

Protecting Ibasho: The Impact of the Arts and Culture in Little Tokyo

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



1949 Nisei Week Queen Terri Hokoda appears in the Nisei Week Grand Parade. Courtesy Toyo Miyatake Studio.

This report seeks to answer the following questions: Does arts and culture have impacts in Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo community, and what are those impacts? The short answer is a resounding yes: In addition to having major impacts, arts and culture is foundational to the existence of Little Tokyo as a place with a historic Japanese American identity. Impacts include a staggering amount of economic activity, community cohesion and social capital, stakeholders with an unusually high degree of political engagement, and development of new community leadership. Historically, arts and culture has served as a means to bring community together and spark new life into local, family-run businesses in Little Tokyo — such as the Nisei Week Festival’s creation in 1934 — and as a way to organize and hold on to place in the face of urban renewal during the 1960s and 70s. Today, Little Tokyo continues to be a commercial and cultural hub, acting as the “spiritual home” for Japanese Americans across Southern California, and as a nationally-recognized site for Asian American and Pacific Islander arts and culture.

This sense of home and belonging is captured in the Japanese word “ibasho,” which connotes the psychological comfort and well-being associated with feeling at home, or knowing you have a place to belong to in the world. Little Tokyo’s arts and its distinct culture have enabled it to thrive with economic vitality. Importantly, arts-based efforts have also channeled this vitality into community strength and equitable development. Little Tokyo stands as a stark contrast to many communities, especially those experiencing runaway cultural development and deep concern around gentrification and displacement. While Little Tokyo has faced seemingly insurmountable challenges in the past, and continues to face threats to its place in the city, its cultural foundation provides an alternative narrative — that arts and culture do not automatically drive gentrification, and can help slow or even stop it. Arts and culture in Little Tokyo has served to create, sustain, and protect ibasho, and should be celebrated, supported, and safeguarded so that this community can continue to thrive into the future.

LITTLE TOKYO

BIG CULTURAL IMPACT

Even though Little Tokyo has a tiny footprint, its cultural shadow looms huge.

In addition to massive cultural institutions, it is home to over 300 businesses, including many legacy businesses specializing in Japanese American food and goods, over 20 annual festivals, and countless cultural arts groups.



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|---|--|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1A Japanese American National Museum | 5A Japanese American Cultural & Community Center | 11 Zenshuji Soto Mission | 17 Koyasan Buddhist Temple | 24 LA Metro Regional Connector site |
| 1B Former site of Nishi Honganji Buddhist Church | 5B Aratani Theatre | 12 St. Francis Xavier Church Japanese Catholic Center | 18 Japanese Village Plaza | 25 800 Traction Ave |
| 2 Union Center for the Arts | 6 Casa Heiwa | 13 Centenary United Methodist Church | 19 Little Tokyo First Street Historic District | |
| 3 Go For Broke Monument | 7 Terasaki Budokan | 14 Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple | 20 Weller Court | |
| 4 The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art | 8 Little Tokyo Public Library | 15 Jodoshu Buddhist Mission | 21 Parker Center | |
| | 9 Little Tokyo Towers | 16 Union Church | 22 First Street North development site | |
| | 10 Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple | | 23 Mangrove development site | |



KEY POINTS

- **Over 15 major Japanese American and Asian American arts, cultural, and religious institutions are located in Little Tokyo**, making it ground zero for Japanese American culture and community in Southern California, and even across the United States as **one of three remaining official Japantowns**.

Arts and culture organizations in Little Tokyo generate \$55.5 million dollars & 1,734 jobs per year

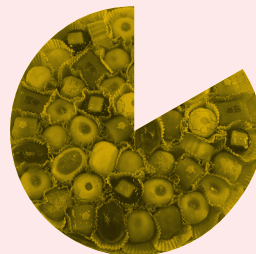
- Arts and culture play a powerful role in generating economic activity within Little Tokyo, which also benefits greater Los Angeles and even California. Conservative estimates suggest that arts and culture organizations in Little Tokyo generate some \$55.5 million in direct economic activity every year, which goes on to directly and indirectly support some 1,734 jobs.
- The economic impact of arts and culture has often been cited in scholarly literature as being a factor in sparking gentrification and displacement. Little Tokyo stands in contrast to this narrative due to its history of **using arts-based activism to hold on to place and generate economic benefit**.

- Little Tokyo has a distinct place-based culture situated in its Japanese American heritage, and arts and culture has played an important role in **developing a culture of organizing and activism tied to community development**.
- **Arts and culture are greatly valued in Little Tokyo**, including all popular, traditional, and everyday forms such as food culture.

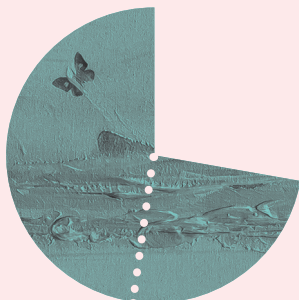


88%
of community stakeholders believe **festivals** are fundamental to Little Tokyo

86%
of community stakeholders believe **food** is fundamental to Little Tokyo



82%
of community stakeholders **spend money on food** while visiting



72%
believe **Japanese-American identity is crucial to Little Tokyo**

One third of these believe this even though they are not themselves Japanese-American

- While Little Tokyo's demographics are changing with more mixed-race, pan-Asian, and even non-Asian American stakeholders, its **Japanese American heritage is still extremely important**. Almost half of stakeholders describe Little Tokyo's Japanese American identity as both important and fundamental to their own personal identity, and another 25% describe it as important even though they are not Japanese American.
- Art and culture's impact in creating a **highly engaged community** is demonstrated in the fact that half of all stakeholders participated in political activity and volunteering in Little Tokyo over the past year, and political engagement is tied to community health both economically and socially.



50%
of all stakeholders participated in **political activity and volunteering** in Little Tokyo over the past year

- Many stakeholders are concerned about gentrification, which takes a distinctly cultural form in Little Tokyo since it is largely a commercial and cultural center rather than a residential neighborhood. Local, **family-run** businesses are seen as an important part of Japanese American culture in Little Tokyo, and **their disappearance and protection** are the biggest concern of stakeholders.



"Atomic Nancy" spins records at the closing night of awareness-raising and SLT-sponsored ART@341. Photo by author.

- Community leaders are very cognizant of the **role that property rights play in gentrification**. Past efforts to re-centralize Japanese American cultural institutions in Little Tokyo have been key to **holding onto place**. Current initiatives include a "community investment fund" and Sustainable Little Tokyo.
- **Arts and culture in Little Tokyo are key to empowering new leaders and enabling new stakeholders** who respectfully abide by the community motto: "Welcome to Little Tokyo, please take off your shoes."

"Welcome to Little Tokyo, please take off your shoes."



- Sustainable Little Tokyo uses **arts-based organizing and activism** to generate economic activity for local businesses, build up new leaders, create culturally-based spaces for engagement, build social and political capital, and stake claim over three major city-owned parcels of land slated for development. **It integrates sustainability of the environment, culture, and community.**



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