

Article

Co-Creation From the Grassroots: Listening to Arts-Based Community Organizing in Little Tokyo

Jonathan Jae-an Crisman

Public & Applied Humanities, University of Arizona, USA; crisman@arizona.edu

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Abstract

Co-creation has been adopted by some as a new paradigm for collaborative and participatory planning, especially through the introduction of creative and artistic practices which can disrupt the problematic power relationships latent within urban projects and knowledge creation. Co-creation research, however, has often focused on practices which connect empowered institutional actors, such as city planning officials, from the top down to less empowered grassroots and community actors. Co-creation can take myriad forms, however, and I use evidence from the Los Angeles community of Little Tokyo to, first, model grassroots-driven co-creation. Second, this example shows how empowered actors can practice “listening” as defined within public spheres literature to better respond to grassroots-driven co-creation. Third, Little Tokyo has also been the site of another promising form of co-creation practice: horizontal co-creation across multiple grassroots actors. In sum, I argue that co-creation practices which emanate from the grassroots can provide valuable insights, further a more just and inclusive city, and deserve more attention.

Keywords

arts organizing; co-creation; gentrification; listening; Little Tokyo; Los Angeles; participation; participatory planning; public art; public spheres

Issue

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1. Introduction

Co-creation is a practice that has increasingly come to be used in public administration and urban planning as a way to engender better participatory processes and positive urban outcomes (Horvath & Carpenter, 2020). While it is practiced in diverse ways, at its core is the desire to involve end-users in the process of making—such as the residents of a neighborhood becoming the designers of a new urban plan for their community, for example. This stands in contrast to more conventional forms of participatory planning where participation is included in only specific, defined moments where feedback is requested, such as within a community workshop or public hearing. Scholars studying co-creation, such as Carpenter et al. (2021) have noted its potential in enabling marginalized communities to work toward building more just and inclusive cities. Yet many other scholars, including those

who coined the term, more often focus on the ways that empowered institutional actors stand to benefit from the participation of co-creators (e.g., Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014, pp. 280–282).

Co-creation activities initiated and designed by institutional actors certainly have the potential to disrupt problematic binary power relations and open up new creative possibilities as some scholars have demonstrated (e.g., Pruvot, 2020). I argue, however, more attention should be paid to participatory planning and co-creation practices that, instead, emanate from the bottom up by grassroots actors. Based upon analysis of art-based community organizing and urban development activities occurring in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Little Tokyo, I first demonstrate that planning actors operating from the grassroots, such as within or for community organizations, rather than institutional actors such as city planning departments, can produce powerful visions

for the future of neighborhoods that are just, progressive, and in service of the public good. I use the term “planning actors” to identify grassroots actors who are undertaking urban planning activities, such as generating urban plans, even though they are not professionally identified as urban planners. Second, drawing from theories of listening found in public sphere literatures, I analyze Little Tokyo’s demonstration of how political leaders can listen “out” to grassroots action as a form of co-creation practice rather than the typical listening “in” that occurs in conventional forms of participation such as public hearings or community meetings. And third, I observe in Little Tokyo the possibility of “horizontal” co-creation between multiple grassroots actors rather than the typical model of co-creation between institutional and grassroots actors. These findings point toward the importance of analyzing co-creation and participatory planning practices on the basis of whether actors come from institutional or grassroots spaces, as well as expand our understanding of what is possible through art-based co-creation methodologies.

2. Literature Review

Co-creation is a concept that emerged in business and management studies in the early 2000s based on the observation that the process of value creation was shifting from control by firms toward control by consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This has been described by some scholars as a “paradigm shift” which is “propelled by advances in global communication and information technologies” resulting in a “new age of engagement” (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014, p. 1). Originally defined as the creation of value by consumers (Zwass, 2010), it has come to be used in other disciplines including public administration and urban planning to describe a participatory and collaborative practice where end-users become involved in all the steps of production: This can apply to the production of goods, knowledge, or even urban development (Voorberg et al., 2015). Carpenter et al. (2021) suggest that this participatory approach better integrates and empowers end-users, pointing to co-creation’s use of creative practices and the arts as a means to generate “agonistic spaces” (see Mouffe, 2013) where dissensus need not come to a neat resolution. Indeed, Horvath and Carpenter (2020) have defined a capitalized “Co-Creation” as distinct from its generic predecessor, highlighting variants of co-creation practice that emphasize critical and creative forms of shared knowledge production as one might find in participatory action research.

