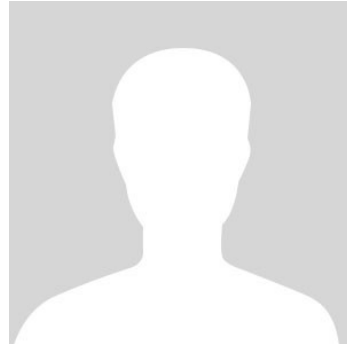


# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Los Angeles's Little Tokyo*

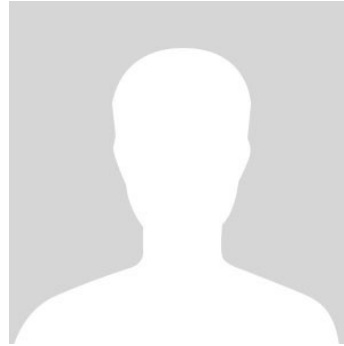
### Participants:



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### Links and References:

Bibliograph and Related Online Content

Music credits:

"Cabernet" from Cafe Nostru by Blue Dot Sessions "Comfort Aire" from Reflections by Blue Dot Sessions "Rooftop Rider" from Kittyhawk by Blue Dot Sessions "Talltall" from Flatlands by Blue Dot Sessions "The Zeppelin" from Aeronaut by Blue Dot Sessions

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## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Los Angeles's Little Tokyo*

### Transcript

#### Introduction (Personal discussions about experiences in 'ethnic landscapes')

Welcome. You're listening to Works in Progress, we're your hosts Julia Medina and Taka Tachibe. We're two graduate students from the Princeton School of Architecture and today we're going to talk about Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

Julia Medina (JM): Okay, so I would like to start this conversation by asking you Taka. As a Japanese American from Los Angeles, what your experience with Little Tokyo was like and what your relationship with the neighborhood is like?

Taka Tachibe (TT): Yeah, growing up I went to Little Tokyo a lot with my family and it was always kind of the place where it was a community center for Japanese people. I don't actually know how many Japanese people live there currently, but it definitely was the place where my parents would speak Japanese with strangers in the city. We'd go to Japanese grocery stores like Marukai, we'd go to natsumatsuri which is a summer festival at the local Buddhist temple and we'd wait in line for ramen for hours on end. It was definitely a place where we got to inhabit multiple aspects of Japanese culture and I have positive associations with it. I also want to note that I grew up in the suburbs about half an hour away from Little Tokyo, which is in Downtown LA. Little Tokyo is right next to Skid Row, which is a poor Black-majority neighborhood that some might call a 'ghetto.' I do wonder what relationship there is between these two places and why the contrast is so stark between them.

#### A brief narrative of "ghettos" (chronological history)

When you think of the word "ghetto," what do you think of? Is it a place? An adjective?

Although "ghetto" commonly refers to an impoverished, urban neighborhood populated by Black or Latinx people, the history of the term ghetto and the places it describes has a largely unknown history.

The word "ghetto" comes from the Venetian Ghetto, a Jewish area of Venice, termed due to the neighborhood's proximity to a foundry ("gheto").

In fact, the term became associated specifically with these Jewish neighborhoods. These neighborhoods formed because Jewish people were seen as outsiders in most European countries they lived in, and public policy forced their segregation.

In Nazi-occupied Europe, Jewish and Romani people were forced to live in Nazi-established ghettos, which were ultimately transformed into concentration camps

Shanghai Ghetto - one square mile in Japanese-occupied Shanghai which held 20,000 Jewish refugees before/after WWII

In the mid-19th century, as German and Irish immigrants formed the first ethnic enclaves in the United States, the term ghetto began to gain popularity in describing these neighborhoods. As Italian and Polish immigrant numbers began to increase, their neighborhoods were also often termed "ghettos."

Sources suggest that the term became more closely linked to poverty (as opposed to

non-American identity) when, during the Great Depression, large groups of people would build makeshift shelters in parking lots.

As affluent white people increasingly moved from city centers to the suburbs and increased their generational wealth through homeownership, the economic plight they left behind and racial division of labor started to contribute to the racial, urban and economic connotations of the ghetto.

Specifically in Los Angeles, this process resulted in artificial scarcity of housing for impoverished people of color in the city. Historian Scott Kurashige summarizes "While government subsidies spurred construction of a nearly endless supply of single-family houses for suburban and white homeowners, the malnourished public housing system shouldered the stigma of poverty and ghettoization."

There are three major classes of theories regarding segregation, as described by David Cutler, Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor. These theories are used in order to predict and understand patterns of segregation in urban areas for research purposes, but they can be useful in understanding and summarizing forms of segregation and the level of agency afforded people of color in different circumstances.

Firstly, the "port of entry" theory describes situations in which ethnic and racial groups prefer to live among members of their own race, especially as new migrants to an urban area. This theory is especially apt in discussing immigrant ethnic groups from other countries, but can also be applied to Black migration from the South to the North.

