

PRESERVING FOR MULTIPLE PUBLICS

CONTESTING VIEWS OF URBAN CONSERVATION IN SEATTLE'S INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

This paper examines the conflicts and multiplicity of public values and interests in one of Seattle's seven historic districts – the International Special Review District (ISRD). Established in 1973, the goal of ISRD has been to preserve the area's unique Asian American character and to encourage rehabilitation of housing and local businesses. Coupled with efforts of local community development organizations to rehabilitate old hotels and revitalize local businesses, the regulatory preservation measures have been generally successful in protecting the pre-existing structures in the neighborhood. However, the task of historic preservation in the district continues to struggle with ongoing changes and competing views within the community. Based on results of interviews and participant observations, this paper examines the contesting views towards historic preservation in ISRD and the implications for the practice of integrated urban conservation in the face of social and economic changes in urban ethnic neighborhoods. The paper argues that integrated urban conservation needs to acknowledge the multiplicity of publics and the often-competing values, ideologies, and interests in an urban context. An integrated approach also needs to recognize the dynamic process of urban change and see diversity and contestation as an important facet of contemporary urban conditions. The findings of this study are particularly relevant toward improving community and public process in urban conservation. Specifically, the paper identifies the important role of community-based organizations in facilitating and fostering a broader process of community development and historic preservation.

Key words: *preservation, community development, multiple publics*

The public is heterogeneous, plural, and playful, a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand (Young 1998, p. 241)

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift in political and planning theory concerning the characteristics of the 'public' in contemporary societies. Rather than

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seeing the 'public ' as a unified group, scholars in urban planning and political science have increasingly acknowledged the differences and plurality of the public in terms of values, identities, and interests (see Young 1998; Sandercock 1998; Quadeer 1997; Bollens 2002; Hayden 1995). This shift in planning and political discourse has important implications for urban conservation and is echoed in the recent literature that particularly challenges the universality of the normative doctrines of preservation (see Tomaszewski 2002; Szmygin 2002; Hou 2002; Okawa 2002). In the context of diverse cultural values and practices, the established preservation practice based on a narrow set of values such as those embodied in the Venice Charter is no longer adequate. Preservation planning now needs to address diverse sets of views in an increasingly contested and pluralized urban context.

This paper uses the case of International District in Seattle, USA to illustrate the complexity facing urban conservation today in terms of competing views and forces in the ongoing process of social, economic and political changes. Based on interviews and participant observations in a recent urban design planning process, the paper examines the multiple constituencies in the district and the competing views toward preservation. Specifically, it looks how changes in local politics and different views of community development are challenging the practice of historic preservation in the District. In addition, it also looks at existing and potential mechanisms for addressing these challenges.

2. Seattle's International District

Located in the Southeastern edge of downtown Seattle, the International District is characteristic of many historic urban ethnic enclaves in North America. Since the 1880s, the urban fabric of the International District area has been shaped by many waves of immigration. Chinatown and Nihonmachi (Japantown) developed side by side. Chinese and Japanese-owned restaurants, hotels and other businesses flourished in the area as Seattle became the hub of Asian immigration in the Pacific Northwest (Chin 2001). Filipinos was the third group to arrive in the area starting in the early 1930s with many working as seasonal labors in Alaska. Starting in the 1920s, there has also been a significant African American presence in the District as Jackson Street became a popular Jazz scene in the city (DON 2002). Today, the International District still retains its multiethnic character with juxtaposition of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and other businesses and activities.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the District experienced a major decline as Japanese American-owned shops were closed, and families were forced to relocate to internment camps during World War II. After the War, few Japanese returned to live in the district and only a handful of Japanese businesses reopened. In the meantime, the Chinese American community experienced increased levels of economic and social mobility during and after the War. However, as a result of the new prosperity, many Chinese families began to seek housing outside of the District in the neighboring suburbs (Chin 2001, p. 73). The hotels and family association buildings that had served as home for

single men for over 50 years were unfit for families to live in. As a result of these changes, the District became primarily a community of poor and aging bachelors living in substandard single resident occupancy (SRO) hotels. Changes in building codes in the 1970's and lack of financial resources for upgrading forced many substandard buildings to be left in disrepair (Chin 2001).

