

Nippon Kan and Astor Hotel

By Doug Chin

From the time it was built until the internment of the local Japanese in World War II, the Nippon Kan was the heart of the Japanese community. The building was constructed in 1909 and located on the northwest corner of Washington Street and Seventh Avenue. The centerpiece was the theater, where local performers as well as performers from California and Japan put on traditional and contemporary plays, concerts, dances, puppet shows, martial arts, and variety shows. Japanese movies were also shown there. . Virtually all groups in the community used the hall—churches, business groups, sports associations, university students, and, of course, various cultural groups.

In addition, the hall was used for religious teachings and provided a forum for discussion of community and political issues. On many occasions, the “red” and “white” parties vigorously debated issues of Japanese politics on stage.

On the upper floors of the building was the Astor Hotel. The hotel offered inexpensive housing for new immigrants. Offices and meeting rooms were located at ground level.

The Nippon Kan’s significance to the community was perhaps best demonstrated by [its control.] Ownership of the building initially belonged to the Cascade Corporation (A). The corporation—established by Takahashi, Hirade and Tsukuno—sold shares to the Japanese community, which in turn supported it. Masajiro Furuya, head of the Furuya Company and its enterprises, later acquired the building. The Toyo Club controlled performances at the hall.

“A night out at the Nippon Kan was a welcome diversion from the rigors of work and school,” wrote David Takami (B). “Most of the entertainers were delightfully unprofessional, sometimes forgetting their lines and struggling to improvise. Between performances, children ran up and down the balcony staircases and their parents caught up on the latest community gossip.”

One of the more notable performances held at the hall featured Shisui Miyashita, a famous composer and conductor. In 1936 he conducted the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, featuring pianist Sachiko Ochi, at the theater.

After WWII, Saijii Nakamura bought the property. He and his family lived in it and managed the upstairs apartments. The theater, however, was not used. In the late 1960s, Nakamura sold the building to architect Ed Burke, who renovated the upper floor for his business and had the property listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the early 1980s, Burke, who had taken on a co-property owner, completely renovated the property (including the theater) for commercial use, and added a penthouse on the rooftop for his own residence. Special care was taken to preserve the original features of the historic theater such as the rosette light fixtures, backstage graffiti, and an original curtain.

Now called the Kobe Terrace Park Building (after an adjacent city park of the same name), this elegant brick building stands at the highest point of the District, as if it was meant to symbolize the historic Asian American character of the area.

(A) Ed and Betty Burke, “In a Chorus of Shadows: The Story of the Nippon Kan and its Restoration,” in *Turning Shadows into Light*, p.47

(B) *Executive Order 9066: Fifty Years Before And After*, Wing Luke Museum, 1992, p. 19