

OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

SHANNON ARLINT
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

BEHIND THE NEWS

‘I think 2020 has shook the ground’

The Garden of Surging Waves tells the story of Chinese immigrants who helped build Astoria.

The park at Heritage Square, the city’s bicentennial legacy gift, is an example of how public spaces can be used to break cultural barriers and ensure our history is not monochrome.

“The stories are there to be shared to all people,” said Suenn Ho, the urban designer behind the project. “For me, public urban space is extremely important to a community.”



DERRICK DePLEDGE

Ho, who lives in Portland, is the principal of Resolve Architecture + Planning. Her design work includes a bronze plaque marking Portland’s original Chinatown and an outdoor museum in Tigard that documents the city’s cultural identity.

In an interview via Zoom, Ho discussed the Garden of Surging Waves, the issues around renaming public spaces, anti-Asian violence and racism and sustaining movements like Black Lives Matter.

Q: What do you see as the value of having public spaces like the Garden of Surging Waves, particularly in predominantly white communities such as Astoria?

A: The demographics of a place is always fluid.

So what I always look at is the story of the place. The stories are there to be shared to all people. For me, public urban space is extremely important to a community. And the community is able to access the place 24/7, and it’s free.

I do feel very privileged to have the opportunity to design a lot of these projects that fit into that category. Recently, the outdoor museum that’s opened in Tigard, it’s another story that allowed the locals to relate to — just like the Garden of Surging Waves — to the sense of place, but with the people that are usually not heard.

That allows a broader understanding of the richness of the history.

I don’t see Astoria as only a white community, even though the population — the majority — is white. I see that a project like that has a sense of responsibility to broaden the understanding of its rich history.

Q: Do you have different feelings now about the garden than when it first opened in 2014?

A: It’s a blessing to see the garden to be able to grow in place and age in place.

The design, from the beginning, was focusing on how to make sure the city does not have a huge maintenance upkeep, so that all the materials that have been used are meant to be low maintenance and age in place.

It’s a blessing that, so far, it seems like the garden has never experienced vandalism.

I do feel that the placement of the garden, the design of the garden, allows a larger sense of ownership by the local community. I think that keeps it more of an eyes on the spot that perhaps hasn’t been really targeted as a place to be vandalized. And I do hope that that is the case from here onward.

What I would love to see, that has been demonstrated so far, has been the usage of the place by the community for activities, such as wedding reception, or vigil, demonstration, performance, tai chi or



Colin Murphey/The Astorian

Suenn Ho is the urban designer behind the Garden of Surging Waves in Astoria.

exercise, even just a place to just contemplate and have your lunch.

I have received a lot of comments saying that it’s amazing — it’s in the middle of downtown and yet it feels very peaceful. I think that’s a success on that kind of aspect.

I would love to see the completion of the entire block that completes the phase two and phase three. But what’s there already — I couldn’t ask for more. I am very happy with where it is that’s been playing out so far.

Q: Astoria is going back to calling the old burial ground off Niagara Avenue the Hillside Cemetery, instead of the Pioneer Cemetery. Part of the reason is that Pioneer — a title from the 1960s — does not adequately convey the region’s history. The belief is that many Chinese workers from the 1800s were buried there or nearby in unmarked graves. While this name change is largely about historic preservation, we have heard some grumbling. There is a perception that some people want to “cancel” or “change” everything. How do we address these issues without such conflict?

A: You and I are part of history, right? We are living and move forward with whatever it is that’s in the past.

I don’t see history as a reason to put any place in a frozen state. I believe history is an evolution reflecting the community throughout different time.

With that said, I do believe that we should always recognize the authenticity of history from different perspectives. It should not be one perspective — and then just dominate the story of that perspective in that place.

I don’t feel that it is necessary to ‘cancel’ or eliminate what was there before. But I do believe that, especially in names, it should ever be evolving to reflect the collective sensibility of the time, of the place.

As we so-call ‘evolve’ — the naming of the place, or how it looks — it should also be very honestly documented what was there before. So that it becomes much

more enriching when you are at a place. You can start flipping back and go back to history and it’s like, this was here like this before and now it is like this and then later on, in the future, it has a new kind of chapter or identity.

Q: We have seen spasms of anti-Asian violence and racism across the United States. Do you see this as directly tied to the language some of our politicians have used against China during the coronavirus pandemic?

