

Chapter 4: Community Concerns: A Place for Young Adults

Much time was spent getting to know the Japantown community and the presence of young adults in Japantown. The need to address what is currently available in Japantown for young adults was brought up often by older community members and during my personal contacts with Japanese and Asian American young adults.

Community Resources

I attended two focus groups — one of the two family focus groups and one of the two young adult focus groups conducted by Asian Neighborhood Design and Chinatown Community Development Center.

Throughout Phase One of the planning process, I attended a series of Japantown Planning, Preservation, and Development Task Force and Environment Committee meetings. The environment committee is one of four committees made up of task force members as well as interested community members. The environment committee was of particular interest because the committee deals with Japantown's physical environment such as urban design, neighborhood character, and public spaces. The other three committees are: the economic and community development committee, which discusses Japantown as a cultural, historic, and commercial center; the real estate and land use committee, which focuses on issues of existing housing and commercial uses, land ownership, and development opportunities; and the communications and marketing committee, which deals with events and festivals.

During the time of the research, a young adult summit was held in Japantown, in which I also participated. The summit brought together about 30 young adults from around the Bay Area, both Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals. The summit provided an opportunity for Japanese young adults to get to know one another and voice their concerns and visions for Japantown.

Asian Neighborhood Design and Chinatown Community Development Center were the consultants for the first phase of the community planning process, which has now been completed. The consultant team gave me access to the data they collected, which include neighborhood demographics, transcripts from focus groups, questionnaires done with passerbys in Japantown, and the Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat (SWOT) analysis with each of the four task force committees.

There are six main concerns regarding the limited activities for young adults in Japantown that were mentioned often by participants of the focus groups, by young adults at the summit, in the SWOT analysis, and in the consultant team's reports.

1. *Lack of a place to hang out*

People of all ages expressed a need in Japantown for a place to "hang out." For older adults, "hang out" spaces seem to mean bars, cafes, or outdoor seating. Young adults have expressed a different definition of "hang out" spaces. They prefer places that are flexible and informal. At such places, one can expect to find friends, meet other young adults, and be able spend time without

spending much money. Some imagine a coffee shop with music; some imagine a space for performances by young artists; and others imagine a place for young adults to organize activities and events. For most, such places, although in Japantown, should not be for people of just Japanese ancestry.

2. *Basketball as the only form of culture available to young adults*

Many Japanese American young adults grew up playing on basketball leagues in Japantown. They live outside of Japantown and the leagues provide an opportunity to meet other Japanese Americans. Many have said that aside from basketball, there are few activities for them in Japantown. For the young adults who do not play basketball, they feel it is difficult to become engaged in the community and to interact with others of the same age.

3. *Consumer/consumption as the only form of involvement available to young adults*

For many young adults, Japantown is more of a commercial center than a community center. It is a place for them to eat Japanese food and buy Japanese goods. They pay to see a movie at the AMC Kabuki, to bowl at Japantown Bowl, or to eat, and leave when they are done.

4. *Cultural identity*

Japanese young adults come from diverse backgrounds. Some are international students from Japan or are first generation in the United States and therefore have stronger ties with Japan. Some

have a long family history in the United States and have grandparents and parents who were impacted by the internment during World War Two. There are also young adults of mixed race. Despite the diverse background, all have expressed the desire to connect or reconnect with the Japanese culture. They have identified the need to create opportunities for young adults to be in Japantown, whether it is to hang out with friends, work, or volunteer.

5. *Encourage Japanese/Asian arts, culture, and entertainment*

Currently Japanese arts, culture, and entertainment are dispersed throughout the city. For example, the Japanese Tea Garden is at the Golden Gate Park; Japanese art is displayed at the Asian Art Museum; and the San Francisco Taiko group, although has a retail shop in Japantown, practices elsewhere. Thus, young adults who are involved with Japanese arts do so outside of Japantown.

6. *Definition of Community*

Many Japanese young adults, who grew up outside of Japantown, feel that their idea of Japantown as a community differs from that of community leaders who grew up in Japantown. The community leaders can draw from their past experiences of when there was a large Japanese residential population surrounding Japantown.

Observations

Observations were done in Japantown on three separate occasions: Friday, September 24, at 3:00pm; Thursday October 30,

at 7:00pm; and Saturday, October 16, at 2:00pm.

Distinctions were made as to whether users appeared to be within the age of 18 and 30, younger, or older and what they were doing.

The pedestrian traffic inside the mall is about double that found on the streets. During the evening count at 7:00, inside Kintetsu Mall in front of Isobune, 135 people passed by during a 15-minute time interval. Outside on Post Street, close to the Isobune street entrance, 66 people passed by during a 15-minute time interval.

