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**The Nippon Kan Theatre: When Cultural Facilities Have a Second Chance**

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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### **Abstract**

The Nippon Kan (Japanese Hall) Theatre was built in 1909, on the corner of Washington Street and Seventh Avenue, in Seattle's Nihonmachi or Japantown. As a community owned space, the Nippon Kan became the social and arts center for the Japanese community and a significant location within the neighborhood that is now known as the Chinatown International District. Although it was closed during the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, it was later rediscovered and renovated, reopening in 1981. Although the times were different, the Nippon Kan claimed a similar place in the heart of the community once again and remained an important location until 2005 when the building was sold. Despite the community's still high regard for the Nippon Kan and the nostalgia for its significance, the new owner was not able to find an anchor tenant to continue to operate the theater and it is now used as office space. However, the Nippon Kan lives on in the memories of community members and is commemorated at the Wing Luke Museum where the original curtain remains on display.

### **The Nippon Kan Theatre: When Cultural Facilities Have a Second Chance**

The Nippon Kan (Japanese Hall) Theatre was originally built in 1909, on the corner of Washington Street and Seventh Avenue, in Seattle's Nihonmachi or Japantown. As a community owned space, the Nippon Kan became the social and arts center for the Japanese community and a significant location within the neighborhood that is now known as the Chinatown International District. Although it was closed during the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, it was later rediscovered and renovated, reopening in 1981. Although the times were different, the Nippon Kan claimed a similar place in the heart of the community once again and remained an important location until 2005 when the building was sold.

### **The Original Project**

The building housing the Nippon Kan and the Astor Hotel above it, cost a mere \$40,000 to build in 1909 (Schwartz, 1976). Although the building was officially owned by the Cascade Investment Company, ownership shares were sold to the Japanese community (Burke & Burke, 2011; Chin, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. The building was designed by the Thompson & Thompson architectural firm and was characteristic of other mixed use buildings in Seattle at that time (Dubrow, 2017). However, the Nippon Kan space was designed specifically with the Japanese community in mind, complete with a stage that could be extended with a runway or *hanamichi* that is needed for Japanese theatrical performances called *shibai* (Dubrow, 2017). The Nippon Kan was where actors and musicians from Japan performed, community meetings were held, and where the community could see *kabuki* movies and *shibai* performances (Burke & Burke, 2011; Chin, 2001; Shah, 2017; Takami, 1998). As Ryo Tsai was later quoted, "Really, just about everything revolved around the Nippon Kan" (Adams, 1985, para. 7).

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<sup>1</sup> See page 4 for note about Burke's self-published account.

The Nippon Kan and its cultural programming continued to flourish as Seattle's Nihonmachi grew. However, a few key events that affected the Japanese community in Seattle in turn affected the Nippon Kan. Following the expansion of the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924, Japanese immigrants could no longer become citizens and could therefore no longer own land in Washington State (Burke & Burke, 2011). This initiated the decline of Seattle's Nihonmachi, but the more serious blow came with World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which brought an increase in anti-Japanese sentiment. In February of 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered the evacuation and incarceration of Japanese Americans from the West Coast (Chin, 2001). This in turn led to Japanese homes and businesses in Seattle being boarded up – including the Nippon Kan.

### **Rediscovery**

In 1971, Ed Burke and his business partner Leon Bridges discovered the Astor Hotel as a possible home for new offices for their architecture firm. Burke later described the decision to purchase and renovate the building as a demonstration of the firm's commitment to "inner city redevelopment" (Burke & Burke, 2011). It is important to note the difficulty in finding sources about the Nippon Kan that describe the renovation in detail. Burke's account of the process represents the most comprehensive timeline and resource of information for the Nippon Kan during the 1970s and 1980, while reflecting his personal memories and records.

Burke's initial plan was for the architectural offices to be located on the ground floor and for the entire building to be developed into office space, including the Nippon Kan (Burke & Burke, 2011). However, a number of factors, including economic pressures and the dissolution of Burke's business partnership, delayed the start of the renovation. Although the exact timing is unknown, it was during this time that these financial difficulties led Burke to take on

philanthropist Samuel Stroum as a silent partner (M. Cawaling, personal communication, March 10, 2021).