Planning scholars in the US, the UK, and elsewhere around the globe have noted the complex problems of power that can warp planning outcomes (Flyvbjerg, 2002; McGuirk, 2001; Stein & Harper, 2003). Co-creation practices, for all their potential in reconfiguring power relationships between actors, are still subject to these pressures. Practitioners of conventional co-creation prac-

tices can resort to activities that are structured from the top down by institutional actors, such as planning workshops or research processes which have been designed by a planning department looking to solicit collaboration from community members. To use Flyvbjerg’s (1998, 2002) value-rational analytic of power, these activities are still based on the rationalities of the empowered actors and thus hold the potential to distort and suppress what, democratically, should happen based on more broadly held rationalities. Co-creation, given its currency across multiple domains, needs additional critical attention to ensure that it does not result in the kinds of cooptation noted by scholars of other forms of participation, such as corporate public affairs campaigns or participatory budgeting (see, for example, Lee et al., 2015). Extending Friedmann’s (1987, 1998) normative understanding of power in planning to this practice, I argue that co-creation ought to shift power to grassroots actors as to enable and empower marginalized groups.

One potential practice within arts-based co-creation that can help resolve embedded problems of power, at least in part, is careful attention to the “politics of listening” (Alexandra, 2015; Horvath & Carpenter, 2020). A nod toward listening does not completely resolve the problematics of power, of course. Nevertheless, care toward listening practiced by empowered institutional actors can help resolve pre-existing “hierarchies, tensions, and disagreements” (Horvath & Carpenter, 2020, p. 8; see also Bickford, 1996). Indeed, scholars have long noted the importance of listening within American planning practice (Forester, 1989, 1999). Our conceptual understanding of listening can be further enriched by literature from communication and political theory which dwell on the nature of the public sphere.

Political theorist Susan Bickford was an early observer of the importance of listening: As she writes, often theories of dialogical participation primarily focus on the masculine coded act of speech rather than the feminine coded act of listening (Bickford, 1996). Yet “both listening and speaking require attention to others,” and, she argues, listening “like speaking, is a creative act” that requires “conscious effort” (Bickford, 1996, p. 144). Elsewhere Bickford has analyzed the design of cities and their public spaces as engendering or inhibiting interaction, participation, and dialog, with gated developments, suburban distance, segregation, and gentrification all contributing to what might be called a listening deficit (Bickford, 2000). These deficits have serious implications for democracy and collective urban life, as the design of our cities, spaces, and institutions yield “political noise” and become unresponsive to citizen needs (Dobson, 2012). So often, interventions privilege giving marginalized communities a “voice” without considering if or how anyone will listen—while interventions that make political actors better listeners may be more effective (Dreher, 2009).

Interestingly, the very same issues identified within participatory planning and co-creation practice—namely,

the problematics of power—are the ones that must be addressed to improve listening. Scholars have pointed toward evidence showing that when people at the bottom are empowered, those at the top listen, putting time and effort into resolving differences and creating shared understanding (Dobson, 2012; Fung, 2004). Listening, in this sense, is far from the “passivity” that it is often associated with and instead becomes a proactive “act.” We can differentiate between common understandings of listening “in” to unidirectional media (mass media, for example), and listening “out” to the public by situating one in spaces and places where these grassroots voices are already in play (Lacey, 2011). In other words, participatory venues do not need to be constructed from the top down so that community actors can be invited in but, rather, institutional actors can go out into urban space in order to hear what is already being spoken on the ground.

