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Recommended Citation

Wren, Cay Lane, "The Wing Takes Flight: How the Wing Luke Museum Built a Home for the Asian American Community" (2020). *Wing Luke Museum*. 1.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/wing-luke-museum/1>

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The Wing Takes Flight:

How the Wing Luke Museum Built a Home for the Asian American Community

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Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

March 17, 2020

Abstract

The Wing Luke Museum has been an important center of Asian American art, history, and community outreach for the past 53 years. It opened in 1967 as a folk art museum in a storefront, honoring the memory of Wing Chong Luke, the first Asian American elected to public office in the state of Washington. Today, it is a showcase for Asian American culture, the only museum of its kind to be accredited by the national association of museums. Under the leadership of Ron Chew, its Executive Director for 17 years, the organization's innovative model for community-based exhibition development gained the respect of the museum world, and the support of a pan-Asian constituency. Their success has resulted in two expansions of the museum, twenty years apart. In 2008, under new leadership and in a new 60,000 square foot space in a landmark building, the museum rededicated itself with new vigor to supporting artists, telling community stories, and preserving historic places. Now attracting a national audience and support, the Wing Luke Museum has entered a golden age. Its commitment to engaging the community and responding to its ever-evolving needs has made the museum an example of what responsible and responsive museum leadership can attain.

The Wing Takes Flight:

How the Wing Luke Museum Built a Home for the Asian American Community

When Wing Luke was elected to the Seattle City Council in 1962, he broke racial precedent as the first Asian American to be elected to office in the state of Washington. Beyond his political achievements, Luke was a man steeped in principle. He used the power of his office to bring public attention and political pressure toward rewriting discriminatory legislation. His goal was to not only make the city laws more fair but also more humane to the people of his community. As an immigrant, he knew the prejudice that immigrants coming to the city of Seattle suffered (Takami, 1999). He knew that laws could be used to shift society's attitudes towards immigrants.

Luke's service was cut short by his untimely death in a plane crash in 1965. Before his death, Luke conceived of an idea for his community, one outside the political or legal realm. He saw the need to preserve everyday Asian culture and art, a need not being met in Seattle. He thought that a community-based museum could ensure the preservation of that culture (Ramirez, 2008a). This seed would eventually flower and become the globally recognized Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, a 60,000 square foot space dedicated to preserving the history of the pan-Asian American experience.

Wing Luke, The Man

Wing Chong Luke was born in Guangzhou, China in 1925. His family moved to Seattle when Luke was only six years old (Takami, 1999). A precocious and inquisitive child, Luke became the family's English-language interpreter and, at a young age, dealt with the racism that was common in Seattle at the time.

He served as class president at Roosevelt [High School] and on the Seattle Inter-High Student Council, and then he fought in the Pacific, earning a Bronze Star. But his family paid a price when other returning servicemen drove rents sky high. The Lukes were given the boot: Chinese, Japanese, what's the difference, their landlady told them, the country was at war with 'those people.' (Stripling, 2005, para. 17)

Despite the prejudice and isolation he faced, Luke was outgoing and friendly, adapting quickly to American life despite the challenges of being Chinese and an immigrant. Throughout his youth, he remained vocally committed to his family and his community as an Asian American (Ramirez, 2008a).

A Call to Political Action

Luke joined the army in 1944, during World War II, serving in the Philippines and earning a Bronze Star. When he returned from the war he resumed his education, earning degrees in political science, public administration, and law from the University of Washington and attending graduate school at American University in Washington, D.C. (Ramirez, 2008a). After five years as an Assistant Attorney General, he took on the monumental challenge of running for political office in 1962, campaigning for an open Seattle City Council seat. Luke's strength was in his community support; his campaign was run predominantly on volunteer effort. He weathered an intense smear campaign accusing him of having communist ties, and ultimately won election by 30,000 votes. His political platform focused on urban renewal and civil rights. He was instrumental in the passing of an open-housing ordinance that effectively prevented discrimination on the basis of race in Seattle housing (Takami, 1999). Luke continued educating himself on both policy and politics: the way in which his influence could mitigate the strife that his community faced.

