

NARRATIVE

The Old Town History Project, Inc.
A project of the
Old Town/Chinatown Neighborhood Association

“The power of place—the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—remains untapped for most working people’s neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women’s history. The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is missing. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.”

Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*

Places matter. They do not have to be beautiful or architecturally noteworthy to be worthy of preservation. They need only be meaningful to those who inhabit them. Places are the cache basins for memory. And to be without memory is to be without identity.

To establish a firm foundation for its future direction and programs, The Old Town History Project, Inc. (OTHP) is requesting a Consultation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a new community based urban/multiethnic museum project in Portland’s Old Town. The Old Town History Project hopes to convene a two-day conference in March 2001. The conference would bring four nationally recognized leaders in community based urban history and museology and a noted performance artist to Portland to share and discuss their work and experience with a regional multidisciplinary board of ten advisors, the OTHP’s principals, and leaders and residents of the Old Town/Chinatown neighborhood. Based on evaluations and recommendations by project consultants, site visits to museums and multiethnic communities in Seattle and Oakland, the OTHP will develop a five year plan and timeline for the establishment of a permanent museum/educational site in the Old Town neighborhood. Subsequently, the Old Town History Project will submit a Planning or Implementation grant to the Endowment.

The Old Town History Project is a project of the Old Town/Chinatown Neighborhood Association established in 2000 as a non-profit corporation and foundation with a board of directors composed of leaders from the neighborhood’s ethnic, social service and business constituencies; humanities scholars and museum professionals; and business and civic leaders. The Project’s goals are both preservative and restorative. It is imperative that we record and document the histories of Portland’s oldest surviving historic neighborhood before it is too late, before the voices, stories, peoples and places are lost or forgotten in the city’s rush to develop the future. At the same time, there is an opportunity to give something back to the community and to the city. Through the creation of living history exhibitions, site specific installations, public programs and public events which both educate and entertain, we intend to bring residents and the general public face to face with the physical and multicultural presence of the past.

Project Description and Background

Known variously since 1860 as “The North End,” Japantown, Burnside, Skid Row, and, since the 1980s, as new Chinatown, Portland’s Old Town today encompasses sixteen square city blocks, bounded by the Willamette River, the old rail yards and central train station, the city center, and a former warehouse district now called “the Pearl.” Old Town has always been ethnically and economically diverse. For a city whose population is overwhelmingly white (although proportionately more so in the 20th century than in the latter half of the 19th), Old Town has sheltered a surprising succession of occupational and racial/ethnic groups, whose arrivals and departures tell a larger story of migration, class and ethnic conflict, commercial and urban development in the Pacific Northwest. The cultural landscape of Old Town has been shaped over the past 150 years by Scandinavian, Greek, Jewish, Roma, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, African American, Native American, and American workers and their families, by business owners and by those in need of food and shelter.

Old Town’s built landscape has also been influenced by periodic attempts by the city and by public-private partnerships to develop the neighborhood and to recast it as an arts and entertainment and tourism quarter. In the 1970s

and 1980s this resulted in the establishment of a new Chinatown/Japantown Historic District at the center of the neighborhood, several new restaurants and nightclubs, and the erection of a Chinese Gate beckoning visitors into the quarter. Spurred by a vibrant Saturday market, business and tourism temporarily swelled, but in the mid 1990s momentum slowed.

Now, recent development of the Pearl District to the west and expanding plans for the River District to the north have abruptly ended Old Town's isolation and seeming impermeable resistance to successful development. And, in September 2000, a \$10.5 million Classical Chinese Garden—occupying a square block just outside the northeast corner of the Historic District—is scheduled to open. The Garden's impact on the neighborhood is expected to be enormous and immediate. Annual visitation projections exceed 300,000 school children and adults. Ironically, the Garden has received only modest support from the neighborhood's small community of Chinese residents and businesses, partially because the Garden's success may spell the eventual decline of what remains of a small and fragile new Chinatown. (The original larger Chinatown closer to the city's commercial core gave way in the 1950s and 60s to urban renewal.)

The time remaining to document the social history and to record the shared memories of place in Old Town/Chinatown is thus very short. Old Town is a neighborhood whose torpor (as viewed from the angle of most profitable use and occupancy) seems to have little advantage. Despite a dense network of social service providers and numerous subsidized low income single resident occupancy housing units (SROs), efforts to slow the development of high rise luxury housing and the attendant escalating property values are not likely to be successful. Already, neighborhood leaders have reached consensus on this issue and have embraced development to a greater or lesser extent. Earlier, in 1998, in an effort to diminish tensions between business and social service constituencies in the neighborhood, a VISIONS committee was created, charged with drafting an Old Town/Chinatown Development Plan. The completed plan was approved by the City Council in spring 2000 and is now in the process of being implemented.