A: Yes. However, I also want to add that throughout history, especially in this country, there has always been racism toward minority groups, Asian communities. Of course, Asians, it’s a term that’s just an umbrella of a whole population that is extremely diverse.

It’s very unfortunate when the hurtful words and disrespectful mannerisms from the politicians — or political leaders — they validate and empower a lot of hateful actions, especially toward very innocent elders, which is totally, totally unjust.

I think a lot of their words and actions stem from naivete, not knowing, not willing to listen, not willing to understand and to respectfully try to learn from what other cultures can contribute to this wonderful country. So that is unfortunate.

I am hoping public space projects — placemaking projects, such as the Garden of Surging Waves — has a role to bring stories to the people who usually don’t care about digging in deeper with the other cultures.

Q: There was strong public support across the country for Black Lives Matter after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police last May. There appeared to be an awareness — even in small towns like Astoria — about the problems of institutional racism. But some of that support has waned. What do you see as the best way to keep these types of conversations going?

A: George Floyd’s killing was a pivotal moment that broke my innocence. I became much more aware of the Black community’s history, maybe their anguish,

their frustration.

I think, like it or not, 2020 has brought a larger surge of these racial issues to dinner tables across racial boundaries. It’s also very unfortunate — I think the coronavirus pandemic has been very inconvenient, in a sense that it is a temporary situation, the virus will be controlled and be dampened.

And because of the surge of larger awareness of Black Lives Matter, I feel that there are more non-Black allies. It’s very important for every one of us to be able to speak up for social justice and to be in support of the Black communities that have consistently been put in a very unjust situation.

I think, if anything, I have been very impressed with the Black community’s resilience. It’s spanning generations, and they’ve been fighting for the same message.

I think 2020 has shook the ground. I think more people have heard, are much more aware of the issues, and feel more comfortable to actually even talk about it. I think that is a big, big step forward.

To fight for social justice, whether or not you’re in the Black community or any other minority communities, I don’t think it will ever go away. I think it’s an ongoing fight. I think it’s an ongoing mission for generations to come.

I think, as an optimist, I do hope that one day a majority of the people in this country will actually be able to say: We speak with one voice. One ideal mission. And, ultimately, it’s one planet, one people. Start with small communities, small cities, and hopefully it goes from our country to the rest of the world.

I don’t know how long that would take. But I think one conversation at a time, to be able to talk, to be willing to listen, for the voices that aren’t usually heard, is already a big step.

A willingness to listen is an ingredient for us to become more tolerant and more appreciative and more respectful to people who are looking different from each other.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Six years?

Regarding the story “Westport man sentenced to prison for road rage death” (The Astorian, April 13) about Jeffrey Stone: So, you run over someone because of road rage, drag them for a quarter of a mile, killing them, and you get six years?

And Stone has previous serious crimes? Judge Henry Kantor must be senile; 20 years, minimum.

RON KENT
Vancouver, Washington

Inflationary spiral

Anyone who understands basic economics should agree that the COVID-19 economic relief bill is anything but. The bill is loaded with generous benefits that will kill the incentive for work and slow the recovery.

The math is simple; the incredible rate of borrowing will spark an inflationary spiral that will surely raise interest rates, which will in turn increase the interest payments of our staggering debt to levels

that will cripple the government’s ability to engage in other economic necessities.

Also, that inflationary spike that rising interest rates cause will create a deep recession that will dwarf the 2008 one. And now the current holder of the office of president wants to spend another \$2 trillion on infrastructure? That’s \$4 trillion in three months in office.

Our grandchildren’s grandchildren, their grandchildren and their grandchildren will be paying for this fiscal stupidity for more years than our country has been a country.

We are already seeing it in our everyday staple purchases. It’s only going to get worse.

KEVIN SWANSON
Warrenton

‘C’mon man’

At first I thought The Astorian was getting a sense of humor when it printed the “Valid point” joke (April 13). Then I realized that maybe the writer was serious. It’s sad that anyone could mistake the difference in demeanor of Donald Trump

and Joe Biden so badly.

Anyone who has actually watched the two in action could not make that mistake. The problem must lie in the media echo chamber. Trump stood and took antagonistic questions from a biased media on a regular basis. Biden does not. He reads

from a script, scratches his head and leaves before any real questions.

Have you ever seen Trump stumble going up the steps to Air Force One? “C’mon man.”

ROBERT LIDDYCOAT
Seaside

BillDay FloridaBill.com