In the evenings, young adults made up a higher percentage of the pedestrian traffic. On Post Street, young adults made up about 30% of the pedestrians counted in the afternoon during a 15-minute interval, and over 40% in the evening.

Outside the mall, stationary groups eating or talking were found on Buchanan Pedestrian Mall by the fountains, in front of Japantown Bowl, and in front of AMC Kabuki. Most groups by the fountains did not stay there very long. On average, people left after 5 to 10 minutes. Inside the malls, stationary groups were usually at the cafe tables, at the benches outside the bookstore, and outside of restaurants waiting to be seated.

Generally, English and Japanese speaking young adults frequent different places. For example, Japanese young adults were often found in front of the magazine racks at the Kinokuniya Bookstore, at Maruwa Supermarket, and at People's Video, where they can buy Japanese books, magazines, and food, and rent Japanese movies and subtitled American movies. The groups of Asian young adults in front of Japantown Bowl and AMC Kabuki were usually English speaking.

A summary of the pedestrian traffic counts and observation maps are attached in the appendix.

Japantown Pedestrian Foot Traffic				
Post Street (near Isobune entrance)				
	Children (0 to 18)	Young Adults (18 to 30)	Older adults (over 30)	Total
Thursday				
7:00 - 7:15				
Oct. 30, 1999	2	29	35	66
Friday				
3:00 - 3:15				
Sept. 24, 1999	7	25	42	74
Saturday				
2:00 - 2:15				
Oct. 16, 1999	9	20	50	79
Kintetsu Mall (near Isobune entrance)				
	Children (0 to 18)	Young Adults (18 to 30)	Older adults (over 30)	Total
Thursday				
7:00 - 7:15				
Oct. 30, 1999	11	66	58	135
Friday				
3:00 - 3:15				
Sept. 24, 1999	15	56	88	159
Saturday				
2:00 - 2:15				
Oct. 16, 1999	17	62	92	171

Interview

Interviews were conducted with twenty-five people in their twenties. Efforts were made to interview people of diverse interests. There were three criteria for selecting people to interview. They are in their twenties. They live in San Francisco or the East Bay, so that for them Japantown is a possible destination place that does not require more than an hour of driving. Their demographics reflect the demographics of the people Japantown attracts – Asians of mainly middle or upper middle income.

A total of 10 males and 15 females were interviewed. The average age is 26. Thirteen work in the Bay Area. Twelve are students – two undergraduate and ten graduate students. Twenty four of the twenty five consider themselves Asian. Ten of the twenty five consider themselves Japanese or Japanese American.

The discussions were built upon 2 basic questions:

- 1) Do you frequent Japantown? If so, for what? If not, why not?
- 2) Where do you go with your friends when you get together? Why?

The community concerns identified from the focus group discussions were that Japantown does not have enough to draw young adults. These concerns were confirmed in the interviews.

Of the twenty-five people interviewed, twenty-three have been to Japantown. Of the twenty-three, none goes to Japantown regularly. They go “once in awhile” or “occasionally to eat.”

There is a general feeling that Japantown is a commercial

center. Of the people interviewed, most go there to eat, watch a movie, and bowl. Several people said that they go to Japantown for movies because the AMC Kabuki is clean. Japantown Bowl is one of only a few bowling alleys in San Francisco and in the East Bay.

The Kinokuniya Bookstore is a destination for many Japanese newcomers. Of the newcomers interviewed, many go to the bookstore for current magazines and books. Several newcomers, who live in the East Bay, mentioned that when they go to the bookstore, they will also buy groceries and eat in Japantown, but in general they can find less expensive Japanese goods and restaurants in the East Bay.

Only a few people go to Japantown for services. For the newcomers interviewed, the bulletin board outside of the Maruwa Supermarket is a frequently used source of information.

During one of the youth focus groups a comment was made that it is difficult to learn about the programs in the community, especially for those who are new to the area or who do not know anyone involved in the community. This comment seems to ring true for those interviewed as well. Aside from annual events, such as the Cherry Blossom Festival and the Street Fair, only a few interviewed mentioned that they are aware of and go to community events. The people, who are aware of community events, volunteer at Kimochi Senior Center.

Perceptions of Japantown were not asked directly. But, when asked whether they go to Japantown and for what, many commented on their impressions of Japantown. Some felt that Japantown is old.

Three of the newcomers interviewed said that it does not reflect Japan. There is a disconnect between what they expect and what they experience.

When asked why they go to Japantown, no one mentioned to “hang out with friends.” Instead, specific activities and places were mentioned. The Kinokuniya Bookstore and the Maruwa Supermarket were the only retail stores mentioned by name. Others were identified by type or location, for example, “to rent videos,” “to eat sushi,” or “to eat at that corner restaurant.” In contrast, when they spoke about other commercial districts they visit with their friends, they described more general activities, for example, “to look around,” or “to walk around.”