

A Master's Legacy

The Aikido Center's Very Unusual Move

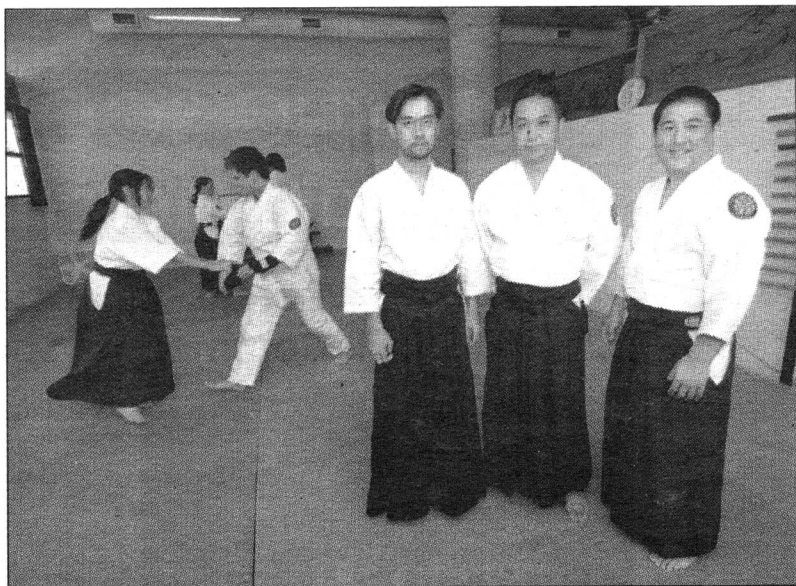


photo by Gary Leonard

(l to r) Mark Ty, Kenneth Furuya and David Ito of the Aikido Center at the school's temporary space in the Arts District. The landlord of the school's former home is paying for most of its move to a new headquarters in Downtown.

BY ANNA SCOTT
STAFF WRITER

On a quiet, industrial-looking block of Second Street on the eastern edge of Downtown, a sign hangs on the side door of a cracked, concrete building.

"We're open!" it reads in bright orange, curlicue letters.

Inside, a handful of men and women in loose-fitting white robes turn summersaults on blue gym mats before pairing off to take turns shoving one another to the ground.

They are not members of an underground fight club. Instead, the people gathered at 929 E. Second St. on a recent weekday evening are students of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles, a Little Tokyo fixture for 23 years.

They won't be there long, howev-

er. The school recently left its home at 940 E. Second St. and set up temporary digs across the street. They'll operate here until the end of the year, when a new home is completed two miles away at 1211 N. Main St.

While it sounds like a simple move, little is what it seems. First, the Center's new home was envisioned and shaped by a man who will never see it — the school's beloved founder, Kensho Furuya, died unexpectedly in the spring.

Additionally, the Aikido Center left its headquarters even though it had eight years remaining on the lease for approximately 2,000 square feet of ground-floor space in the red brick building (originally constructed as a sugar storage facility in the see Aikido, page 10

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1880s). The structure was purchased last year by a developer who wants to turn the Center, as well as 10 live-work units and two industrial spaces, into condominiums.

While similar situations have put landlords and displaced tenants at odds, the Aikido Center has ended up with a pretty sweet deal. In fact, school officials praise the developer, Barns Lofts, LLP, and its principal, Mark Borman.

“He’s being very nice, very cooperative,” said the Aikido Center’s chief administrator, David Ito, of Borman. “We’re very impressed with the way he kind of stayed true to our vision of what we want to do.”

Forging an Alliance

With its move to a currently vacant, ground-floor unit next to the Los Angeles State Historic Park, the Aikido Center will gain approximately 700 square feet of floor space, a second bathroom and three new showers.

More significantly, the upgrade will cost the school very little. Barn Lofts not only found the Aikido Center’s new site, but is also paying for its temporary space and more than 90% of the move and related construction.

Borman, who also owns two other Arts District buildings, said he respects the Aikido Center’s long history in Little Tokyo. “The idea was to find another building that could also accommodate them for a long time,” he said.

He has not calculated the total cost of moving the school, Borman said, because, “It’s never been about the money for me. It’s about doing the right thing.” Particularly important, he added, was, “to preserve the aesthetic that currently exists” at the school, modeled by its founder after the spare, elegant style of a 16th century Japanese samurai mansion.

To that end, while renovations have begun in the rest of the 39,000-square-foot building to make way for 39 two-bedroom, three-story condominiums, the Aikido Center’s former space remains mostly intact until it can be moved in its entirety to the new location.

A Continuing Legacy

In a bittersweet twist of fate, the new Aikido Center will now stand as a memorial to Furuya. The teacher and active Little Toyko community member began working with Borman to envision the new dojo last year and died of a heart attack on March 6, at age 58 — the same day renovations began at 940 E. Second St.

A Pasadena native and ordained Zen priest who held a joint degree in Asian Studies from USC and Harvard University, Furuya (“Furuya Sensei” to his students) is described by friends as a fierce scholar who possessed a photographic memory, an encyclopedic knowledge of Japanese culture, more than 5,000 books and a surprisingly silly sense of humor.

A recent Aikido Center newsletter included comments made at Furuya’s funeral. One, from longtime friend Dr. Helen Hsu, read, “Sensei was a man who could diligently study calligraphy or tea ceremony for hours, and then go out for lamb risotto and crack up over really awful kung fu movies.”

Fuyura was as intent on imparting life skills as fighting skills, his Aikido students say.

“In addition to just the technique that Furuya Sensei tried to instill in us, he also taught us to be more considerate of other people above ourselves,” said Aikido Center manager and student Mark Ty, a 27-year-old tax attorney, on a recent evening at the center. “I think he’s made me a better person.”

For Furuya, who began studying martial arts when he was 8 years old, the Aikido Center represented the fulfillment of a nearly lifelong dream. He opened the school’s first incarnation in Hollywood in 1974, sharing a space with a gymnastics school before setting



photo by Larry Armstrong/Aikido Center LA

Kenseh Furuya, the Aikido Center’s founder, teaching at the former studio. Known as “Furuya Sensei” to decades of students, he passed away in March.

his sights on Little Tokyo 10 years later.

“He wanted to do something for the Japanese community,” said Ito, “to create a school to draw in Japanese Americans and support the Japanese community.”

Armed with knowledge gained during his travels to Japan in the late 1960s and early ’70s, Furuya hired traditional carpenters from Kyoto to build his Downtown Los Angeles school. He worked alongside them to craft each detail, from the Japanese garden outside the entrance to its sleek interior, furnished mostly with authentic Japanese antiques.

The center was completed in 1984, and over two decades, as Furuya built up a roster of more than 70 students, he also authored a book on martial arts philosophy and several magazine articles; created a nine-part Aikido video series; founded the Los Angeles Sword and

Swordmanship Society; and served on various boards and committees in Little Tokyo, including the Los Angeles Police Department Civilian Martial Arts Advisory Board and the Greater Little Tokyo Anti-Crime Association.

In his will, Furuya, who never married and had no children, left everything he owned to a private foundation to further the study of Aikido and related arts. The new Aikido Center, his students say, will stand as both a perfect monument to and continuation of his life’s passion.

“He wanted to create this school totally dedicated to teaching Aikido and other arts related to Aikido,” said Kenneth Furuya, an Aikido Center teacher and Fuyura Sensei’s cousin. “He realized that dream.”

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