One rich source of evidence that can inform how we can understand the power dynamics of listening in co-creation practices comes from the black American cultural experience. Habermas (1962/1989) defined the public sphere as a free space of discourse separate from governmentality yet outside of the private domestic sphere. This was critiqued by numerous scholars as being simplistic in terms of its assumption of singularity and of its reliance on the experience of white, bourgeois men (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990). Communication theorist Catherine Squires (2002) expands the theoretical model of the public sphere further with particular analysis of the African American public sphere, noting the distinct kinds of speech practices that occur within what she terms enclave, counter, and satellite publics which exist in relation to dominant publics. She describes an enclave public as one that hides counterhegemonic ideas within an internally lively debate (e.g., the “hidden transcripts” of antebellum spirituals; see Neal, 1999). A counterpublic stands in public opposition to dominant cultures (e.g., the civil rights movement). And satellite publics seek separation out of preference and occasionally interface with the dominant public (e.g., black internet culture; see Steele, 2018). Through this typology, we can identify speech “on the ground” that is meant for listening (i.e., within counterpublics), for listening with permission (i.e., satellite publics), and for respectfully leaving alone (i.e., enclave publics). I revisit and use this typology throughout the article to identify when and how different art-based political practices are meant to be heard by political leaders and the general public.

3. Methodology

The data for this article comes from a larger body of research focused on arts, activism, and urban development in Little Tokyo. I have spent a little over four years as a community-based researcher in Little Tokyo, from 2018 to the present, collecting ethnographic and case study data. I did this primarily as a member of the Arts

Action Committee within a community coalition organization called Sustainable Little Tokyo (SLT). Data collection included 24 semi-structured interviews with artists, cultural workers, activists, small business owners, and community leaders, a survey of 333 community stakeholders, ethnographic observation at community meetings and events, and analysis of archival, historical, and visual materials. Principal data collection occurred from 2018–2019, when I was more heavily involved in community events and activities, but I have remained a member of the Arts Action Committee and continued to contribute and observe on a less frequent basis, typically within the context of a monthly meeting. While my analysis comes out of this larger body of community-engaged research and perspective, this article focuses on a subset of these materials and methods.

The subset of methods and data used for this article, in particular, include the following three elements. First, I use case study and content analysis of published materials of the SLT 2013 community vision process to understand the nature of one example of co-creation from the grassroots, complemented with some interview and survey data. Second, I use interview responses and ethnographic data from my time in the Arts Action Committee to analyze the role of listening in the process of organizing and social change which culminated in the City of Los Angeles granting development rights for a key parcel of public land in Little Tokyo to local community organizations. And third, I use a case study methodology to consider a specific event, the Little Tokyo Cultural Organizing Workshop, put on by LA Commons, SLT, Arts and Democracy, and the University of Southern California’s Race, Art and Placemaking Initiative, to understand the potentials of horizontal co-creation organized by grassroots actors engaging with each other, rather than within a top down-bottom up hierarchy.

4. Case Study Context

While there might be numerous examples of grassroots co-creation activities in communities around the globe, Little Tokyo has long used the arts as a means for community organizing, building, and development. Perhaps most importantly, Little Tokyo models practical strategies that can be adopted by other marginalized, ethnic, and immigrant neighborhoods that face similar urban pressures. But its example also provides valuable insights for the literature on arts-based co-creation, expanding it into new contexts. Similarly, the public spheres literature has historically focused more generally on a generic European or American political context. But scholars such as Squires (2002) have brought in a critical ethnic studies lens which helps create a frame of reference for understanding how these elements play out in a place like Little Tokyo.

Little Tokyo is a relatively small neighborhood in the vast expanse of Los Angeles, a few city blocks sandwiched between the Civic Core, the gentrified Arts

District, and the industrial Skid Row; yet it holds outsized symbolic importance for Japanese Americans and Asian Americans throughout the Southland (Figure 1). As one interviewee described, it remains “the mother ship” for Japanese Americans in the area. It has seen dramatic challenges over its roughly 140-year history, including redlining, racial discrimination, the forced relocation of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, seizure of lands through eminent domain, an influx of corporate capital, and current processes of gentrification.