The Old Town History Project came into being in early 1999 in response to the Old Town/Chinatown Development Plan's limited reference to collection and preservation of the neighborhood's multicultural history. Neighborhood Association leaders, particularly those representing the ethnic communities, social service agencies and lower income residents, were sensible of the changing economic and social complexion of the neighborhood and wanted a community based oral history project which would document and represent the shared memories of place held by "all nations" and by all economic strata in the neighborhood. But lacking a suitable neighborhood repository for the proposed oral history collection as well as for the potential collection of family photographs and objects, the project remained largely a point of discussion, although a few interviews with aging residents were taken in 1999-2000.

It was a trip to New York City by the project director in May, 2000 which finally pushed the Old Town History Project into gear. New York's Lower East Side provides a number of innovative multiuse urban/ethnic history museum sites to study. Visits to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Eldridge Street Project, and the Museum of the Chinese of the Americas, as well as a ticket to Ann Carlson's stunning installation "Nite Lite"—a walking tour of Chelsea featuring site specific *tableaux vivants* of historical photographs restaged and lit in black and white—was convincing evidence that the memories and stories of place should not be detached from the places themselves. This was as much a recognition of the enormous power that places have over those who have known them intimately as their home country and over those who travel there vicariously through the lives of others, as it was a recognition of the power that places wield in reconnecting the owners and the inheritors of once shared memories and experiences.

These models also demonstrated that the urban history enterprise is by its very nature contested, a multicultural, multiclass site of conflicting meanings and intentions. It is also, potentially, a site for the realization of all that is hopeful and emergent in 21st century America. For communities such as Portland's Old Town, it need not be an either/or choice between preservation and development. "Both social history and architectural preservation have the potential of contributing to the neighborhood economic development in the city," Hayden has argued, even though "decades of 'urban renewal' and 'redevelopment' have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated."

To some degree, the memories of Old Town have been obfuscated by historians' neglect. Although primary research by the Old Town History Project into the neighborhood's rich and complex multicultural history has only begun, it is evident that this home to dockworkers, loggers, railway porters, prostitutes, lottery dens, burlesque theatres and rescue missions, has most often been a colorful "sidebar" accompanying the "mainstream" history of Portland's founding fathers.

A significant group of publications and video productions, most of them authored by non-scholarly writers, did appear briefly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coinciding with city-wide interest in historic preservation and the creation of historic districts. But all of them: Kathleen Ryan's moving photo essay with text by Mark Beach, *Burnside: A Community* (1979); Charles Reynolds' original drawings published in *Sketches of Oldtown & Old Timers* (1980); Elizabeth McLagan's *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (1980); Nelson Chia-chi Ho, *Portland's Chinatown: The History of an Urban Ethnic District* (1978); Thomas Doulis, *A Surge to the Sea: The Greeks in Oregon* (1977) and Kazuo Ito's *Issei* are now out of print. Other than a small number of M.A. theses and dissertations, primarily on the Chinese in Oregon; an interesting 1997 article by William Toll in the *Western Historical Quarterly* comparing Japanese and African-American settlement patterns in Old Town based on the 1920 census; and an oral history project of the African-American community on the city's east side sponsored by the Bosco-Milligan Foundation, there has been little attempt to reconstruct the social and economic history of Portland's urban core in the last twenty years. As a result, much of the documentary research needed to undergird the proposed museum project will have to be done simultaneously with the collection of oral histories and the development of public programs.

It had become clear by early summer 2000, that the Old Town History Project needed a physical site from which to carry out its research, community based oral history collection, and public programs, and that its long term goals might well include the acquisition of a building—preferably an intact, unaltered historic structure within which to reconstruct and represent the families, ethnicities, occupations, rituals and cultural contexts of those who once lived and worked there. As we began to envision this site, we saw that it could become:

- An interdisciplinary, living, indoor/outdoor museum and educational site bridging the humanities, arts, and social sciences, where ongoing research and community memory-making sustains and enriches the community's diversity and feeds the museum's continual renewal and revisioning;
- An intellectual and creative process flowing out from the site into the streets and public and commercial places of the entire neighborhood;
- A dialogue and collaboration between scholars, artists, community residents, leaders and activists grounded in respectful listening; and
- A site which deepens public understanding, respect and tolerance for the diverse urban places, ethnic groups, social and economic classes, religious, occupational and artistic traditions that are Old Town's heritage and human treasure.