In 1978, the Burkes nominated the Nippon Kan for both the National and the Washington State Register of Historic Places (“15 Sites Nominated for Historic-Places Register,” 1977; Burke & Burke, 2011). While the original building is not of any specific architectural distinction, its importance to the early Japanese immigrant community helped it secure its place on the register (Yong, 2004). This was an important preliminary step for the renovation that started soon after and would not only update the theater space, but would also turn the 55 former hotel rooms and street level storefronts into 19,000 square feet of office space (Lane, 1980).

Although it ultimately took Burke ten years to decide what route to take with the building and then to plan and execute its renovation, his careful attention to the historic significance of the building was instrumental in ensuring that it could regain some of its former stature within the community. Burke also made an effort to research the history of the Nippon Kan and reach out to the surrounding community, especially the Japanese American community (Burke & Burke, 2011).

### **Restoration**

The \$1.2 million renovation of the newly renamed Kobe Park Building was funded in part by a \$154,744 federal grant from the Heritage Conservation and Recreation service. The rest of the funding was secured by Burke and his partner (Lane, 1980). Special attention was given to the Nippon Kan thanks to the funds from the preservation grant (Lane, 1980). The theater renovation included repairing and refinishing the stage floor, replacing the main hall floor, installing new heating, carpeting the balcony and foyer, and new restrooms (Lane, 1980). Additionally, the distinctive rosette on the ceiling of the hall was restored and improvements

were made to the theater's production facilities including new stage equipment such as curtains, a sound system, and lighting, as well as the addition of a ticket booth and installation of acoustic panels (Burke & Burke, 2011).

Other aspects of the renovation included adding an apartment for the Burkes on the top floor and modifying the rest of the top two floors into flexible open office space (Burke & Burke, 2011). The most visible structural change was the addition of an elevator. However, there were also unseen issues in the aging building that had to be addressed. In order to meet current building codes, various parts of the structure had to be braced and reinforced for seismic safety. This included replacing all of the windows and door frames to increase the stability of the aging brick walls (Burke & Burke, 2011).

The most significant issue with the renovation was a long delay in gaining approval for the city building permit for the design of the renovation (Burke & Burke, 2011). Burke claimed that his design "reflected an accepted approach: restore that which is historic but use contemporary materials for that which is not" (Burke & Burke, 2011). He applied this principle to the restoration of the external walls of the building; while the two street-facing sides of the building were restored as much as possible to their original 1909 condition, Burke felt that the north and the west walls were not historically significant and therefore more modern materials could be used to update them (Lane, 1980). Burke expressed his frustration with this process, recalling how

...Design Review Regulations for the International District specifically exempted the block we were on from design review. In spite of this, the director of the Seattle Office of Historic Preservation delayed approval of the permit for seven

months for meetings with the local Design Review Board. (Burke & Burke, 2011, p. 67)

### **Second Chances**

Although it had been 39 years since it had operated as a theater, the Nippon Kan really started to come alive again in 1981 as the renovation was finally wrapping up. Ed Burke's wife Elizabeth (Betty) was the first manager of the newly restored theater (Burke & Burke, 2011). Thanks to the Burkes' efforts to raise awareness of the historical site, before long, local community members were renting the theater and hall for weddings, business events, and performances featuring Japanese traditional artists and other Asian American performers (Burke & Burke, 2011). It became clear that the Nippon Kan could regain an important place in the International District.

Although Betty Burke managed the theater, the Burkes did not want to produce events in the theater (Burke & Burke, 2011). However, they decided to develop a Japanese Performing Arts Series to help sponsor the use of the Nippon Kan for traditional Japanese artists. This eventually became a nonprofit organization called the Nippon Kan Heritage Association (NKHA), whose board consisted of local Japanese American artists and business people. The NKHA averaged five productions a year but the Nippon Kan also continued to be used for visiting Japanese artists and groups as well as other music, dance and theater performances; business events; community meetings; dances and social events; church groups; and private events like weddings (Burke & Burke, 2011).

