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Japantown Redevelopment Past and Present

AsianWeek Staff Report, Oct 20, 2006

Last year, filmmaker and activist Boku Kodama was close to wrapping up his project documenting one of San Francisco Japantown's most turbulent eras, the 1960s and '70s when the neighborhood was literally demolished in the name of redevelopment.

But, when Kodama saw history about to repeat itself in 2005, he shifted gears and decided to bring in current events to give his documentary more perspective.

Crossroads in Nihonmachi shares the complex struggles of San Francisco's Japanese community through the voices of people who lived, suffered and even prospered during the postwar urban renewal period. In Japanese, "nihon" refers to Japan, and "machi" means town.

Fundraiser:

6 Degrees on Solano
1403 Solano Ave.
Albany, CA 94706

Thu., Nov. 2
5 p.m. to closing

25% of all sales will be donated to Urban VOICE and to the production.

For more info, contact Urban VOICE at (510) 655-1304 or visit www.urbanvoice.org

Before World War II, Nihonmachi was a thriving ethnic community of over 32 square blocks, and became one of the most important historic neighborhoods in Japanese American history. But after the Pearl Harbor bombing, virtually all Japanese Americans were forced out of their homes into concentration camps.

Things got worse after the war when they returned. By 1948, city leaders were calling the neighborhood a slum and San Francisco's master plan called for

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Nihonmachi's mix of residents and small businesses to be replaced with high-rises, and a major thoroughfare cutting through the neighborhood.

Properties were seized by eminent domain, mass evictions occurred and entire city blocks were bulldozed, leaving Japantown in ruins. Many described this ordeal as the "Second Evacuation."

It wasn't until only four blocks remained that an organized response from residents, small businesses, community activists and students protested any further evictions in Nihonmachi.

As a generation that experienced the civil rights and anti-war movement firsthand, many young Nihonmachi activists stepped up and joined the fight, establishing community groups such as J-Town Collective and Committee Against Nihonmachi Evictions (CANE).

"Battle lines were drawn with one side consisting of community activists, students, small businesses and renters. On the other side stood property owners with financial support in alliance with the Redevelopment Agency. What should have been a united front against outside interests ended with factions fighting each other — sometimes bitterly. It was a classic case of divide and conquer," described Kodama.

"It was a tense time for many, especially among those who wanted to stay. Perhaps the most painful conflict erupted amongst those who could afford to stay versus longtime residents and businesses that couldn't."

Fast forward to 2005, when Kintetsu Enterprises of America, owners of the Miyako Hotel, the Miyako Inn and two-thirds of the Japan Center Mall, announced they would be selling their properties to 3D Investments, a Beverly Hills land developer with a track record of building high-rise condominiums.

Kintetsu's sale unofficially represented the largest single transfer of property in Japantown ever. But once again, there was no opportunity for community input, and had to be demanded by local activists. Speculation and accusations of who in the community had information and who might benefit were growing by the day.

Kodama commented, "How Kintetsu and 3D were able to separate various influential groups within Nihonmachi is a tactic that has played out numerous times in our community's history, just like the Redevelopment Agency did in the 1960s. They divided us so that any possibility of a united front would be unlikely."

As a result of the parallels, the production staff rewrote Crossroads in Nihonmachi to include the Kintetsu-3D ordeal using eyewitness accounts, visual evidence and printed documents to tell a more current historical

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narrative about Nihonmachi.

An important goal of the project is to prepare other urban communities and ethnic neighborhoods for similar changes. Urban VOICE, an East Bay nonprofit video production company focusing on social and economic justice stories, is producing the documentary. Kodama, the group's executive director, states that since the 1850s, major change in every urban communities has occurred consistently every 25 to 30 years.

"The film is not just about the lessons of Japantown. Sooner or later, every urban community will be faced with urban renewal. Each community must be organized and prepared to have a unified voice to effectively protect ourselves against deep pockets and unfriendly development," Kodama said.

"It's important to emphasize how profiteers will exploit neighborhoods with rising property values, low economic opposition, and political complacency amongst the locals," stated Kodama.

"Developers can drive a stake into the heart of the community solely for their own financial gain. In every case we've studied, unprepared communities are left reactive and constantly on the defensive."

Currently, the biggest obstacle for completing production of Crossroads in Nihonmachi is raising funds to finish editing over 300 hours of video. All staffers and videographers are volunteers.

A fundraiser is planned for early November. The film is scheduled for release December 2006.

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