The community in Little Tokyo has often used arts and culture as tools for building cohesion and responding to challenges. In response to the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression, for example, community members launched the Nisei Week Festival in 1934 as a shared experience of art and culture that could raise up flagging businesses (Kurashige, 2002), a tradition that continues today. Or, in response to the influx of corporate capital investment from Japan during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., see Iwama et al., 2021), activists worked to channel these resources into cultural organizations that would benefit the community rather than investing solely in for-profit real estate developments. In recent years, as new market-rate condo buildings have gone up, community members have come up with a slogan that shows how it is not fixed but is a dynamic neighborhood that moves into the future while asking that newcomers respect its heritage and give back to the community: “Welcome to Little Tokyo, please take off your shoes.”

The example of Little Tokyo highlights how models for participatory urban planning and development have changed over time. Typically, within a participatory planning process in the US, the developer of an urban project—whether it is a private developer on a parcel of land, or a public agency designing an urban plan or infrastructure project—will have a vision for that project, and then will solicit public participation in the form of input or feedback on that project. These solicitations may take the form of hearings, commenting periods, workshops, charrettes, or more, but they offer no guarantee that this input will actually be used—and rarer still will such participation reach the “top rung” of citizen empowerment because by this point, the developer already has too much invested in a project to be open to change (Arnstein, 1969). Additionally, as numerous scholars have noted, while participatory planning practices were at least in part first conceptualized as a solution for incorporating views from the disenfranchised, they are often dominated by more elite, older, wealthier, whiter, and home-owning participants—This imbalance results in outcomes from such participatory processes that favor these empowered groups, often at the expense of those who do not have the resources to participate (Fainstein & Lubinsky, 2020; McQuarrie, 2015).

Co-creation practices offer an alternative model, inviting participants in at the earliest stages of a development process so that their participation can meaningfully influence outcomes. But even here, the milieu for participation already assumes a public or private developer



Figure 1. A map of Little Tokyo’s current boundaries within the context of Downtown Los Angeles, as defined by its Community Design Overlay established in 2014.

with resources who can invite participants. Might there be a form of participatory practice that emanates from the grassroots from the onset, propositionally suggesting futures from milieus that are designed and created from the bottom up? How might outcomes be influenced if grassroots actors spoke “up” on their own terms, rather than institutional actors inviting “down” opportunities for feedback? One informative example of such a practice is the SLT 2013 community vision, initiated in 2012 and continuing to influence urban outcomes to the present day.

5. Co-Creation From the Grassroots

In 2012, Metro, the transit authority for Los Angeles County, began work on its Regional Connector project, linking disparate rail lines and constructing new stations in Downtown LA. This project, heralded by many as a critical improvement in the public transit network, was, to use Flyvbjerg’s (1998, 2002) terminology on power, also a representation of Metro’s particular rationality and it did not reflect a positive direction for everyone in Little Tokyo. The project cut directly through the neighborhood, razing half of a city block that contained culturally significant businesses and buildings for construction and its new Little Tokyo/Arts District rail station. This compelled the community to take action: Locals noted that not only were they losing yet another block to eminent domain as has happened historically, but the rail stop could potentially drive bigger and faster changes in the area as this newfound centrality increased gentrification pressures. The Little Tokyo Community Council (LTCC), a community organization with representatives from all the different stakeholders in the neighborhood, such as residents, business owners, cultural institutions, and parishioners, began to organize a grassroots community visioning process with the help of Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a longstanding community services organization and community development corporation. LTCC, in fact, had been constituted a little over a decade previously as a community response to alarm about the incursion of big-box retailers on the very same city block. Action began this time around with a community visioning process, and this effort can be understood as an example of co-creation that emanated from the grassroots up.

