



Little Tokyo Service Center's Role in Catalyzing Community Ownership

Ecosystem Stewards: Building the
Infrastructure for Shared Ownership

center for
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investment

What are Ecosystem Stewards?

Every movement needs a bridge between vision, reality, and people who build that bridge. In the world of community-owned real estate, that bridge is the ecosystem – the space where dreams of ownership meet the know-how, resources, and partnerships needed to bring them to life. The people and organizations who create and work in this space are what we call Ecosystem Stewards. They may not always be in the spotlight, but they are builders of the infrastructure for shared ownership: connecting neighbors' determination to the tools of finance, guiding grassroots groups through complicated processes, and weaving together efforts that might otherwise stand alone. This series, *Ecosystem Stewards: Building the Infrastructure for Shared Ownership*, lifts up their critical role in ensuring that communities can turn vision into lasting control of land, culture, and future.



From Resistance to Resilience: LTSC and the Architecture of Community Power

Ecosystem stewards - who make up the connective tissue between community organizing and actual property ownership - are a critical force in the community-owned real estate (CORE) landscape. They are the intermediary organizations that provide the technical expertise, financial scaffolding, and institutional knowledge needed to transform visions of community ownership into concrete plans and successful projects. From this strategic perch, these organizations can also view activity across their local ecosystems, connecting dots between disparate efforts and identifying opportunities for collaboration. In other words, these stewards serve as the strategic, financial, and relational infrastructure that makes community ownership viable at scale—beyond singular projects. Few organizations embody this intermediary role more skillfully than Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a steadfast force for cultural preservation, anti-displacement, and self-determination in Los Angeles.

Founded in 1980 by three Japanese American community activists, LTSC emerged in response to a legacy of displacement that shaped—and scarred—Little Tokyo. The community had already endured forced removal during World War II, urban renewal's bulldozing in the postwar decades, and a third wave of erasure spurred by overseas real estate speculation in the 1980s. In this context, Little Tokyo, once the vibrant heart of Japanese American life in Southern California, had become a fractured landscape.

Initially established as a social service agency for a predominantly monolingual, immigrant senior population, LTSC shifted its path when seniors in a city-owned building faced eviction. Organizing the tenants and rallying the community, LTSC ultimately took ownership of the building in 1991—despite having no prior experience in housing development. That victory set LTSC on a trajectory that has yielded over 1,200 units of affordable housing (with 500 more underway), 200,000 square feet of community facilities, and a deeply relational approach to community development across 10 different LA neighborhoods. As Takao Suzuki, LTSC's Co-Executive Director, reflects, "We've always seen ourselves as an extension of the community, really prioritizing the biggest needs in the community." This community-responsive approach has guided their evolution from social services into comprehensive community development.

Bridging Community and Control: LTSC in the Ecosystem and Beyond

Today, LTSC operates both in the intermediary space of community ownership ecosystems and at the direct project level. They are not just real estate developers or service providers; they are connectors, bridge-builders, and ecosystem stewards. Their philosophy is simple but profound, as Takao explains: "We always believe, and we continue to believe, that a healthy ecosystem includes not just one strong organization like ours, but all organizations within that ecosystem."

LTSC provides technical assistance and capacity-building support to grassroots organizations interested in community development, often acting as a "backbone" partner. Through initiatives like the Real Estate Collaborative, they have helped communities from Koreatown to South LA secure ownership of vital land and buildings. Their approach reduces risk for emerging groups by offering predevelopment expertise, asset management, and compliance support—without erasing or overshadowing local leadership.

For LTSC, community ownership is not just about securing land—it's about anchoring culture, sustaining collective memory, and protecting a place against the relentless forces of speculation and displacement. Their vision extends beyond Little Tokyo to a broader Los Angeles where communities of color can own, control, and steward their neighborhoods. Success, from LTSC's vantage point, looks like robust, interdependent ecosystems where cultural identity and economic resilience are rooted in land.

LTSC's strategies weave together land acquisition, tenant and small business organizing, coalition-building, and cultural stewardship. They engage residents deeply in shaping ownership models, emphasizing that decision-making must be grounded in lived experience.





Capital with a Conscience: Building Community Through Financial Innovation

Creatively navigating financing challenges, LTSC has leveraged tools like Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, New Markets Tax Credits, and philanthropic patient capital. They also act as grant intermediaries, helping partner organizations access resources that would otherwise be out of reach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, LTSC mobilized grants to fund small business meal preparation, delivering food to vulnerable residents while sustaining local enterprises—a microcosm of their ecosystem-centric ethos.