Plan of Work and Project Timeline

Since June 2000, as it has refined its mission, the Old Town History Project has assumed shape and direction. A nine-member board has been established, articles of incorporation filed, and an application for 501c(3) tax exempt status is underway. The project director has enlisted several student interns as researchers and as volunteers, and is currently leading a senior History seminar at Washington State University Vancouver whose topic is the social and economic history of Old Town. Most importantly, perhaps, the OTHP has leased a storefront in Old Town. This gives the project a physical presence in the neighborhood, provides an office and welcoming space for meetings and discussions and a site from which programs can be launched. In addition, an inner office will be used as a sound studio for recording oral histories. Neighborhood and student volunteers will staff the storefront for 12 to 15 hours on weekday afternoons. Our plans for the next six months encompass groundwork for future programs and regularly scheduled public events in the neighborhood.

Leading up to the March 2001 consultants meeting, the Old Town History Project will focus most of its energies on widening community support for and participation in the Project and on building a secure financial foundation for future programs and operations. We will also develop a workplan and timeline for long-term archival research, and begin to lay the groundwork for on-site, for-credit internships and classes in urban, public and ethnic history, urban archeology, anthropology, and folklore taught by faculty at local universities and colleges such as Washington State University, Portland State University, and Portland Community College. Partnerships and programming involving local high school teachers and students will also be explored.

In October, we begin Wednesday evening story circles to record memories of the neighborhood as it has been seen by various residents: homeless Native Americans, residents of SROs, railway workers, and members of the Chinese, Japanese and Greek communities, for example. Through the story circles, we will reopen dialogue and awaken long-forgotten memories of place and experience. Lucy Lippard, in *The Lure of the Local*, argues for such story circles, for what she terms “the layered history of words and places [that is] barely visible to the outsider, and less and less visible even to the insider.” Story circles will allow us to identify some of the candidates for in-depth oral histories and to weave together the strands of memory, place, and experience that will become the fabric for future programs such as walking tours, site-specific installations, public art and performance.

Thanks to its storefront space, the Old Town History Project will be a regular participant in Portland’s First Thursday: an event organized by several art galleries around town, who stage their monthly openings on that evening. In October, we will host an exhibition of works by self-taught artist Charles Reynolds, whose sketches of the businesses, buildings and residents of Old Town recorded the community as it appeared in the 1970s. Reynolds, now in his 90s, will attend the opening, as will some of the people whose portraits he made nearly thirty years ago and whom the Old Town History Project has already begun to record. Plans for future First Thursdays include performance, dance and music as well as visual art exhibitions which revive and reflect the multicultural and occupational traditions and stories of the neighborhood.

Artist Ann Carlson will be visiting Portland within the next two months to discuss the performance piece she is creating under the sponsorship of the Portland Center for Contemporary Art (PICA), scheduled for March 2001. The work will be similar to the one Carlson staged in May in New York: a night-time walking tour of Chelsea in which residents served as tour guides. Tourists encountered a series of staged *tableaux vivants* with actors and artists restaging the events at the locations at which the historical photographs were taken. The Old Town History Project is working with PICA to stage Carlson’s performance in Old Town and to provide her with the background images and histories that will inform her script.

We will also continue a process begun this summer in dialogue with community business leaders and the Portland Development Commission to explore the availability of a suitable unaltered historic structure within the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District and within the two block wide Old Town portion of the adjacent Skidmore Historic District. We do not yet know whether an opportunity exists to acquire a building for non profit use at a realistic price and within a realistic timeframe. The requested consultants meeting in March, 2001 will allow us to compare the Old Town neighborhood and its remaining intact historic structures with other urban neighborhoods, drawing upon the experience of L. Thomas Frye in Sacramento and Oakland, Jack Tchen in New York City, Richard Rabinowitz in New York City and elsewhere and Ron Chew in Seattle.