Luke's work with fair housing, Indian fishing rights, using publicity to sway opinion toward saving the Pike Place Market or saving the Wawona sailing ship as a way to revitalize the waterfront were just part of his broader view. (Stripling, 2005, para. 10)

Luke felt his duty as a Councilmember was to work for all peoples in Seattle, tapping into the strength of collaboration and community.

The Seed of a Museum

Having immersed himself in education and politics for most of his life, it was Luke's keen attention to details that gave him the idea for a museum of the authentic Asian American experience. The story is now so intrinsically tied to what the Wing Luke Museum has become that it almost reads like folklore, a legend that would be featured in one of its own exhibits.

Toward the end of his life, after seeing some worn Chinese slippers that a local shop owner had found after cleaning out his basement, Wing suggested creating a Chinese folk-art museum in the neighborhood. "He said these things shouldn't be hidden away." (Ramirez, 2008a, para. 16)

From that small interaction, Luke envisioned an institution that would illuminate his family's culture. He had the foresight to realize that communities like his would need a place dedicated to preserving their home country's culture amid the pressure to assimilate and adapt to American life. "His sense was that there were enough museums for jade and silks," his sister, Bettie Luke recalled. "It was the living culture that was going to die off, and there needed to be something to preserve it" (Stripling, 2005).

Unfortunately, his political career and preservationist aspirations were cut short when a fishing trip in the Cascades in May, 1965 ended in tragedy. His plane crashed and remained undiscovered for three-and-a-half years. During that painful time, the Chinese American

Community Fund was created to offset the costly search for the plane. In a poignant turn of events, after his body was recovered, the remaining funds were used to build out the storefront that would become the Wing Luke Memorial Museum (Stripling, 2005). While his brief career had undoubtedly increased acceptance of Asians by the white community, Seattle in the late 1960s was not the ideal environment for the museum that Luke had envisioned.

Seattle's Asian Community

Like many cities, Seattle has a long and complex relationship with race. Racial discrimination is built into the societal foundations that the city we know today developed upon. Memories of the Japanese and German internment camps built during World War II remained fresh, and the redlining of African American neighborhoods was ongoing when the Wing Luke Museum first opened its doors in 1967. It is fair to state that Seattle was still on the uphill side of the learning curve on race relations.

Though Asian Americans continue to experience prejudicial treatment well into the city's second century, anti-Asian sentiment dates from the beginnings of Seattle and how immigrants were treated as soon as they arrived in the 1800s. Author, historian, and former Wing Luke Museum director Ron Chew described those conditions in an interview.

I think with many of these ethnic enclaves that exist ... you have folks because of discrimination, because of lack of opportunities - really congregating near an arrival point and finding work close by. In Seattle you had a Chinatown which began as early and even before the city formed as a city. (Parkinson, 2017)

Immigrants were crucial in the building of the city; their cheap labor contributed to massive industrial development over a short period of time. As the city changed, so too did Chinatown. Initially located near the industrial waterfront south of downtown, landfill, street

relocation and regrading projects pushed the neighborhood further east, to its current location. Segregated by discriminatory housing legislation, the area was first occupied by Chinese, then Japanese, then Filipino and later, Southeast Asian immigrants. During World War II, African Americans arriving to work in factories and excluded from white neighborhoods, congregated in and around Chinatown. In the 1950s, it was declared an International settlement. Activists defending the neighborhood's diverse residents reclaimed the term "International District" when they joined to protest building of the Kingdome stadium in the early 1970s (Parkinson, 2017). Though the laws and attitudes of society were against them, Asian Americans remained committed to their culture; that pride in their community supported and drove the modest beginnings to the Wing Luke Museum.

The First Twenty Years

The Wing Luke Museum opened in 1967 in a small storefront space on Eighth Avenue South in the heart of the International District. Within a decade, it became clear that community support was there for the museum and its mission, with each new exhibition bringing in more patrons. In 1985, the museum undertook its first expansion. David Berger (1985) reported in the *Seattle Times*,

The Wing Luke Memorial Museum will be moving to a new and much bigger home...