When the Burkes ended their management of the Kobe Park Building in 1991 (Burke & Burke, 2011), Stroum Enterprises took over management of the building and continued to make the theater available to the community as a resource (M. Cawaling and P. West, personal



communication, March 10, 2021). However, Stroum Enterprises also began to outsource the onsite management of the Nippon Kan to others. This task soon passed on to the Northwest Asian American Theatre or NWAAT, which was also one of the most significant tenants of the Nippon Kan during the 1990's and 2000's.

### **Northwest Asian American Theatre**

NWAAT's roots trace back to the University of Washington where a group of Asian American students founded an Asian American drama group in the 1970's. This group would evolve into the Theatrical Ensemble of Asians (TEA), the Asian Exclusion Act, and eventually the Northwest Asian American Theater in 1981 (Lee, 2011). At the time, NWAAT was one of only five theater groups in the U.S. that focused on the voices of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community (Northwest Asian American Theater, 1999).

NWAAT first performed at the Nippon Kan during their 1979-1980 season, while the building was still being renovated (Lee, 2011). Although the Theatre Off Jackson later became NWAAT's primary home, the company continued to stage events at the Nippon Kan. At 450 seats compared to the 140 seats of the Theatre Off Jackson, the Nippon Kan gave NWAAT a larger venue when they needed more space for popular productions like "Community Show Off" and fundraising events (M. Cawaling, personal communication, March 10, 2021).

In 1994, NWAAT was seeking to expand, so they decided to accept an offer to take over the management of the Nippon Kan (M. Cawaling, personal communication, March 10, 2021). For their part, NWAAT was seeking to become a company that operated more year-round. Managing the Nippon Kan would allow them to transition two of their part time staff members to full time, as well as give them a facility in which to expand their own programming. Manuel Cawaling, Associate Artistic Director for NWAAT during this time, described how their decision

to manage the Nippon Kan came from a desire to “lift up our presence in the International District as the main organization for theater spaces, as well as for programming.”

Commissions NWAAT would earn from renting the Nippon Kan to other groups were expected to generate half of the salaries for the new full time staff members (M. Cawaling and P. West, personal communication, March 10, 2021). This became a challenge as the leg work of finding rentals was complicated by the challenges of managing an aging facility. Patti West, the Executive Director of the Theatre off Jackson recently recalled that, “as the technical infrastructure started to fail, it became harder and harder to find theatrical tenants, which were more lucrative.” This was compounded by trends that led many theater companies to seek non-traditional spaces for their performances instead of the proscenium stage that was in the Nippon Kan (P. West, personal communication, March 10, 2021). Despite these difficulties, NWAAT continued to manage the Nippon Kan until the building was sold in 2005.

### **The End of a (Second) Era**

After Samuel Stroum’s death in 2001, Stroum Enterprises began to liquidate certain assets (M. Cawaling, personal communication, March 10, 2021). Bob Santos, then Executive Director of InterIm Community Development Association, offered to buy the Kobe Park Building, intending to convert the upper levels to apartments and to continue to operate the Nippon Kan. Although Stroum Enterprises hoped that the building would be bought by a non-profit, Interim’s offer was below the asking price (Wong, 2005). However, in 2005, the Kobe Park Building, which had originally been listed for sale at \$3.3 million, was sold to ABC Legal Services for \$3.1 million (Wong, 2005).

Despite the community’s still high regard for the Nippon Kan and the nostalgia for its significance, ABC Legal was not able to find an anchor tenant to continue to operate the space as

a theater (K. Hsieh, personal communication, March 10, 2021). Since ABC Legal moved into the building in 2005, little has been written about the current condition of the space. However, a former employee of ABC Legal, who worked in the Kobe Park Building at the beginning of 2020 stated that it seems like most of the original interior structures have been maintained. The Nippon Kan itself is now an open work space: the stage and the hall floor are now carpeted and occupied by desks. Backstage graffiti from past performers in the Nippon Kan's history has been covered in plexiglass to preserve it. By all appearances, ABC Legal has done its best to treat the space with respect (D. Winter, personal communication, March 16, 2021).