The SLT 2013 community vision process spanned the course of a year, with community leaders identifying the need for a community vision and formulating the vision process in 2012 after the Regional Connector broke ground, principal community visioning occurring throughout 2013, and the final report being published in January of 2014. It raised funding from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation; the Enterprise Community Partners; the University of California, Los Angeles; and JP Morgan Chase. LTSC and LTCC also pulled in expertise from the Natural Resources Defense Council and hired numerous design, real estate devel-

opment, planning, and infrastructure consultants, led by the firm Mithun. While representatives from public agencies were invited to participate in this process, it was controlled, organized, and initiated by LTSC and LTCC from the bottom up. The final vision report notes the importance of its “bottom-up participatory design process” that involved “200 community members” (SLT, 2014, p. 22) principally from senior and low-income communities in the neighborhood (such as Little Tokyo Towers, Teramachi Homes, and Casa Heiwa), from community groups and businesses (such as the Little Tokyo Business Association), and from community institutions (such as the various churches and temples, and other cultural organizations). A task force which included representatives from these diverse groups was responsible for maintaining ongoing momentum on the project, while broader community input was solicited at key moments, such as a three-day community charrette held in September of 2013, and numerous meetings that were held leading up to and after the charrette.

Of particular note is that, given Little Tokyo’s long history of integrating arts and urban development as described above, these cultural organizations played a key role in formulating values and ideas for the vision, suggesting an importance for the arts beyond the methodological centrality of the arts typically associated with co-creation (Crisman, 2020, 2021; Horvath & Carpenter, 2020). Additionally, arts-based methodologies were used in the visioning process as a tool for shared knowledge creation. Both of these factors played a role in SLT recognizing the importance and value of arts-based methodologies and incorporating them as a key feature of its identity as it grew over time and became more established.

The community-oriented stakeholders participating in the visioning process contrasted with both single-site private developers and public agencies. Rather than focusing exclusively on design considerations such as setbacks or responding to some kind of project that had already been partially designed, the participants were able to conceptualize holistic, interlocking goals for the future of the neighborhood. These goals, as described in the visioning document, included (a) sustaining its unique character, (b) incorporating attention to environmental considerations, (c) a “balanced, human scale” for urban development, (d) the importance of economic vitality and mobility, and (e) sustaining the “strong community fabric” that comes from its stakeholders, its heritage, and its community institutions (SLT, 2014, pp. 25–79). These interlocking elements coalesced in a vision for a “sustainable Little Tokyo” where not only its environment, but also its culture, economic vitality, and community life were also supported so that they could be sustained into the future for subsequent generations. The term proposed by a participant and adopted by the vision was “*mottainai*,” a Japanese term that directly translates to “what a waste!” but also connotes the emotional and humane importance of a holistic

understanding of sustainability—especially by decrying unsustainable practices (SLT, 2014, pp. 82–87).

In the end, the process produced the kind of community plan document that a planning agency might produce, but with a distinct and culturally grounded voice which emanated from the neighborhood’s shared identity (Figure 2). Participants in the process were diverse, coming from a range of ethnic backgrounds and institutional affiliations including the historic Japanese American heritage connected to Little Tokyo but also extending beyond it to include its iconic pan-Asian American cultural entities, its significant Latinx population, and its multiracial religious organizations. In my research, one interviewee described to me that Little Tokyo paradoxically needs to remain inclusive for its growing non-Japanese American community members to protect its Japanese American history: Only through a strong community fabric where everyone can participate, build shared community values, and contribute to its livelihood will Little Tokyo remain on the map. This sentiment has enabled a place-specific shared identity where, according to my survey results, 87% of Little Tokyo stakeholders saw the neighborhood’s Japanese American heritage as important even though only 47% of respondents identified as Japanese American. Ultimately, the visioning document highlighted the neighborhood’s Japanese American heritage, but also affirmed its diverse, multicultural identity along with the need to protect all of these aspects of its character.

