

SLC can make up for Japantown injustices — but only if they involve our community

Japantown (100 S. between 200 W. and 300 W.) was part of the heart of Salt Lake City. Before its forced decline in the late 1960s, Japantown stretched from South Temple to 400 South and from State Street to 700 West. As today's community leaders consider revitalization plans for the downtown area surrounding the Delta Center, it is important for us to take a moment to consider what this means for the community who utilize this space right now.

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The Sports, Entertainment, Culture and Convention District (SECC), which has been proposed by the city and Smith Entertainment Group (SEG), has the power to change the city. As Utah embarks on this new journey, we remain cautiously optimistic about Salt Lake City's future and the role Japantown will play in it. It is up to us as the taxpayers to ensure we move forward as the diverse community we are and to not repeat failures of the past.

The Japanese American community has been integral to Utah's economic growth since the end of the 19th century, when the first immigrants arrived to build infrastructure for the agriculture, railroad and mining industries in Utah. After the injustices Japanese Americans faced during WWII, including their experience in internment camps, many families chose Salt Lake City as Japantown as their refuge.

Unfortunately, during the height of Japantown in 1965, the Salt Palace was constructed and what was once a thriving, diverse city center became unwelcoming. The Palace split downtown by closing 100 South between West Temple and 200 West. Businesses had no choice but to either close their doors or relocate. The only remnants of the once sprawling Japantown are the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple, Japanese Church of Christ and Japan-Sage Market (now on S. Main Street). Since its original construction, the Salt Palace Convention Center has grown in size, cutting away more pieces of Japantown and eroding the cultural fabric of the city.

In 2020, the Japanese Community Preservation Committee (JCPC) spoke out in



An undated photograph of a couple in Japantown in Salt Lake City.

opposition to the West Quarter development plans to ensure Japantown Street did not become the backside to loading docks of yet another development. The JCPC was created in the early 2000s with the goal of preserving and restoring historic Japantown. In partnership with the Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency, they received approval for a streetscape beautification plan to add Japanese landscaping and artwork to 100 South. There have been recent conversations acknowledging the streetscape funding, however construction has yet to begin. With the downtown revitalization effort proposed by the city and SEG moving so quickly, we are equally hopeful and concerned about the completion and follow through on the Japantown Streetscape and the future of Japantown.

Despite its diminished size, Japantown remains a cultural and economic asset to downtown. The festivals we host are a display of our cultural heritage and bring together people from across the state, not just from our own community. The Salt Lake Buddhist Temple and Japanese

Church of Christ continually host food bazaars, workshops, exhibits, art displays and more. Despite our community's concerns, we believe this revitalization effort is an opportunity for the city, county and SEG to make up for past injustices and acknowledge Japantown as a critical stakeholder in downtown's future.

To address the past while also looking toward a brighter future, our community asks for the following items to be addressed:

Implement the 100 South Japantown Streetscape and landscaping plan;

Preserve the Japanese Church of Christ, the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple and the Japanese Garden as physical assets;

Preserve the ability to hold religious services, gatherings and festivals;

Preserve and develop additional parking for both the Japanese Church of Christ and the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple;

Promote street-facing, compatible business development with Japanese cultural design;

Promote historic signage and

wayfinding to Japantown; and

Involve Japanese American community in SECC planning.

This is our capital city's opportunity to shift the way big development responds to marginalized communities. Japantown

has repeatedly been impacted by development projects which either lacked consideration for or outright opposed the goals of our community. Will those in power see Japantown as the cultural and

economic asset so many residents support and are in favor of? Or will they repeat the mistakes past leadership have made?

Thus far, we are encouraged by the support from local leaders and hope this bodes well for a brighter future for Japantown. This is a historic opportunity to expand an ethnic enclave to once again become a thriving cultural district.

History has repeatedly shown officials and leaders only respond to those who make their voices heard, so please amplify our voices and sign the petition at www.slcpjapantown.com to support our community. As negotiations are ongoing, the Japanese American community will not sit idly as echoes of our past become resoundingly louder.

We will continue to honor our past to forge a foundation of future visibility in downtown's cityscape.

Alex Hirai was born and raised in Salt Lake City. From a young age, Alex was taught the importance of history and how it affects the present. After attending East High School in Salt Lake City, he graduated with a degree in ethnic studies, as well as a minor in history and political science from the University of Utah. He has a passion for advancing the struggle of the working class and ensuring justice for all Americans. Clarysa Park grew up in Layton and recently moved back from Los Angeles. She has a husband and two (almost three!) young boys and is dedicated to making Salt Lake City a place which celebrates diversity and inclusion for future generations. She started the petition and SLC Japantown.

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