Prompted by both the blighted conditions of the neighborhood and encroachment of new developments such as a sports stadium and freeway, a pan-ethnic effort for revitalizing the neighborhood began in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement began as activists from diverse ethnic backgrounds came together to fight against the building of the Kingdome Stadium. They feared that traffic and business impacts resulting from the new development would lead to loss of residents and cultural identity of the area (Chin 2001, p. 80). The protests brought media and public attention to the crisis facing the District. In response to the community outcry, the City agreed to establish a historic preservation district – International Special Review District (ISRD), to preserve “the District’s unique Asian American character and to encourage rehabilitation of areas of housing and pedestrian-oriented businesses” (DON 2002). In addition to ISRD, the community activism during that time also brought to existence several community-based organizations that provide housing, job referral, childcare, and other social services to local residents, particularly the low-income elderly and new immigrants.

3. Preservation under International Special Review District

The historic preservation movement in Seattle began in the 1960s in response to proposed demolition of several landmark buildings and parts of the downtown area under urban renewal. In 1970, the City established its first historic district in Pioneer Square. In 1972, voters approved an initiative for the Pike Place Market historic district. In 1973, the City Council adopted a Landmarks Preservation Ordinance to protect properties of historic and architectural significance around the city (DON 2002). In Seattle’s seven historic districts today, the appearance and historical integrity of structures and public spaces are regulated by a ‘citizens board’ in each district and/or the Landmarks Preservation Board in accordance with processes and criteria established by the City ordinance. Some historic districts also overlap with other special review and approval processes. Various federal, state, and local programs (such as historic tax credit and a special tax valuation) are available to assist property owners in the maintenance and restoration of landmark structures (DON 2002).

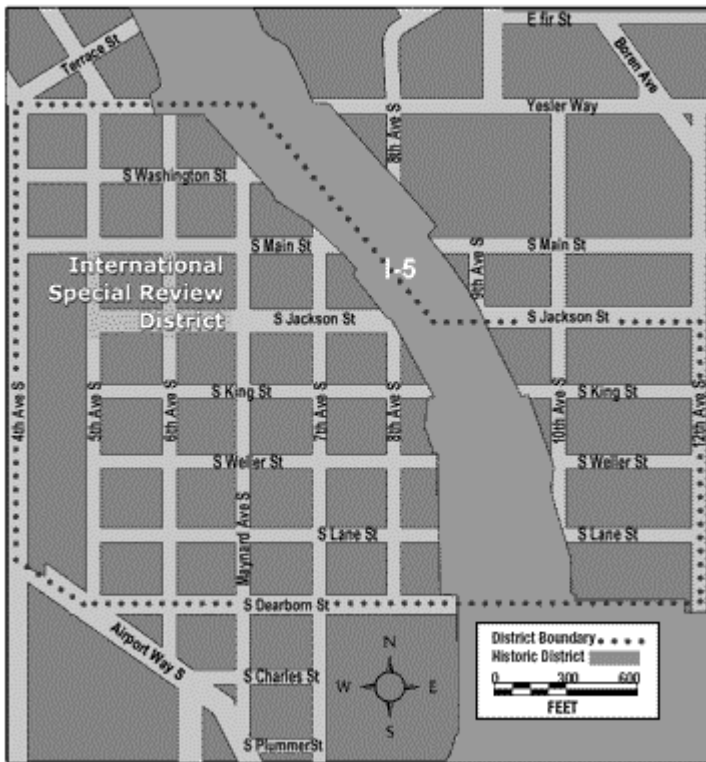


Figure 1. Map of International Special Review District (DON 2002)

Since its establishment in 1973, preservation under ISRD follows a model similar to the six other historic districts in Seattle. The ISRD is governed by a citizens board that consists of seven members. Five are elected by the community in annual elections and two are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by City Council. Two of the five elected Board members are property or business owners in the District or who are employed in the District. Two of the elected members are residents in the District or have demonstrated an interest in the District. One member is elected at large. The Board reviews applications for Certificates of Approval for any change to the use, exterior appearance of buildings or structures, streets, sidewalks, and other public spaces in the District (DON 2002). A set of guidelines was established that specifies permitted and prohibited elements in façade alterations, security systems, signage, awnings, and canopies.

Specifically, the following changes are subject to the review and approval process before the City will issue any permits (DON 2002):

- ?? Any change to the outside of any building or structure.
- ?? Installation of any new sign or change to any existing sign.
- ?? Installation of a new awning or canopy.
- ?? Any change to an interior that affects the exterior.
- ?? New addition, construction, and/or remodel.