Analyzing the visioning process through Squires’ (2002) lens, we can see it beginning as an enclave public model. It was a tool for community members to develop

their own internal sense of culture, identity, and vision for the future. It then shifted to a counterpublic model as this shared vision sparked public action. Indeed, the vision plan which was instrumental in developing the *mottainai* sense of sustainability relevant to Little Tokyo’s future and which was ultimately named the “Sustainable Little Tokyo” vision gave way to a permanent coalition organization also named SLT as a partnership between LTCC, LTSC, and another major community and cultural organization, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center. SLT, as the counterpublic manifestation of the enclaved community visioning process, forms the basis for understanding how the ideal of “listening” can work on the ground in practice in the next section.

6. Listening to Little Tokyo

One of the key insights to come out of the SLT visioning process was the identification of three major parcels of publicly owned land that could be “make or break” development opportunities for Little Tokyo, as described by one interview subject. The first parcel was the Regional Connector site which, beyond its rail station, had its remaining space open for development possibility. Additionally, there was the Mangrove site, a large, open industrial plot of land slated to be used as a construction staging site for the Metro development, and the First Street North site, a large, city-owned parking lot just to the north of the historically designated First Street North strip of buildings at the heart of Little Tokyo. Acknowledging the importance of the “unseen layer” of property rights, as one interviewee described,



Figure 2. The conceptual design framework that came out of the SLT 2013 visioning process, focusing on new community-oriented development on three major publicly owned parcels of land in Little Tokyo. Source: SLT (2014).

community members identified that privately owned parcels were very difficult to control. On the other hand, they could use their voice and vote to pressure City Hall into ensuring that these public parcels of land were developed according to community specifications.

The SLT 2013 vision gave the community a shared rallying point, necessary for speaking with one voice that could be heard by city officials. The SLT coalition became the locus for community action in pursuit of this vision, speaking out in the form of arts events, showing up to hearings, and marches and rallies. The community vision provided an important precondition for this process to work as, often, communities are incorrectly assumed to be univocal and homogenous, leading to confusion and miscommunication when institutional actors in a co-creation process hear conflicting demands. A co-creation process that does not sufficiently allow for such enclaved public discourse before moving into a stage of public participation can thus result in failure.

A few years after launching the SLT coalition, its partners hired a full-time arts organizer whose role would be to use art and culture as a means to build political buy-in for the SLT 2013 vision. In contrast to many marginalized communities who see art with a wary eye because of its links to gentrification (Crisman & Kim, 2019), Little Tokyo's long history of incorporating arts and activism into its culture and urban development provided an understanding of how the arts could be used as a powerful tool for community organizing and speaking out. As one interviewee noted, one of Little Tokyo's strengths is in reaching out to diverse community members, and the arts can be a tool for doing that. Some early actions included initiating a public art exhibition titled "Windows of Little Tokyo" where local artists were commissioned to produce large-scale graphics about the past, present, and future of Little Tokyo that would go up in the windows of participating businesses. Another project focused on launching a podcast where local artists could share their music and issues of the day could be discussed.

One of the primary projects conducted by SLT was its ART@341FSN project when in 2018 it took over a small storefront on the historic First Street North block and held a series of dozens of arts events, from poetry readings to jazz nights. As an embedded researcher working with SLT's Arts Action Committee, I offered my archival and research skills to put together an exhibition in the space on the history of Little Tokyo's arts activism. Visitors to these art programs learned about Little Tokyo's history, what was happening in the community today, and were given an opportunity to sign up for a mailing list and learn about future actions, in addition to enjoying art. These participants may not have necessarily stepped up to an outright political event, but they were happy to engage and support in this context which felt more accessible.

Over the course of several years, this broadened counterpublic held numerous other arts events, sent

petitions, marched, showed up to hearings, and ultimately pressured the City Hall to give the community control over the development of all three parcels of land so that the community vision could be realized. An Orange County-based developer was initially selected in March of 2020 to develop the Regional Connector site against the community's wishes, though community members were given a say in how the proposed building's ground-level spaces would be programmed. After multiple attempts to work with this developer, LTCC passed a formal resolution in August of 2020 in opposition to their selection, requesting that Metro restart its developer selection process, all while efforts continued to stake a claim in the future of the remaining two parcels. This unified voice proved effective, with Metro leadership withdrawing from the development agreement in November of 2020. Furthermore, city leaders passed a resolution granting a land lease to LTSC and community organization Go for Broke National Education Center across the First Street North parcel in March of 2021 and authorized joint development of both the Regional Connector site and the Mangrove parcel in July of 2021. While the outcome of this process remains to be seen, its trajectory is shaping up to align with the community vision after years of work from the bottom up.