### **Could There Be Another Comeback?**

The Nippon Kan has seemingly been lost not once, but twice in its lifetime so far. One common thread is the strong significance that it had as a theater and cultural facility during both of the periods of its operation. Even in 2021, 16 years after it was last used as a theater, it is still remembered fondly as a home to the Asian American Pacific Islander community. Despite the decline it experienced in the early 2000's, its memory lives on – just like the theater itself.

While the Kobe Park Building is not open to the general public, it is possible to see a special piece of the Nippon Kan's history at the Wing Luke Museum, which currently has a screen or scrim from the theater's stage on display. The screen was first displayed in 1909 when the theater opened (Wing Luke Museum, n.d.). It measures 15 by 30 feet and is painted with ads for local Japanese American businesses who had to pay a regular fee to keep their names on the curtain. It also functioned as a protective barrier to keep any fires that started onstage from spreading to the audience (Ramirez, 2008).

The curtain had been re-discovered by the Burkes when they purchased the building and later passed on to Stroum Enterprises (Ramirez, 2008). When Stroum sold the building to ABC

Legal, the curtain was moved to an art storage facility and was eventually donated to the Wing Luke Museum (Ramirez, 2008). When the museum started to investigate restoring the curtain, they discovered that it was 83 percent asbestos fibers that were woven with cotton. It took three and a half months to restore the fragile curtain, and ensure that it could be safely displayed to the public (Ramirez, 2008). It currently hangs in the Wing Luke's Tateuchi Story Theatre, where audiences can continue to appreciate it and the memories it represents (Wing Luke Museum, n.d.).

The story of the Nippon Kan is a cautionary tale about the importance of operations planning for cultural facilities. The 1981 restoration of the Nippon Kan gave it a second chance at life, however the larger failure was the emphasis on the facility solely, without the long term financial commitment needed to sustain it. With proper attention and funding for its maintenance from the building's owners, there would have been more of an operational infrastructure in place that may have allowed the theater to continue as a performance space, even under new ownership of the building. While the owners wanted the theater to be a community resource, it needed more support for that to be feasible. This kind of support might have been available if ownership had been retained by a community or creative entity. While there was never a lack of enthusiasm about the Nippon Kan in the larger community, nostalgia cannot make up for deferred maintenance, technical upkeep and most importantly, long term planning.

However, the bigger lesson that we can learn from the Nippon Kan is that second chances for facilities are possible. The original significance of the theater allowed it to be renovated to serve a very similar purpose in its second period of operation. As a National Historic Landmark, it is also possible that it could be revived again if ABC Legal ever decides to sell the building or lease the theater to a non-profit entity. While the property value of the Kobe Park building has

skyrocketed from just over \$3 million in 2005 to \$8.6 million in 2020 (King County Department of Assessments, n.d.), could this leave the door open for another comeback for the Nippon Kan? Only time will tell if the right organization would be able to revive it in a more sustainable way, to make the future of the Nippon Kan as bright as the memories of its past.

**Method Note:**

This case study was developed by Stefanie Fatooh, MFA 2022 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. A group interview was conducted with former members and staff of the Northwest Asian American Theatre. This group interview included Manuel Cawaling, former Associate Artistic Director; Kathy Hsieh, former Managing Director; Bea Kiyohara, former Artistic Director of 15 years; and Patti West, who helped to manage the Nippon Kan before becoming the Executive Director of Theatre Off Jackson. Primary research was conducted during Spring Quarter, 2021. Susan Kanimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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Photo Gallery



*Photograph of Directors and Members of Nippon Kan.  
Courtesy Wing Luke Museum Collection, 2006.038.001.001*



*Nippon Kan Theatre Screen. Courtesy Wing Luke Museum Collection*