LTSC's impact is tangible: beyond the affordable housing units and facilities developed, they have enabled ownership and control over culturally critical spaces like the Daimaru Hotel and First Street North. These gains have yielded more than just real estate—they have preserved the cultural fabric of Little Tokyo, resisted gentrification pressures, and seeded new models of ownership through projects like Sustainable Little Tokyo.

As Takao puts it, "We don't really see the growth or development of other organizations as competition, we kind of feel like it's all necessary to have a healthy ecosystem." Their collaborative model has strengthened partner organizations like the Filipino Workers Center and Trust South LA, ensuring that the movement for community ownership is decentralized and resilient.

Even unexpected challenges—such as being called to aid disaster recovery efforts in Altadena—have become opportunities for LTSC to extend its solidarity-based model, stepping in where government systems have failed.



LTSC's Support for Community-Led Land Trusts

LTSC's collaboration with community land trusts (CLTs) is not incidental—it's a strategic response to broader systemic shifts. Over the past few decades, traditional Community Development Corporations (CDCs), once fierce engines of grassroots-driven housing and organizing, have largely professionalized into affordable housing developers. In Los Angeles, LTSC saw the critical need to nurture a new wave of organizations focused explicitly on community ownership.

Enter community land trusts like Fideicomiso Comunitario Tierra Libre.

Fideicomiso, born out of Latinx tenant organizing in Boyle Heights, represents the future LTSC envisions: community-rooted, democratically governed, and laser-focused on keeping people in place. Recognizing the formidable barriers that new CLTs face—securing financing, navigating regulatory hurdles, building organizational infrastructure—LTSC stepped into its steward role with care and intentionality.

Rather than overshadowing or absorbing Fideicomiso, LTSC offered technical assistance, financial scaffolding, and real estate expertise behind the scenes. They helped structure deals, provided critical asset management services, and navigated the complex landscape of affordable housing finance. They also actively helped shape policy wins, like the \$14 million LA County pilot fund for community ownership, which would not have been possible without the groundwork laid by organizations like Fideicomiso—with LTSC as a quiet but powerful ally.

This approach is fundamentally about redistributing capacity. LTSC sees its role not as the perpetual holder of resources, but as a shepherd—helping groups develop their own operational muscles, secure their own funding streams, and eventually stand independently. In the words of their leadership, success is when partners no longer need LTSC's back-end support at all.

LTSC'S Strategy to Seed, Share, and Sustain Power

Their collaboration with Fideicomiso isn't an isolated case. LTSC has extended similar solidarity-based partnerships to Trust South LA, supporting Black and Latinx organizers in reclaiming land, and to other emerging CLTs across Los Angeles. Across every relationship, the throughline is clear: LTSC prioritizes trust, humility, and long-term ecosystem health over short-term credit or control.

In many ways, LTSC's partnership model with CLTs is an answer to the loss of holistic CDCs in the community development landscape. By empowering CLTs to rise, LTSC is helping to rebuild an infrastructure of organizations that center cultural resilience, democratic governance, and economic justice—not just production of housing units. Through this work, LTSC is not simply preserving Little Tokyo—they are investing in a future where community ownership is normalized, networked, and nurtured across every frontline neighborhood.

Looking ahead, LTSC's strategic plan—updated every three years—points toward an even deeper investment in thought leadership, policy development, and advocacy. This dual role as both housing developer and service provider—offering everything from social services to child development and senior services—keeps their advocacy grounded in real community needs, with boots-on-the-ground connections that inform their systemic change work. They see themselves increasingly as a catalyst for transformation—not just a practitioner. Through this community-rooted approach, LTSC has fundamentally shifted the landscape of possibility for neighborhoods across Los Angeles—proving that when communities are equipped with the tools, resources, and solidarity needed to claim ownership over their own futures, they don't just survive displacement and gentrification, they flourish as architects of their own cultural and economic destiny.



All photos courtesy of Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC).

For more information about Little Tokyo Service Center, visit www.LTSC.org.

About the Center for Community Investment

The Center for Community Investment (CCI), a sponsored project at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, works to ensure that all communities, especially those that have suffered from structural racism and policies that have left them economically and socially isolated, can unlock the capital they need to thrive. Our work is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co, Target Foundation, Wells Fargo & Company, and The California Endowment.

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