Throughout this process, SLT and other community organizations maintained a productive working relationship with city leaders and agencies, as they have historically, while simultaneously voicing, again and again, its vision for the future of Little Tokyo. As one interviewee noted, "We've gotten better at demanding stuff—As time goes on, you get more savvy." The creative use of the arts amplified community members' voices, gathering traction in local news sources and reminding elected officials of who they represent. Where without public arts and culture, this vision may have remained a "hidden transcript" that was known to a dissatisfied neighborhood but unappreciated by elected officials; here, the use of arts and culture served to both translate and amplify this vision to elected officials and a broader public. Combining community activism with arts-based activities allowed campaigns to gain wider traction in local conversations and media, resulting in greater traction with elected officials. The city originally anticipated a conventional development process for these parcels of land but in response to this concerted effort enabled through arts-based organizing, its plans shifted to respond directly to the stated desires of the SLT vision.

I argue that this agonistic process can be understood as one means for listening "out" by elected officials. Community activists make their demands through public fora such as rallies or petitions, and elected officials respond through similarly public means such as public statements and passing ordinances. While the process does not resemble traditional co-creation processes which have both parties working together in the same room, there remains still the grassroots, co-created

vision that forms the basis for action; arts continue to play a central role, and the process pulls creative input from both grassroots and institutional actors in service of positive outcomes. The participants in this relationship collaborate as productive adversaries rather than consensus-driven actors, opening up space for multiple rationalities (see Hillier, 2003). These outcomes were by no means guaranteed: City leaders could have easily ignored the voices coming from the ground, and, certainly, the process was not always smooth. But listening ultimately yielded positive outcomes for the political futures of institutional actors and, more importantly, equitable and sustainable development that can help protect Little Tokyo from erasure.

7. Building Community Knowledge: Horizontal Co-Creation

A final example from Little Tokyo that can further illustrate the diverse possibility of grassroots co-creation practices is their potential for capacity and coalition building horizontally. While co-creation is typically modeled as a partnership between more empowered institutional actors and less empowered community and grassroots actors, it can also be modeled as a partnership across actors on a horizontal playing field. Little Tokyo has come to be known as an example of how marginalized, ethnic, and immigrant neighborhoods can band together and stake a claim for their place in the future of the city and, as such, other communities look to learn from its historical and contemporary practices.

In March of 2019, a group of community organizations from outside of Little Tokyo partnered with SLT to host, in their advertised language, a Little Tokyo Cultural Organizing Workshop, sharing knowledge on, as one handout described, “how leaders in this neighborhood have been effective in sustaining their culture despite a new wave of redevelopment and displacement.” Organizing partners included LA Commons, a community-based arts organization in LA; Arts & Democracy, an organization that “builds the momentum of a growing movement that links arts and culture, participatory democracy, and social justice” (Arts & Democracy, 2022); and Race, Arts and Place, a collective of researchers focused on justice-oriented arts from the University of Southern California. Participants included numerous artists, activists, and community organizers from Little Tokyo and across Los Angeles, and leaders from other LA-based community arts organizations, such as the 18th Street Arts Center and the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Altogether, around 50 participants joined to learn and share knowledge about arts-based actions that can influence urban development (Figure 3).

