Japantown Bowl, The J-Pop Center and the Character

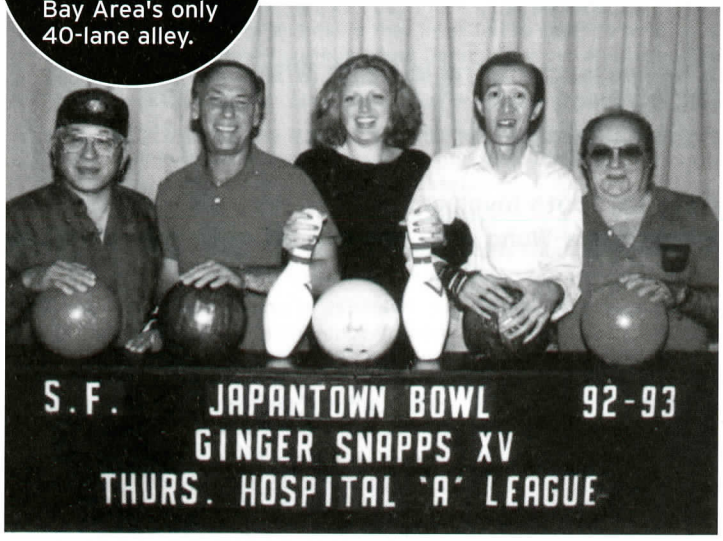
by Ben Hamamoto

Starting in 1975, Ginger and Frank Masuoka went bowling twice a week at Japantown Bowl on Post & Webster streets in San Francisco's Nihonmachi. They were a part of the Hospital League and the Reno/Tahoe Express League. They bowled with the Fort Miley Veterans Medical Center team where Frank was secretary/treasurer for the league for 15 years.

The bowling alley was an instituion for local Nikkei, a community center that connected Japanese Americans to each other and to bowlers of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. There was the Juvenile League: bowlers so young that bumper guards were placed in the channels of the lanes to keep the bowling ball rolling into the pin zone. There were Junior Leagues, Adult Leagues, Gay/Lesbian Leagues, Handicap Leagues, and of course, there was always Open Bowl League and Senior's League Bowl.

A Place for Community - Japantown Bowl served a diverse community as the Bay Area's only 40-lane alley.

In 2000, though, Japanese railroad giant Kintetsu Enterprises Co. of America, which owned the property Japantown Bowl operated in, closed



Photos courtesy of Ginger Masuoka

the business to ready the property for sale. The bowling alley was far too young to be considered a historic landmark and there was nothing superficially Japanese about it to make cultural preservation claims, but its closing, amidst significant community protest, is looked at by many as a critical chapter in the long and troubled saga of San Francisco Japantown's redevelopment.

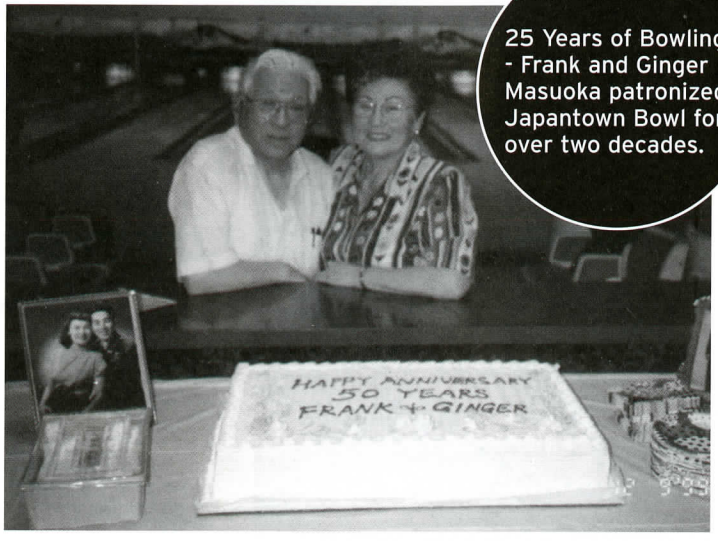
In 1948, the Western Addition area of San Francisco, which housed much of the city's African American population as well as about half of Japantown, was chosen as one of the first large-scale urban renewal projects in the country. Cleverly drawing boundaries in a way that gerrymandered Nihonmachi, which was doing quite well, in with neighborhoods that were struggling financially, the city identified the area as blighted and in need of redevelopment. Property was seized by eminent domain and razed to the ground, displacing 1500 residents and 60 small Nikkei businesses, as the majority did not own the property they lived and/or did business in.

