Furthermore, activists ensured that the organization and its properties would support not only high culture, but also local arts and community organizations. Thus, its name evolved from the Japanese Cultural Center to the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center — though, to this day, the Japanese transliteration of the Center’s name remains the ‘Japan–US Culture Center,’ perhaps as a means to placate Japanese funders.

The third element of this story is perhaps the most important, even as it is the most accidental. Bill Watanabe, a local community leader and activist, had applied for and received a community development block grant from the City of Los Angeles which he had hoped to use to provide rent subsidies to the numerous tenants struggling after their eviction from the Sun Building. But after the funds were awarded, Watanabe discovered that they were only permitted to be used for direct services, not the rent subsidies he had hoped for. Watanabe and several of the small service organizations that had popped up throughout Little Tokyo were forced to join forces to use the money, and LTSC was born in 1979. Furthermore, these activists rallied to secure rent subsidies from the developing JACCC and its new building. The organization would live up to its new name, providing low-rent spaces for numerous arts and community organizations who once had a home in the Sun Building.

While the eviction and demolition of the Sun Building is marked with sorrow by many of Little Tokyo’s leaders, it is also the flashpoint for new beginnings in the neighborhood. The complicated history of the Little Tokyo Development Project is hardly one to be lauded without qualification, yet the many events that unfolded under its development program led to the establishment of JACCC, which then acted as a new home for the very tenants that it displaced — an outcome, it should be noted, that only came with hard-earned resistance from a galvanized community and its activist political leaders. Furthermore, LTSC went on to become an institutional home for many of these young activists and community leaders, eventually moving beyond its origin as an accidental service provider to a multi-dimensional organization. Its activities now include a community development corporation that has built affordable housing and community spaces, advocacy for Little Tokyo's interests in local policy debates, and a support system for small businesses and culture bearers in the neighborhood. This giant in Little Tokyo’s history and development may not have been established were it not for the accidental misreading of a grant’s restricted fund uses.

A damaged urban economy enables community land ownership

Beyond the establishment of JACCC, LTSC, and rental spaces for dozens of arts and community organizations, these organizations have also served to migrate significant blocks of land.
out of the speculative real estate market and into the non-profit sector. This happy byproduct of a contingent history has ensured that current pressures of gentrification are at least slowed to a degree where Little Tokyo has not vanished from the map like so many immigrant neighborhoods across the US. This process began decades earlier, sparked through efforts by community leaders to ensure that something like the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans would never happen again, especially after facing ongoing issues around racial covenants and discrimination, and the City of Los Angeles’s use of eminent domain to build the LAPD headquarters.

Coincident with LTRP in the 1970s, many key religious institutions in the neighborhood made the decision to begin capital campaigns, acquire land, and build new buildings. Some institutions, including Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple and Centenary United Methodist Church, had been forced out of Little Tokyo in the 1910s and 1920s, and this was a return to a shared place in the city. Others, including Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Temple and Union Church of Los Angeles, were concerned about the LTRP’s plans and wanted to get ahead of eminent domain by relocating to new buildings outside of the LTRP map. Construction was completed on the various new architectural insertions into the landscape of Little Tokyo for each of these four institutions in 1976, 1995, 1969, and 1976, respectively. Here, too, we see activism and community organizing in response to unexpected and even imagined threats, placemaking contingent on response to threat, disaster, and discrimination.

In the 1990s, Los Angeles’s economy was in the doldrums. The exodus of important aerospace and defense industries disproportionately impacted the local economy. Other factors included racial unrest and police violence symbolized by Rodney King and the uprisings of 1992; natural disasters including the 1994 Northridge earthquake, fires, and landslides; and the apotheosis of suburbanization as core areas continued to be subject to white flight with new immigrants moving in and wealthier, whiter residents moving to the city’s edges (Davis, 1990; Klein, 2008). Los Angeles’s downtown, Little Tokyo included, were areas that many people avoided, and many of the small businesses that formed the backbone of Little Tokyo either left for other areas or were shuttered entirely. Community leaders knew that more needed to be done. This process of re-centralizing Japanese American cultural life in Little Tokyo continued: LTSC established its community development arm in 1994 and began plans for low-income housing, cultural facilities, and more.