The "centralized" or "collective action racism" theory describes scenarios in which white people "use legal, quasi-legal, or violent, illegal barriers to keep [Black people] out of white neighborhoods." Examples of this include explicit racial violence, discriminatory zoning laws, and selective government funding.

Finally, there is the "decentralized racism" theory, in which white people choose to segregate themselves by paying more to live in exclusively white areas. Examples of this include the white flight to the suburbs, gated communities, and other exclusive, affluent self-formed white neighborhoods.

#### Bronzeville - Little Tokyo during Japanese internment

After Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced out of their homes into camps euphemistically called Relocation Centers. This included the few thousand Japanese Americans living in Little Tokyo at the time, and the fate of the neighborhood became an open question for city officials. According to Kurashige, there was "some talk of turning Little Tokyo into the city's "Latin Quarter" which would be both a center of Mexican American life and a conduit for inter-American trade. But these plans never came to fruition."

In 1943, a Black entrepreneur named Leonard Christmas purchased the

one-hundred-room Digby Hotel in the neighborhood, which would accommodate Black southern migrants searching for work during the Great Migration of the early 20th century.

Other Black business owners followed suit and operated restaurants, barbershops, laundries, and hotels. The area became a prominent center for Black

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life and its many clubs like

Shepp's Playhouse, Samba Club, and Finale hosted early bebop performances by Charlie Parker and Miles Davis along with others. At this time, with the absence of Japanese Americans, Little Tokyo took on a new name: Bronzeville. Here's LA-based talk show host Ralph Walker interviewing historian Dr. Hillary Jenks about how the neighborhood got its new name:

PLAY CLIP: (3:49) "Bronzeville. What is that all about, a bunch of brown buildings or what?" "Bronzeville originally the term comes from Chicago's South Side. With the Great Migration to Chicago, the South Side is where most African Americans ended up living due to segregation and restrictive covenants. It got nicknamed Bronzeville and the term carried to other places sometimes the African American neighborhood would get called that and in LA in particular, we got a Bronzeville in World War Two"

It's notable that a change in ethnic demographics would come with a change in name for the neighborhood, especially when it's considered alongside the limited areas non-white people were allowed to inhabit at the time. Before the war, Little Tokyo was home to about 10,000 residents, the majority of whom were Japanese Americans. With 95% of Los Angeles being unavailable to Black southern migrants during the war due to segregation and racially restrictive covenants, the area formerly known as Little Tokyo housed around 25,000 residents, the majority of whom were African American.

This didn't stop the surrounding wealthy white residents from participating in fear-mongering campaigns that instilled a sense of danger being inherent to the Black bodies that occupied this non-white space. In May 1944, The Los Angeles Times falsely cited that nearly 80,000 Black residents were jammed into the one-square-mile neighborhood which led the City health officer George Uhl to condemn housing units to prevent a public health crisis. He remarked "many of these people who come from Louisiana and Texas have no knowledge of sanitation and health standards"

These fear-mongering campaigns attached ethnic identity to spatial practices that were caused by the finite boundaries of non-white space. As historian Scott Kurashige assesses, "while thousands of African American workers were squeezing into shacks, sheds, and storefronts, thousands of whites given a helping hand by the government were moving into new suburban homes with modern amenities." Ultimately, the name change from Little Tokyo to Bronzeville can be read in the same way with whiteness defining its own spatial boundaries and making non-white space artificially scarce with a clear and distinct name.

Los Angeles Homba Hongwanji Buddhist Temple and Providence Baptist Church

Bronzeville should not be read as an ethnic landscape that stands in opposition to Japanese American spatial practices. Examples of interethnic solidarity were made apparent through the stewardship of Japanese American cultural properties by Black community leaders, but these were complicated by competing spatial needs of each community. Like most properties that Japanese Americans needed to sell or lease before entering the internment camps, the Los Angeles Homba Hongwanji Buddhist Temple was leased to the Providence Baptist Church which had a Black congregation. The church's pastor recognized a "moral

obligation [to] safeguard Japanese interests" in the property, but he simultaneously noted that the church was "proceeding on the assumption that the Japanese [would] never be back in this area in large enough numbers to justify a property of this magnitude."

This was a reasonable assumption based on anti-Japanese rhetoric from the Mayor of Los Angeles. In his radio address of June 2, 1943, Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron stated, "We in Los Angeles ought to know our Japs. We are not going to be fooled, if others are. And those Japanese released through warm human sympathy of the administrators of the War Relocation Authority had better not come back to Los Angeles."

The internment order was lifted on January 2, 1945, which allowed Japanese Americans to return to Little Tokyo. With the same restrictive covenants that barred non-white subjects from living in most neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Japanese Americans struggled to find housing in the limited areas they were allowed. This gave rise to a spatial tension and as Kurashige notes, "as the end of the war approached, it was clear that two communities, Bronzeville and Little Tokyo, were standing on the same geographic location." This would ultimately lead to the Hongwanji Buddhist temple evicting the Providence Baptist Church despite the terms of the lease lasting through the duration of the war. Through a court battle, the church won occupancy rights and \$5000 in damages, but ultimately was unable to purchase the building outright, which rendered their presence temporary.