The museum will rent the building from the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation Development Authority, which recently received \$200,000 from the Legislature to refurbish the structure into rentable conditions. The private nonprofit museum will have to come up with \$300,000 to customize the space.

Berger noted that, at the time, the museum's annual budget was \$55,000 and they had a staff of three, the only full-time employee being museum director Kit Freudenberg. The plan

outlined a trio of galleries: one space dedicated to International District histories, one space for rotating exhibits related to the interests of the pan-Asian community, and the third to be rented out to the community. Freudenberg and her team sought to support community interests inside the museum while offering community members power over how they wanted to present those interests (Berger, 1985). This would prove to be a key engagement strategy that the museum would employ over the next three decades and the next evolution of the museum. The 1987 expansion was a direct response to the need for more exhibit space and the desire to connect more effectively with local schools and community events. The number of museum visitors and the need for more space continued to grow.

The Wing Takes Flight

Ron Chew was appointed Executive Director of the Wing Luke Museum in 1991. Chew had spent his life in the International District. His first job was busboy at the Hong Kong restaurant where his father was a waiter. He was the editor of the International Examiner, covering community issues during the 1970s and 80s (Chin, 2001). A personal friend of many of the district's older immigrants and younger political activists, he was uniquely positioned to draw out the community's stories.

The first exhibition mounted under Chew's direction was "Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After." It depicted the results of the order signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 12th, 1942, which was used to imprison thousands of Japanese, German, and Italian Americans in domestic concentration camps. 110,000 Japanese Americans living on the west coast were affected. More than two-thirds of the detainees were American citizens; the rest were legal immigrants who had lived in America for over twenty years (Wing Luke Museum, n.d.). This mass incarceration had a huge impact on the Japanese community in Seattle.

Less than 50 years after the order was signed, many in the International District community had experienced incarceration first-hand and came forward to share their accounts.

Executive Order 9066 became the most successful exhibition in the museum's history to that point. The attendance was indicative of how the community would react when their truths, no matter how painful, were given respectful treatment. This exhibit touched on both an emotionally charged cultural trauma and an act that affected the community's residents personally. A version of the exhibit is still on display today, but when it was constructed all those years ago it created a new paradigm for community-museum collaboration, with over 100 community volunteers personally contributing to the construction of the exhibit (Niiya, 2017).

In the wake of the overwhelmingly positive response to Executive Order 9066, Chew began assessing the opportunities that the museum could tap into if it had more space,

Based on the success of the Executive Order 9066 exhibit which we held, and the community interest and just the power of the program ... we swiftly began outgrowing our space, both for that exhibition because it was much larger than we had envisioned, as well as for subsequent programs and exhibitions. So we began thinking about the future, and began, sort of looking at where we might relocate to. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Community as Blueprint

For any non-profit organization, a large capital project is a long process. Once Chew and the museum's board committed to relocation and expansion, they had to define their goals and assess the cost of achieving them. The new space would expand upon the original 1987 plan: a historical permanent exhibit, rotating exhibits of community interest, and galleries in which Asian communities across the spectrum could tell their own stories in a contemporary manner

(Chew, 2009). The museum's growing collection of historic artifacts would get regular rotation in the museum's exhibits. School groups and community events would benefit from additional meeting space, a library, and a youth arts center. Chew described the process of methodically outlining a budget, which took over a year, and required judicious consultation with the museum's staff and constituents. Serving the community was the foundation of the expansion plan.

It was also driven by conversations with the community, in that community-based model that we're working, people said 'Hey we maybe we should do this and this'. And now following the Executive Order 9066 exhibit, you know there's a desire to tell the incarceration story as part of a permanent display. And so both community conversations as well as some of the internal thinking just based on the number of school tours and programs you're churning out, that led to some initial framing of what kind of facility we need and how many square feet. (personal communication, March 4, 2020)

Chew and the board set a goal of \$23 million for the capital campaign. He devoted the last five years of his tenure as director to fundraising, building a donor list of nearly 2000 people. With the finances secured and the move set for the end of 2007, Chew made a gracious exit. The museum began a six-month journey to travel the two-and-a-half blocks to its new home in the historic East Kong Yick Building.