The city's Redevelopment Agency expanded Geary, a street that connected downtown to some of San Francisco's suburbs, to an eight-lane expressway that physically divided the black and Japanese American communities and recreated the neighborhood as a tourist attraction, favoring big buildings built by big money over small family owned establishments.

Japan Center was built by Kintetsu in the mid to late '60s to introduce the goods of newly prosperous Japan to the American public – there were showrooms for Hitachi, Mitsubishi and Sony. The Japanese railroad company also constructed the Miyako Mall, Kintetsu Mall, Miyako Hotel and Miyako Inn. A community resistance movement grew over the years, but was unable to stop the character of Japantown from shifting fundamentally from a Nikkei residential and small business area to a shopping mall run by Japanese companies.

To the city, though, redevelopment was a success as it raised property tax revenues in the area three-fold by 1977. "The [mass incarcertaion] had a dramatic impact on Japanese Americans, but urban renewal, or redevelopment amounted to a second eviction,"

25 Years of Bowling - Frank and Ginger Masuoka patronized Japantown Bowl for over two decades.



Shizue Seigel, former editor of Nikkei Heritage explained in a previous issue. "It can be argued that [redevelopment] weakened the fabric of the Nikkei community far more seriously , insidiously and permanently than the [concentration camps]." Japantown Bowl was one of the few businesses that remained a place for the Nikkei and other communities, as opposed to tourists. Ginger still remembers her shock and feeling of sadness upon hearing Bert Webb, the manager, of the decision coming from "upstairs. "Hearing the announcement, several of the senior bowlers said, "So what are we supposed to do now? Put our bowling balls in the closet and die?"

"The fight to 'save' the Japantown Bowl, which brought 150,000 visitors to Japantown each year, was a very emotional one," Kenji Taguma, president of the Nichi Bei Foundation, explained. "It galvanized both seniors and youth, who utilized the bowling alley for inexpensive recreational entertainment." "J-Town Bowl," as it was affectionately called, was also the Bay Area's only 40-lane alley and, as such, was the only viable location for large-scale tournaments. "[The alley] housed

Japanese American bowling leagues, which have since moved to locations outside of the city, if they exist at all."

Sports Complex noted that the closure likely displaced many of the 30 Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender leagues . Nearby businesses, including the historic family-owned Benkyodo café, said the closure slowed traffic to the area and affected sales.

Members of the diverse communities who patronized Japantown Bowl rallied around the business, organizing a community forum at the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California, packing a Board of Supervisors committee hearing on the issue, protesting outside city hall prior to the hearing and calling for a building moratorium. The JCCCNC even tried to negotiate buying the property as an adaptive reuse for non-profits..

"By being involved in it, we could improve upon how the bowling alley can better serve the community," JCCCNC Executive Director Paul Osaki told the Nichi Bei Times during that period. "Retention of land in the community is critical for the community's survival... If we start losing the land, we start losing the community." Ultimately, the property was sold to and developed by John McInerney.

Currently a UPS Store is the only retail business at the location. Market-rate condominiums occupy the upper floors. Frank Masuoka, now 87 years old, still finds time and energy to bowl twice a week, but sadly not at Japantown Bowl where he had so many friends.

