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How We Contain Our Stories — and Determine What's Worth Saving

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The first Tower Records store in the U.S. was opened in 1960 in Sacramento. It was demolished in 2019.

“It’s not worth saving,” I told my parents as I helped them clean out their garage full of objects from the past 60 years.

I played tug of war with them, trying to convince them to throw away 40 years’ worth of bank calendars, a children’s wooden desk, bowling trophies from 1968 and my dad’s first computer. My father would exclaim in excitement, “Look, aren’t you glad I saved this!” as he

pulled out a picture made from macaroni and dried beans glued to paper that I made in kindergarten at Charles Mack Elementary School in Sacramento.

I responded: “I would have been more excited if you saved our Pong set.”

To you, your parents’ stuff in the garage might be better off at Goodwill or in a recycling bin. But to them, these objects might hold their life stories — memories, accomplishments, milestones and chapters of their lives. Their coveted objects are as vital as the foundation and walls of their home. Their home, like all their stuff, is the bigger capsule that traces their life path. Built together, our homes become our neighborhoods, which in turn make up our city.

Cities aren’t just a dense collection of buildings; they also serve as containers of life stories. When we demolish the places that shape our lives, we risk losing the paths we have carved out both as individuals and as a community. Imagine the demolition of your childhood home or a favorite hangout spot. It might be as upsetting as the razing of Tower Records, where you bought Michael Jackson’s “The Wall,” or the Arden Century Cinedomes, where you saw “Star Wars.” It’s even more heartbreaking to read of the obliteration of entire ethnic enclaves like the West End’s Japantown, Chinatown, and Black Business district.

Without critical selection and thoughtful historical preservation, our city’s historic buildings and neighborhoods could be reduced to rubble and our storyscapes erased.

Memories in the walls and in ‘third places’

Our experiences that take place in communal spaces such as a record store or a movie theater, add to a city’s collective memory. Buildings are social environments where we gather, meet friends and strangers, and create community. These gathering nodes are referred to as “third places,” a term coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989. Oldenburg emphasizes that these third places are our communal living rooms that anchor us in a city.

Our stories attach to buildings, walls and streets. We can point to the music venue where we fell in love, or the corner where we protested against a political regime or the store where we landed our first job. That may explain why we are saddened when our favorite bookstore, movie theater or cafe disappears, and is replaced by luxury condos, a freeway or a parking lot.

The Victorian art historian John Ruskin wrote in his 1849 essay “The Seven Lamps of Architecture” about the importance of memory and preserving architecture: “We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”



The Alder Grove housing complex, Sacramento's first public housing complex (originally known as New Helvetia), was accepted onto the National Register of Historic Places in 2014. This 2020 photo was taken as part of a Rosie the Riveter event, with a gathering of Alder Grove residents who protested a proposal before the Sacramento City Council to demolish some of the older two-story brick buildings. (Photo courtesy of Don Cox)

Buildings don't just serve as shelter and commerce, but also carriers of cultural memory and time. When buildings disappear due to natural causes, change of ownership or new development, our routine, relationships and affiliations can be disrupted. In some tragic cases, entire communities are destroyed. These cultural corridors are vital to a city not only for their social exchange but because this is where historical events occur, like the long-gone building in Oak Park where the Sacramento chapter of the Black Panthers' met, or the houses where great leaders like Joan Didion and [civil rights attorney Nathaniel S. Colley](#) resided.

Yet, after World War II, legislation prioritized urban renewal across the nation, erasing many of our storyhoods. One blaring example of this is the Capitol Mall Redevelopment Project in Sacramento.

A few years after the California State Legislature approved the Community Redevelopment Act of 1945, developers with the support of city officials and the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency (now called the Sacramento Housing & Redevelopment Agency) leveled the fourth-largest Japantown in the nation, a Chinatown and a Black-owned business district. Fifteen city blocks home to a rich storyhood called West End were torn down for a shopping mall, government buildings and parking lots.

SRA and the Sacramento City Planning Commission expedited the process by falsely claiming that the area was blighted and fit for *slum clearance*, according to U.C. Davis School of Law Prof. Thomas Joo; Joo argued that Sacramento's West End was the most publicized example of using slum clearance to eliminate a multiethnic downtown enclave.

Despite resistance and peaceful protests from community members, the West End demolition displaced nearly 4,000 residents (80% Asian American and 20% Black) and 350 business owners who were 60-75% Japanese. The city destroyed — later regretting doing so — not only a thriving neighborhood but also one of Sacramento's cultural gems.

'Blight is an imaginary disease of buildings that is caused by the race and ethnicity of the people in the buildings, and presumably the only cure is a wrecking ball.' ~ Bernard J. Frieden, urban renewal critic

'Where there is ruin, there is hope for treasure,' -Rumi

Today, after the mistakes of the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal destruction, there is more research and community organization to prevent ethnic enclave erasures like those of Japantown, Chinatown and the Black West End.

Socially conscious planners now take into account different voices of the community and cultural hubs that have housed important events and leaders. City of Sacramento's Preservation Director Sean de Courcy emphasized the importance of preserving a range of stories for a more accurate telling of history, which before the 1950s covered mostly the white settler story.