The Building as Exhibit

The East Kong Yick Building has a vibrant history all its own. Built in 1910 by enterprising Chinese pioneers, the East and West Kong Yick buildings were home to Chinese businesses throughout the 20th century, including shops, residences, a hotel, and perhaps most importantly, family association meeting rooms where, "...people from the same region of their

native country with the same family name would gather” (Maurice, 2008, para. 4). The top floors of both buildings were apartments for the original investors and their families (Maurice, 2008). At the turn of the 21st century, some of the apartments in the West Kong Yick Building were still occupied by their descendants. The museum was committed to remaining in the International District but, at the time that they were searching for a new home, only the East Kong Yick building had no tenants on its upper floors. This was crucial to the relocation team, since they did not want to displace residents or do harm to the community they sought to serve. Renovating just the east building allowed them to maintain their budget and blend into the community rather than disrupting it (R. Chew, personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Recycle, Reuse, Reinvent

The East Kong Yick Building is an important structure in the International District, a National Landmark district. The renovation had to be sensitive to its history. The museum staff and their architects wanted to showcase the building and all of its historical idiosyncrasies in an authentic and unforced manner. The sky-lit hall at the top of the grand staircase, which delights visitors to this day, encloses a light well that was previously open to the sky. The reception desk is built out of pieces of the building’s original doors. The staircase is made with timber salvaged during the renovation. All elements of the new structure were cultivated with care and in consideration to the building’s past (Maurice, 2008).

Even the main floor theater’s curtain has a story. Once a key element of another community institution, the Nippon Kan Theatre, it is a patchwork of advertisements for local businesses that existed in the 1910s. This grand-scale Yellow Pages was taken down in 1915 for reasons unknown and the curtain was thought to be lost. Rediscovered in 1990, it was offered up to the museum in 2006 (Ramirez, 2008b). Originally a fire curtain, meant to prevent accidental

fires onstage from spreading into the audience, it turned out to be 83 percent asbestos. It seemed that this piece of history might be doomed, but “Malarkey [the painting conservator] knew the whole curtain would have to be encapsulated in some protective substance in order to safely hang in a museum environment. Eventually, he found a resin-based, see-through product that would hold the pigments in place” (Ramirez, 2008b, para.16). After three-and-a-half months of careful work, the precious souvenir was put on display, a moving reminder of the community’s history.

Homecoming

When the museum opened its new doors in 2008, the weight of expectations was palpable, but the community was not disappointed. The museum’s CEO and long-time advocate Beth Takekawa took over as director and Chew handed over the reins, knowing the museum was financially secure with a surplus to get them through the challenges of growing into a much larger building and organization. Contemporary exhibits rotate through the large, white-walled spaces on the main floor. The cultures of various Asian countries are highlighted in the smaller community portrait galleries on the second floor. The commitment to remembering the past and supporting the future are woven together in one building, maintaining a meaningful balance. In a 2017 interview, Chew reflected on his time at the museum and the museum’s role in the Chinatown-International District’s development.

As a museum person, as a historian, as a storyteller, you can't frame your future without somehow acknowledging and providing a place for that past to emerge because it provides you some emotional connection to who you are and why you are where you are. (Parkinson, 2017)

But in the same interview, Chew noted that you can't stay fixated on the past or you risk losing relevance. A conscientious museum administrator must stay committed to moving forward in order to remain vital and sustainable.

The Wing Luke Museum is a model of adaptation and reinvention. Starting as a modest storefront display of cultural ephemera and folk art, the museum today sets a precedent in culturally conscious contemporary art and youth education, while staying attuned to the community it was born from and seeks to serve. It continues to let its history, its people, and its community values direct how it can develop next.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Cay Lane Wren, MFA 2021, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research practicum focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. An interview was conducted with Ron Chew, Wing Luke Museum Executive Director from 1991-2007. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

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