- ?? A proposed new business or service (change of use).
- ?? Any change in a public right-of-way or other public spaces, including parks and sidewalks.
- ?? Demolition of any building or structure.
- ?? Exterior painting

Over the years, historic preservation under ISRD would not have achieved the results today without the efforts of local non-profit community development corporations as well as the unique characteristics of immigrant communities in the District. Several abandoned hotel buildings have been restored for housing low- and moderate-income residents. Many old buildings continue to be owned by family associations that have persisted in the District. Complicated ownership has prevented properties to change hands easily. However, despite the efforts of non-profit organizations, there are still a substantial number of vacant buildings that are left in disrepair, and the district continues to face disagreements on issues of development and preservation. For example, many business and property owners would like to see more market-rate housing and commercial developments in the District. They viewed preservation as a barrier against economic development and outside investments. They argue that the existing guidelines are too stringent. On the other hand, most non-profit community organizations that emerged in the pan-ethnic activism in the 1960's and 1970's view historic preservation as essential to protecting the character and interest of the community.

4. From Pan-ethnicity to Multiple Publics

The disagreements on issues of development and preservation have intensified in recent years. The arguments not only highlight the tension between different players in the District but also bring to light the existence and characteristics of multiple publics in the District in contrast to the rhetoric of earlier pan-ethnic activism. These players include different ethnic groups, non-profit social service organizations, residents, merchants, and property owners. The tension and disagreements in part also reflect the ongoing social, demographic and economic changes in the neighborhood. Together, these changes present complex challenges facing the discourse and practice of preservation in the District. The following describes several recent events that illustrate the current tensions and multiplicity of values and interests in the District.

One of the recent conflicts between preservation and development involved the proposed opening of a McDonald inside ISRD. Fearing the encroachment of corporate influence and threats to the local identity, many in the non-profit community organizations protested strongly against the opening of McDonald. However, there were others in the community who welcomed the establishment of a McDonald in the neighborhood. The building owner was also eager to find a tenant who could occupy

the historic building that has been costly to repair and maintain. After protests were staged to oppose the restaurant, the McDonald Corporation eventually backed away from the project (Santos 2002). To this day, activists in the non-profit organizations viewed this as a victory, while others saw it as just another case in which activists have obstructed economic development in the District.

Another recent conflict in the District occurred in the closure of Lane Street. The street closure was proposed by a local Japanese American business owner as part of a new mixed-use development that would house a greatly expanded grocery market on the ground floor and market-rate residential units on top. The development plan that included the street closure received recommendation from ISRD Board and approval from the Department of Neighborhood but caused uproar in the adjacent Chinese community. The Chinese organizations argued that the street vacation would cause traffic congestion, hinder emergency vehicles and adversely impact local businesses (Han 2002, p. 1; Chin 2001, p. 109). For some, the controversy reflected old animosity and inter-ethnic conflicts in the District (Chin 2001, p. 109). In reversed roles, non-profit organizations generally favored the project while most in the adjacent Chinese community were strongly against it. The incident later led to a turning point in the makeup of the ISRD citizens board. Before, there was little attention toward the governing of ISRD. After the Lane Street closure incident, members of the Chinese community realized the need to protect their interests by participating in the ISRD Board. In the election following the incident, members of the Chinese community voted in large number and became the elected majority on the Board. Since then, several individuals also participate regularly in community meetings and events mainly to safeguard the interests of the Chinese community.

Even with the changing makeup of the citizens board, frustration with ISRD by many merchants continues as the regulatory measures remained unchanged. The most recent public discussion on preservation in the District occurred during an urban design planning process led by a local non-profit community organization—the Inter*Im Community Development Association (IDCA). The project was developed to envision improvement of the neighborhood environment and to propose design guidelines to control new development in the District. During a public workshop, one local architect proposed the establishment of a ‘Freedom Zone’ to ease the preservation requirements for certain façade alterations. The proposal was warmly welcomed by local merchants. However, it was resisted by city officials and worried the non-profit groups because the change would undermine the preservation practice under ISRD. Eventually, the proposal was not considered in the urban design plan as the focus of the plan shifted to planning of open spaces and streetscape. The discussion again highlights the competing views toward preservation in the District and the challenges facing existing regulatory measures under ISRD.

With the intention to protect historic character and identity, preservation under ISRD also led to other development consequences that exemplify the complexity of urban conservation. In recent years, one of the most visible changes in the neighborhood has

been the emergence of a new neighborhood—Little Saigon, at the edge of the District and east of Interstate Freeway 5. Since 1990s, a growing number of mainly Vietnamese businesses including grocery markets, restaurants, and retail shops have been established just outside the ISRD boundary in an area formerly occupied by vacant industrial warehouses. The growing new businesses outside the historic core of the District have been partly a reaction toward the restrictions imposed on development inside ISRD. As a result, while Little Saigon is still within the International District Urban Village boundary under the City’s neighborhood planning framework, it does not have the development restrictions as in the ISRD. The differences in terms of development restrictions and distinct cultural identity have caused tensions within the District. Some do not think Little Saigon ought to be included in the neighborhood planning process, while others would like to see the District as inclusive of all ethnic groups. The growing presence of Little Saigon and different pattern of development also challenge the character and identity of the District compared to its earlier heritage.