In 2023, the Office of Historic Preservation launched [The African American Experience History Project \(AAEHP\)](#) that traces the Black community in Sacramento from the 1850s to the 1980s. It is the first comprehensive framework for protecting Black historic resources in Sacramento. It also catalyzed the official listing of the New Helvetia Historic District and 12 separate landmark properties to the Sacramento Register of Historic & Cultural Resources on Aug. 26, 2025.



The original Tower Records in Sacramento was demolished in 2019 and a five-story housing development is being built at the site. (Courtesy photo by Sarah Moon)

Although the city spearheaded and secured \$50,000 in state funds for AAEHP, it has been a long-term community effort. It would not have been possible without the advocacy and community initiative from the Oak Park Neighborhood Association, Greater Sacramento African American Genealogy Society, Preservation Sacramento and local Black leaders. Historians such as Joe Debbs and Margo King-Douglas have been advocating for the acknowledgement of cultural contributions of the Black story in the city's preservation framework since the mid-2010s.

Another example of community organization for historic preservation is Reclaim Sacramento. This grassroots organization is made up of 15 core members from the Japanese American Citizens League and members of the Buddhist Church. Since 2020, they have been convening monthly, discussing ways to tell the local Japantown story.

In 2024, Reclaim Sacramento raised \$25,000, mostly through individual donations, for a [mural by artist Karen Tsugawa](#) to commemorate Japantown. It hangs temporarily on 301 Capitol Mall, presently owned by the Shingle Springs Miwok Tribe. Reclaim founder Jamie Katayanagi, dreams of a more anchoring hub such as a visitor center. Reclaim member John Kanemoto envisioned a more poetic installation, such as giant red Torii gates along the four entrances to the invisible Japantown.

Storykeepers of the city

Leveling places takes hours, whereas rebuilding stories can take decades. The AAEHP initiative is the result of at least 13 years of perseverance and patience on the part of community members and nonprofit organizations. Reclaim may have another decade or two before realizing a more permanent home to catalyze their stories.

Allies are essential, especially in times when recent legislation is prioritizing new development over historical preservation. To save time, these grassroots organizations need not reinvent wheels; fortunately, there are established organizations with expertise in historic preservation that can assist their efforts. Examples include Preservation Sacramento, California Preservation Foundation, Latinos in Heritage Conservation, Asian & Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation and the African American and Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

Adding artists, architects, planners, researchers and political figures to a team will not only assist in a robust plan to reinsert ethnic stories back into our built environment, but also provide the support and creativity needed to accomplish the huge feat of remaking history.

The City of Sacramento dedicates only two full-time staff to its Historic Preservation program. The director de Courcy and Preservation Planner Harry Feuss oversee 32 historic districts consisting of 4,500 listings and about 950 landmark buildings, all while grant writing and spearheading projects like AAEHP and LGBTQ+ Historic Experience Project.

Given limited City resources, reviving and protecting cultural corridors relies more on the community to research, plan, organize and propose ideas. For individuals dedicated to resuscitating our stories, a good place to start is investigating historic preservation and understanding how storyhoods are selected.

Protecting our stories

Receiving Federal or State listing for a building is more of an honorary title that has economic and historical benefits. It's a local listing like the Sacramento Register of Historic & Cultural Resources that can make demolition very challenging for a registered complex like New Helvetia. Developers, in this case, would also have to go before a design review by the Preservation Commission and meet the current adopted West Broadway Historic District Plan. That's why, if you want to save a building from the wrecking ball, it is wise to get a building locally listed and not just federally or statewide.

Sixty years ago, we adopted measures to ensure that places of significance could acquire some protection on the federal, state and city levels; however, these laws have recently been jeopardized. For instance, the Abundant and Affordable Homes Near Transit Act signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom in October 2025 prioritizes transit-oriented development by overriding local zoning laws, which might include [historic district protection](#). (The law goes into effect in July 2026.)

Those people trying to rescue an ethnic enclave from demolition should think like a planner and economist, and not only as a historian. Cultural neighborhoods are important economic actors, such as business nodes, tourism draws, and import and export connectors. According to de Courcy, studies reveal that a designated historic district imbues a neighborhood with more civic pride, elevates the property value in the vicinity and encourages capital improvements with access to grants. Given all these advantages of historic districts and monuments, city planners make sure to adopt a historic district when reviewing plans for a new area or development.

“It’s a bummer to lead a walking tour and have to point to a parking lot and say, ‘This is where this awesome thing used to be,” said William Burg, a prominent Sacramento preservationist and historian.

Like cleaning out the attic with your parents, the process of selecting which buildings to save can be an emotionally charged challenge because it’s not just walls we’re sorting through, but the stories of our lives. One can’t easily discard a lifetime’s worth of memories attached to buildings that have laid the foundation of our communities. But if we — city council, planning commissioners, historic preservationists, architects, historians and community members — come together, we can thoughtfully choose to honor the multiple voices and richness of cultural stories that make up our city.

By Angie Eng

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