Over the course of the day, we engaged in multiple art-based activities and methodologies for understanding the pressures that different communities were facing, and for collective problem solving and visioning for the future of our respective communities. Representatives from the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a noted theater group based in Skid Row who uses “theater of the oppressed” methods (Boal, 1985), led the group in theater-based exercises to think through what issues



Figure 3. Horizontal co-creation in action at a Little Tokyo Cultural Organizing Workshop organized between multiple community organizations in Little Tokyo and community and arts organizations outside of Little Tokyo.

were at stake in our communities and how to resolve these issues. A mapping exercise connected us to the place and to each other. Leaders from SLT presented the state of their campaign to influence future development on public lands in Little Tokyo. A ritual performance of connection and transformation led by noted Little Tokyo artist Nobuko Miyamoto brought us outside, and tours through the neighborhood where community leaders noted their history and key moments of challenge and activism told a story of how to overcome threats to one's place in the city. Some participants were there as conduits to communities in far-flung parts of the country, bringing new knowledge back home, while others considered how to apply these experiences to their communities in Los Angeles.

Co-creation is typically framed as a relationship between empowered institutional actors and less empowered community and grassroots actors, setting up a model for shared power and ownership across a creative process of project development that gets at questions of power and makes processes more equitable. But the example of Little Tokyo points toward practices which are already between equally empowered actors from the onset, putting together multiple grassroots entities who can collaboratively create and influence urban outcomes through art and action. While this model does not necessarily include the top-down actors who have access to development rights or levers of power, and accordingly is limited in the degree of influence it can have on things like major urban development projects, it nevertheless can be considered an important form of co-creation because it allows grassroots actors to build horizontal bridges with like-minded organizations, ultimately building up shared knowledge, social capital, and political power that can be effectively deployed in the kinds of urban actions which demand listening from the top.

8. Conclusions

Co-creation offers a set of practices for collaborative and participatory planning, especially through the introduction of creative and artistic activities which can disrupt the problematic power relationships latent within urban projects and knowledge creation. Co-creation research, however, has often focused on practices which work from the top down, connecting empowered institutional actors, such as city planning officials, with less empowered grassroots and community actors. Co-creation can take myriad forms, however, and evidence from the Los Angeles community of Little Tokyo suggest the importance of considering arts-based co-creation practices which emanate from the grassroots.

Communication theories regarding the public sphere offer a useful typology for analyzing these differing forms of grassroots co-creation: While top-down approaches operate within a conventional public sphere of the dominant culture, grassroots co-creation can operate within

enclave publics, counterpublics, or satellite publics. I note that these are not fixed categories, but are often dynamic based on what phase a debate or project is in. In the case of Little Tokyo, it required a separate enclave public discourse so that it could align on a shared vision for the future of its neighborhood; then it moved into a counterpublic discourse that engaged city officials and demanded the realization of their creative plan for the Little Tokyo of tomorrow. A co-creation process that does not sufficiently allow for such enclaved public discourse can fail because empowered actors often mistakenly assume that one person or group speaks for a whole community, resulting in unwanted outcomes.

Similarly, communication scholars have long noted the "listening deficit" (Dobson, 2012), describing how discursive practices are meaningless without listening—And, as a corollary, participatory planning and co-creation practices are meaningless if they are not "empowered" (Fung & Wright, 2003). Little Tokyo used art-based actions to build power and to be heard by city officials. In this case, officials listened, heard, and responded to these demands. This is a critical component of co-creation practice that ought to be understood as a valuable form of agonistic collaboration rather than an antagonistic or negative outcome.

Finally, co-creation can occur beyond grassroots actors within a particular community to include other grassroots organizations in a form of "horizontal co-creation." This allows participants to build bridges with like-minded organizations, creatively producing shared knowledge, social capital, and political power that can be used in times of need. In all, these are features of a more capacious understanding of co-creation and offer broadened potential in its use by designers, planners, community organizers, activists, artists, and more in activities that can be initiated and emanate from the bottom up.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Jonathan Jae-an Crisman is Assistant Professor in Public and Applied Humanities at the University of Arizona, with courtesy appointments in Art, Architecture, Geography, and Urban Planning. He holds a PhD in Urban Planning and Development from the University of Southern California, and Master of Architecture and Master in City Planning degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.