5. Discussion: Challenges facing Preservation

As evident above, preservation in the International District is now faced with the challenge to address multiple voices in the community. These competing views and forces are intertwined with local politics, development process, and demographic and social changes in the communities. However, ISRD as currently set up has not been able to provide effective mechanism in addressing these multiple challenges in the District. In addition to the rigid framework that governs ISRD, there are additional problems including language barriers that prevent information to be communicated effectively to local merchants and property owners. There is also a lack of expertise needed to review the plans. Furthermore, the current guidelines that focus mainly on preserving historic buildings provide little guidance for new constructions in the District. As a result, they have not allowed the District to evolve in response to changing social and economic needs.

At the practical level, the cost of repair and maintenance create disincentives for ordinary property owners to renovate the buildings to meet the housing and economic needs in the District. The lack of housing capacity could not support a population large enough to create a stronger local economy. On the other hand, the changing cultural and ethnic makeup also presents additional challenges for the District to maintain its historic character focusing on the heritage of earlier immigrants. New immigrants such as the Vietnamese community with new business and social activities are defining the character and identities of the District. There are also those who argue that Chinatown would always evolve and that current preservation prevented its natural evolution. Can these new layers of activities co-exist with the historic buildings and character? Can International District continue to evolve and grow while maintaining its historic character?

The preservation planning in the International District is in need of a more integrated approach and a more inclusive view of the multiple needs in the community ranging

from housing and economic development to protection and redefinition of cultural identity. The democratic process for electing the citizens board in theory allows ISRD to respond to needs of the community. However, its role has been confined to reviewing detailed changes in the buildings as mandated by the preservation ordinance. As a popularly elected board, the lack of professional expertise has prevented the board from providing innovative guidance for preservation. There is not a pro-active mechanism under ISRD to deal with the new challenges. Currently, there is also not an established institutional planning mechanism that effectively addresses these issues.

In contrast to the limitations of ISRD, the local community organizations have played a more active role in meeting the needs of preservation and community development. Local community development corporations including IDCA have been responsible for renovating and restoring many historic hotels. The professional skills allow them to take advantage of tax programs and innovative financing mechanisms to develop affordable housing while preserving the historic buildings. More recently, organizations such as IDCA have also been active in neighborhood planning. There have been two recent efforts in neighborhood planning in the District – the Strategic Plan of 1998 under the City’s neighborhood planning process and more recently the urban design master plan, completed in 2003. Both provided channels for community inputs that would otherwise not be heard through ISRD. ID Forum, a monthly gathering of community organizations in the District provides an informal mechanism for the community groups to coordinate actions and activities and to discuss issues such as neighborhood safety and street cleanup. On a day-to-day basis, local organizations such as the Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area, a local merchants association, have been important in providing city authority with connections to the neighborhood. Through neighborhood events, planning efforts, and networking, the organizations have allowed for greater involvement of different constituencies in the District in the process of community development. Despite inter-group conflicts as result of ideological differences, these groups provide an important basis for community involvement in an integrated approach to urban conservation.

Conclusions: Preserving for Multiple Publics

Historic preservation as an established discipline since the 1960s has maintained a strong focus on technical expertise. In contrast, there has been less emphasis on public process compared to other planning sub-disciplines. In practice, however, because of the high stakes of developmental process in cities, preservation has always sparked political tensions and arguments and is subject to volatile public processes. In a democratic context where different voices and forces compete in the public realm, the practice of preservation increasingly requires effective mechanisms to facilitate and negotiate expressions and agreements. As evident in the case of Seattle’s International District, technical guidelines and regulatory measures alone are inadequate in addressing the changing needs of multiple constituencies in the community. An integrated approach to urban conservation needs to acknowledge the multiplicity of

publics and the often-competing values, ideologies, and interests in an urban context. It also needs to recognize the dynamic process of urban change and see diversity and contestation as an important facet of contemporary urban conditions.

In the face of regulatory and institutional limitations, local community organizations play an important role in engaging the publics. With social and organizational networks, these organizations allow multiple voices to be represented and negotiated. With professional skills, non-profit organizations can be instrumental in linking preservation and community development. While regulatory measures may still be important, community-based organizations and democratic process together are critical to an integrated approach to urban conservation that makes effective use of social capital, technical expertise, and institutional support. The organizations bring renewed energy to community development that cannot be provided by regulatory measures. They help provide important and necessary social processes in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic public realm.

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