Field of racial positions (Foreign to insider and inferior to superior)

White leaders like Mayor Fletcher Bowron stoked fears that tensions would arise between Japanese Americans and African Americans in the form of race riots to reclaim space, but Black activists made concerted efforts to push back against this narrative. Ebony magazine was instrumental in a PR campaign to describe the integration of Little Tokyo and Bronzeville as a "miracle in race relations." They would write in July 1946 that "the race war that flopped [had] not a single case of violence, [or] a single disturbance between the two minorities [with] the mixture of chitterlings and sukiyaki, of jive and Japanese [being] a heartfelt kinship grown between the two minorities, both victims of race hate."

Efforts by Japanese Americans and African Americans to coexist were undermined by the further deprivation of space allotted by white leadership for people of color.

PLAY CLIP: (27:56) "In 1950 the city announced that they were going to take this whole block of what became Parker Center that was part of Little Tokyo and Bronzeville, so once they announced that a lot of people moved out ahead of the bulldozers, it was clear the whole block was going to be gone. That block had a slew of Japanese American businesses and also had a lot of residents in hotels and other rooming houses on that block and about 90% of the people who lived there were Black. There were 3,000 people that lived on that block, so once the city came in and said "we're going to build Parker Center" that pretty much killed off Bronzeville. It was really because the city said, "we don't really value real estate associated with either of your

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communities, so this is convenient, let's build it here."

The construction of the new LAPD headquarters Parker Center marked a greater presence of white police in Little Tokyo that disproportionately displaced Black residents. The

eventual return of the neighborhood as a Japanese American cultural hub along with the presence of white police and the displacement of Black Americans illustrates the different racial positions each community occupied in relation to one another. As political scientist Claire Jean Kim describes in her essay "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," Asian subjects are triangulated between white and Black subjects as a way of supporting the project of white dominance while simultaneously being perceived as a perpetual foreigner. The favoring of Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo over Black Americans in Bronzeville instrumentalized Asian subjects into anti-Blackness while continuing to subjugate all people of color into a finite boundary that can be continually made smaller with the presence of police.

### Whiteness and settler colonialism

Settler colonialism is a practice in which migrants invade land that does not belong to them, usually as a method of building wealth, and seek to replace the existing population through force. In the case of the United States, this act of colonization and the following acts of racialization, genocide, and oppression were devastating to indigenous Americans and continue to exploit people of color.

The settler colonialist project is inextricably linked to the preservation of whiteness and the consolidation of wealth and power.

Inevitably, this practice includes discriminatory housing practices and concerted efforts on the part of white people to keep their communities segregated.

### Conclusion

Whereas white European immigrants were eventually able to assimilate and dissolve or not dissolve their ethnic enclaves, people of color were continually forced, through housing laws and explicit discrimination, to live in segregated communities which were often under-resourced, over-policed, and generally disparaged by white people in the area.

The theories of segregation which differentiate between decisions made by people of color and immigrants versus those made by white people and the government elucidate the distinction between an ethnic enclave and a so-called ghetto.

We hope that by looking closer at an often overlooked piece of history we complicate the common understanding of ethnic landscapes and investigate the role of whiteness in their formation and subjugation. To return to Ralph Walker interviewing historian Dr. Hillary Jenks, we offer a key reflection:

PLAY CLIP: (43:52) "Well what is an ethnic landscape anyway what do we even mean when we say that" "Any landscape if people live on it is an ethnic landscape. These ideas of "some things are and some things aren't" is just our way of trying to normalize whiteness by not naming it and saying "we're just going to talk about Thai Town or Little India" instead"

(47:32) "places matter, they organize people's experiences and their opportunities and just because you name something with some simple nickname like Little Tokyo or Bronzeville, frequently that means people think it's okay to kind of wipe it off the map or never go there and

it's not. These are the richest places that we have, these are where we all come from and we need to reinvest in them as opposed to erase them"

Of course places like Little Tokyo include cultural offerings not commonly found elsewhere and can serve as respites for immigrant communities, they also have histories latent within them that reveal racial dynamics that we still struggle with today. Losses in collective memory of places like Bronzeville in Los Angeles only serve to perpetuate American myths of opportunity and freedom that obfuscate the role whiteness has played in oppressing people of color. Therefore, the spatial practices of people of color in places like Little Tokyo and Bronzeville are reactionary to limitations placed upon them and should be read as uniquely American experiences in the face of violent settler colonial practices.

### Discussion Questions:

We offer these brief discussion questions as a potential guide for reflection and discussion among students who have listened to this podcast.

1. What is your interpretation of the link between settler colonialism and the ethnic enclave? How are they directly or indirectly related?
2. What are some examples of ethnic enclaves in your city? Which of the three theories of segregation might apply to how they came to be?