Thus, over the course of decades, Little Tokyo has gradually returned as the dominant site for Japanese American culture and symbolic identity – despite the fact that it has very little residential stock and is ethnically diverse (residents are only about a quarter Japanese American; Painter et al., 2016). This process has happened through fits and starts as institutions and organizations undertook their own steps to secure a place in what some community leaders have referred to as ‘the mother ship.’ In aggregate, the recentralization of Japanese American culture in Little Tokyo has ensured its long-term viability within both the Japanese American community and the broader public imaginary as a place with a marked Japanese American identity. Many other ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods cease to function as subsequent generations assimilate not only culturally but also geographically as they move to other areas, in contrast to initial immigrants who are forced into enclaves and are dependent on mutual aid and familial connections (Ellis and Wright, 2005; Li, 2006; Toji and Umemoto, 2003). Furthermore, the fact that these institutions have operated as cultural, non-profit, or public entities has removed their land from the speculative real estate market in a spatial pattern geographically distributed throughout Little Tokyo, inoculating it from the worst of gentrification pressures – an impressive accomplishment, given its location amidst some of the highest value land in LA.
An earthquake sparks community cultural development

One structure that deserves special attention is the old Union Church building. As the US National Park Service describes this historic site,

> The Japanese Union Church of Los Angeles was established February 7, 1918 through the merger of three congregations, the Los Angeles Presbyterian Church (est. 1905), the Los Angeles Congregational Church (est. 1908), and the Japanese Bethlehem Congregational Church of Los Angeles (est. by 1911).

(Waugh et al., 1988)

The church completed its shared home in 1923 and was active until World War II when the entire congregation was incarcerated. The building was used for several years as a community center for the new Black community which had moved into Little Tokyo. After the return of Japanese Americans to Little Tokyo in 1945, the building was rechristened as the Evergreen Hotel, and it was used as a resettlement and rebuilding center. It finally returned to its original purpose in 1949, after the community center found a new home and the Evergreen Hotel ceased operations.

Later, as LTRP gained steam through the 1960s and officially began in 1970, church members were concerned about their location in an area that was slated for redevelopment. They preemptively relocated, selling their property to the City of Los Angeles, which in turn leased it to the CRA. The church ultimately found a new parcel of land a few blocks away, and they moved into their new facility upon its completion in 1976, completing the sale of their previous site to the city in 1978. While Union Church undertook these activities to preempt the expected eviction through eminent domain by LTRP, the imagined threat would never even materialize: the old Union Church building sat abandoned for decades. So placemaking can also be contingent even to imagined threats and unfulfilled expectations. But the formation of a new home for Union Church is only part of the story.

Among the many issues facing LA in the 1990s was the 1994 Northridge earthquake. The old Union Church building was condemned as unsafe following the earthquake, though this had little impact as it had been sitting vacant for 20 years. Nevertheless, this jolt compelled the City to figure out what to do with the property, ultimately leasing it to LTSC with its newly instituted community development corporation. The agreement was for 44 years at 1 dollar per year with the understanding that LTSC would renovate and seismically retrofit the building – work that ended up costing $3.4 million at the time. The rechristened Union Center for the Arts was envisioned as a community center for the arts, and the first tenants who were all signed in 1995 have remained to this day: the historic Asian American media arts organization Visual Communications, the Asian American studio arts and exhibition center LA Art Core, and the oldest Asian American theater group in the US, East West Players. The site has also become home to the oldest Asian American open mic night, ‘Tuesday Night Cafe,’ which has become an important venue for activism and organizing by youth.