The consultant meeting planned for March, 2001 will provide an essential opportunity for the Old Town community and the OTHP board to learn about and to discuss first hand the applicability of models and strategies used successfully elsewhere to create strong multiethnic urban history projects. The external consultants who have agreed to aid us—Richard Rabinowitz, L. Thomas Frye, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Mary Murphy and Ann Carlson—bring an extraordinary range of experience, knowledge and creative genius to the process. Members of the group share a “place matters” sensibility, a commitment to community based history, interdisciplinary research and practice, and innovative use of story, emotion, performance and aural and visual media to reveal complex issues of class, gender, culture and ethnicity in the industrial and post-industrial city.

The presentation of model sites and projects by the five consultants will be followed by a series of breakout or focus meetings involving national and regional advisors, project members and community leaders; working discussions of the conference as a whole; and a neighborhood meeting and reception. The March conference date has been selected to coincide with Ann Carlson’s PICA residency in Portland. Conference participants will be able to see her performance first hand prior to discussion.

Once the conference is over, we will ask our consultants and local advisors to provide thoughtful responses to the conference and for specific recommendations about the future direction of the OTHP. Two members of the OTHP will travel to Seattle and to Oakland for site visits and further discussions with Ron Chew, director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum and with L. Thomas Frye, emeritus Curator of History of the Oakland Museum of California. The results of these site visits and discussions will be synthesized with the recommendations from advisors and consultants into a set of recommendations which will be re-circulated to advisors and to community residents and leaders through

Board of Directors

Jacqueline Peterson, President

2644 NE 32nd Place

Portland, OR 97212

(Professor of History, Washington State University Vancouver)

Vasiliki Vlahakis, Vice President

3235 NE Klickitat

Portland, OR 97212

(longtime owner of Greek grocery at 6th and Couch)

Prudence Roberts, Vice President and Secretary

8225 SE 37th

Portland, OR 97202

(Curator of American Art, Portland Art Museum)

Ernest Bonner, Treasurer

2924 NE 27th Avenue

Portland, OR 97212

(former Director of Planning, City of Portland)

Genevieve Nelson

6826 N Atlantic

Portland, OR 97217

(Director, Sisters of the Road Café)

Ellen Thomas

4147 NE Flanders

Portland, OR 97232

(Director of Education, Northwest Film Center)

Judith Margles

6211 SW 25th

Portland, OR 97201

(Director, Oregon Jewish Museum)

June Arima Schumann, Executive Director

Nikkei Legacy Center

117 NW 2nd Avenue

Portland, OR 97209

Richard Harris, Executive Director

Central City Concern

2 North 2nd Avenue

Portland, OR 97209

George Azumano

4851 NW Ranier Terrace

Portland, OR 97229-2361

Ex Officio Members:

Louis K.C. Lee, CPA

318 NW Davis
Portland, OR 97209
(Board Member of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association)

Old Town History Project, Inc.

Board of Advisors

Dr. Ronald Chew, Director
The Wing Luke Museum of Asian Cultures
407 7th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104

Nancy Nusz
Folklife Coordinator/Director
Oregon Folklife Program
Oregon Historical Society
1200 SW Park
Portland, OR 97205

Terry Toedtemeier
Curator of Photography
Portland Art Museum
1219 SW Park Avenue
Portland, OR 97205

Professor Laurie Mercier
Department of History
Washington State University—Vancouver
14204 Salmon Creek Avenue
Vancouver, WA 98686-9623

George Katagiri
3228 SW 13th
Portland, OR 97201

Linda Johnson
2603 SE 15th Street
Portland, OR 97202

Richard H. Engeman
Director, Manuscript and Archives Collections
Oregon Historical Society
1200 SW Park
Portland, OR 97205

Mr. Thomas Hacker, AIA, Principal
Thomas Hacker and Associates, Architects P.C.
34 NW First Avenue
Portland, OR 97209

Sura Rubenstein
6921 SW Capital Highway
Portland, OR 97219

JoAnne Hong
The Great Era
239 NW 3rd Avenue
Portland, OR 97209

Old Town History Project

National Advisors

Professor John Kuo Wei Tchen, Director
Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program & Institute
New York University
269 Mercer Street #609
New York, NY 10003

Dr. Richard Rabinowitz, Director
American History Workshop, Inc.
588 7th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11215-3707

Dr. L. Thomas Frye
4697 Park Boulevard
Oakland, CA 94602
(Director, California Gold Rush Sesquicentennial Project and Chief Curator of History Emeritus, Oakland Museum of California)

Professor Mary Murphy
Department of History and Philosophy
Montana State University
2-155 Wilson Hall
PO Box 172320
Bozeman, MT 59712-2320