Last year, the neighboring Hokubei Mainichi building was razed to make way for what has informally become known as the "J-Pop Center." Seiji Horibuchi, founder of the pioneering anime and manga company Viz Media, represented Japanese publishing company Shogakukan which bought the building in 2004 and constructed and opened the center, called "NEW PEOPLE" in 2009. The complex currently houses Japanese avant-garde fashion boutiques, a Japanese pop art gallery, a cafe, and the country's first movie theater dedicated to Japanese live-action and animated films.

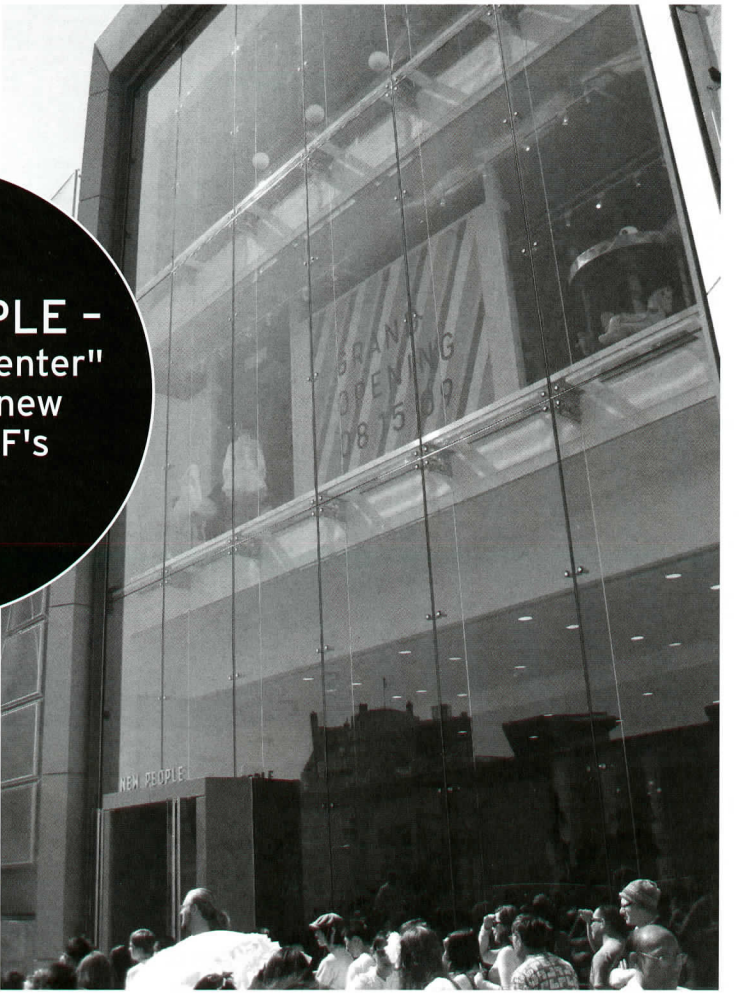
While "NEW PEOPLE" undeniably continues the trend of a Japan-centric Japantown, it was largely welcomed by the Nikkei community, with both the Japantown Merchant's Association and the Japantown Task Force expressing hope in its ability to revitalize Nihonmachi.

Viz Cinema, located inside "NEW PEOPLE" has a connection to the community's past. Horibuchi hatched the idea for Viz Cinema more than two decades ago when the Kokusai Gekijyou movie theater – that specialized in Japanese film and was one of the first theaters to participate in the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival – was closed and converted to a Denny's. "I want to bring back a showcase for Japanese films: live action, documentaries and animation," Horibuchi told Nichi Bei. "If possible, films from other Asian countries like Thailand, Korea and India."

Viz Cinema has followed in the Kokusai's footsteps by participating in the SFIAAFF and by screening Asian American narrative documentary films as well as films from Asia. "NEW PEOPLE" is no Japantown Bowl, but with both the potential to revitalize the area economically and attract young Nikkei back, it represents a new direction in a post-redevelopment era.. ✺

NEW PEOPLE – The "J-Pop Center" represents a new direction of SF's Japantown.





Photos courtesy of Carrie Laurent