The Union Center for the Arts is yet another example of space that has been held in public and non-profit trust, out of the speculative real estate market, acting as a buffer against rapid increases in rents and property costs. But, moreover, its role as an internationally recognized home for Japanese American and Asian American arts and culture has cemented Little Tokyo’s identity in the public imaginary as one fundamentally interwoven with these ethnic and immigrant urbanisms. East West Players, in particular, has international acclaim and yet it was itinerant, located in various sites elsewhere in Los Angeles, belying its historico-geographical connection
to Japanese American and Asian American identity. The creation of the Union Center for the Arts located this identity within Little Tokyo, contributing to the making of place. And this would not have occurred but for several disasters and grassroots responses to these events: the threat of imminent domain by the CRA, which forced the relocation of Union Church, which volunteered to sell their property to the City of Los Angeles; the long-term abandonment of the property, leaving this fenced-up blight in the eyes and minds of community members and, especially, LTSC; and the Northridge earthquake itself compelled the City to act, giving actors in Little Tokyo a window of opportunity to reclaim the property and transform it into one that could benefit the neighborhood.

Conclusion: Sustaining Little Tokyo

History delicately balances between multiple forces, inexorably moving forward as places are made, destroyed, and rebirthed in its wake, as Walter Benjamin described in his Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History (1940). The outcome of this process is one determined based on a calculus between the vagaries of life – contingent on disaster, serendipity, chance, and other unpredictable external factors – and the culture of the community based in that place. These stories of Little Tokyo and its continued life, even as so many immigrant urbanisms of its kind have faded away, is hardly one where disaster was absent. Rather, bad stars shone especially bright on the neighborhood, but a distinct culture based on the specific place of Little Tokyo and its experiences in coming together to meet these challenges created an active and communal resilience capable of withstanding these unexpected forces. This form of urban resilience, based in specific, place-based cultural praxis, is one worth further examination. Too often, resilience – especially in a world which is rapidly heating and has risk and disaster on the mind – defaults to top-down, infrastructural interventions that can have the unintended consequence of disrupting the very cultural practices that give a place resilience. Walls, levees, and transportation networks stand in for a disappeared population.

These stories of Little Tokyo also point beyond mere survival in the face of disaster. At other times, the unexpected serendipity of coincidental timing and the fortunate misreading of scripts – combined with a participatory, communal, and creative culture – led to moments of placemaking that have injected new life into the community. The histories of placemaking are, at times, intentional and determined. But, more often than not, after a plan has been envisioned and drawn, its execution goes awry. Unexpected factors, human error, and any number of other forces lead to placemaking contingent on the unpredictable. But communities that have built up a culture of resilience, participation, engagement, and creativity can respond to these contingent moments to turn the proverbial lemon into lemonade.

One additional theme that has repeatedly emerged amidst this process is the relationship between placemaking and property rights. Little Tokyo demonstrates the importance of this invisible and often overlooked social construction, which undergirds nearly everything about urban development. Because of the not-entirely intentional stockpiling of land in Little Tokyo into cultural, non-profit, institutional, and public uses, the neighborhood has been effectively inoculated against the worst pressures of gentrification. The slicing and dicing of property rights into religious institutions, non-profit housing, and cultural organizations has guaranteed that a certain amount of square footage will always remain outside of the speculative real estate market. Moreover, its spatial distribution across Little Tokyo has also acted to suppress some of the most rapid forms of speculation that occur as parcels are aggregated, joined, and expanded, with the spread of a ‘hip, saleable vibe’ from parcel to parcel, as if the buildings on them were on fire.
The theory of urban placemaking built out of these elements – as one contingent on disaster and the culture of resilience embodied by its community, combined with the underlying factor of property rights – is manifesting again today in Little Tokyo (Crisman and Kim, 2019; Kim, 2012; and Kim, 2011). In response to the recognition that the three last large parcels of land in the neighborhood are publicly owned and slated for development, the community has come together to envision the future it desires and to stake a claim over its place in the city under the auspices of a coalition named Sustainable Little Tokyo. This action was, again, the communal response to a bad star: LA Metro razed the entirety of one of the last remaining blocks of Little Tokyo to make way for construction on its Regional Connector project. This block, along with two others, is publicly owned and subject to the pressures of community organizing and activism, unlike most of the privately held land that occupies urban spaces today. If history serves as a guide, these factors point toward a sustained yet entirely unknowable future for Little Tokyo and its place in the city.

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References


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