



SAVE THE JAPANESE YWCA

Taking Legal Action to Honor the Legacy of the Issei Women

1996-2002 | 1830 Sutter Street, San Francisco

The Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC) and a coalition of Japanese Christian Churches (Soko Bukai) worked together in a six-year legal battle to preserve a historical neighborhood building: the Japanese Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Since 1912, the Japanese YWCA served the community with a variety of cultural, social and athletic activities and services for young women and girls. The founders—a group of first generation Japanese American (Issei) women—were barred from the YWCA due to segregation policies, so they established the Japanese YWCA as an independent organization. However, in order to purchase property for the organization, the Issei women were forbidden by the discriminatory Alien Land Laws (1912-13). Thus, the Issei women independently raised funds and created a legal trust for the San Francisco YWCA to purchase property on the Japanese YWCA's behalf. Under this arrangement, the building designed by the famous architect, Julia Morgan, at 1830 Sutter Street became the Japanese YWCA's home in 1932.

However, with rising real estate values, the San Francisco YWCA attempted to claim complete ownership of the building in 1996 to convert it into condominiums. In response, the Soko Bukai filed a lawsuit against the YWCA. Despite the YWCA's several appeals for immediate dismissal, the lawsuit continued and unveiled the numerous historical injustices that the Issei women endured (racial exclusion, Alien Land Laws, WWII incarceration, 1960-70s Redevelopment). Mobilizing such political capital, a settlement was reached in 2002 in favor of the Japanese American community; at the request of Soko Bukai, Nihonmachi Little Friends became the building's new owner and steward. This arrangement allowed the 1830 Sutter Building to perpetuate and honor the Issei Women's Legacy as visionary community builders.