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Little Town in the Big City— Chinatown in the First Port of Gold Mountain

*Grant Avenue, Lee
Family Association,
San Francisco,
California.*

The traditional approaches to identifying and demarcating significant cultural properties are often inadequate when addressing the expressions of culture and peoples outside of the mainstream North American experience. Assigned chronological “periods,” descriptions of architectural styles, and other constructs insufficiently treat resources that, in a sense, lie at the periphery of Euro-American culture.

This is true of many immigrant groups, whose imprint on the urban landscape in particular was often ephemeral, in a material sense, though obviously profound in other ways. Italians, Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, and various other ethnic and national groups had their impact on cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, often little-altering the fundamental physical fabric of the cities of which they became a part. The same is true of Chinese and Japanese communities, whose significance in the cultural life of the United States is only now coming to be recognized. The circumstances of San Francisco’s lower Chinatown well illustrate these phenomena.

*Grant Avenue looking
North, San
Francisco, California.*

The particular conditions of social organization and daily life in San Francisco’s Chinatown generated a separate identity and physical reality for its people. The Chinese Americans living in San Francisco during the late-19th and early-20th centuries did not import building types from their native places. Rather, their places of habitation and daily life reflected an adaptation of common American building types to better conform to their purposes. The Chinese immigrants’ attitudes, the demographic structure of the Chinese-American community,

discrimination, and legal barriers all contributed to the character of this group’s

experience of habitation and its morphogenesis.

The majority of Chinese immigrants to the United States before 1965 came from Guangdong Province of South China, a province that contains only about 5% of China’s total population. It was relatively easy to travel to the colonial ports of Macao and Hong Kong from the densely populated farming areas of the province in and around the Pearl River Delta. This region was one of the most densely settled parts of China with villages tightly clustered together. Houses in these villages had compact plans in which a large central room replaced the courtyard.

The Chinese immigrants were predominantly males who began to arrive in significant numbers during the California Gold Rush. Later, Chinese immigrants came in search of wage labor. Pioneer populations in the United States were commonly predominantly male. According to the 1850 U.S. Census, the ratio of men to women in California was about 12 to 1. The 1852 census of San Francisco found 83% of the Euro-American population to be male. The Chinese were an example of this phenomena, and continued to have an unbalanced sex ratio for many decades. As late as 1880, the male-to-female ratio was about 21 to 1, and in 1890, 27 to 1.

Traditionally, a man from Guangdong Province married and began his family before going abroad in search of work. In this way, a new generation could help to guaranty the survival of the family name, and the young wife could take care of the husband’s parents. This pattern strengthened the loyalty of the sojourner to the kinship group and the native place.

Discrimination contributed to making the United States appear to be only a temporary place of residence. In 1854, the Federal District Court in San Francisco refused citizenship to a Chinese resident setting a precedent, and the Nationality Act of 1870 blocked Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. The California Alien Land

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Gregory Yee Mark

Honolulu's Chinatown

San Francisco's Chinatown has its parallels in many U.S. cities. Honolulu's Chinatown, which was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and is now governed by Special District ordinance, with in-place design controls, has many points in common.

Currently, Honolulu's Chinatown is defined as a 15-block area bordered by business, historic, and industrial areas in downtown Honolulu. Chinatown was originally occupied by Native Hawaiian housesites, and later served as a docking and reception area for trading and whaling ships. By 1848, Chinatown was a Hawaiian-Chinese business district, which included fenced house lots, boarding houses, sailmaking shops, jewelry stores, bakeries, barber shops, drug and herb stores, restaurants, and metal shops.

In 1852, Chinese contract workers began to migrate to Hawai'i and worked and lived on the sugar plantations. However, as a result of the islands' growing Chinese population, Honolulu's Chinatown grew into a thriving center of Chinese activity. Many Chinese established stores and other private businesses in which the owners and their families would live above the shop or nearby. In 1882, the United Chinese Society was formed, the first of approximately 100 societies that were to be located primarily in the Chinatown area.

In 1886, the first of two Chinatown fires began on Hotel Street. The first fire was unintentional, but destroyed 30 acres of the Chinatown area. Some businesses and, most importantly, some families relocated to outside of Chinatown. Chinatown was rebuilt, but in 1899, in an attempt to control an outbreak of the bubonic plague, a fire was intentionally set by the fire department and went out of control, devastating the community once again. To Chinatown residents this fire had a tremendous impact. Many were not able to recover their losses, others simply moved away from Chinatown. Many were unable to prove ownership of their property because records had been lost or burned.

Out of the ashes of the 1899–1900 fire Chinatown was rebuilt. By the 1930s, Honolulu's Chinatown was the largest in the United States. Today, many of the Chinese-owned businesses have given way to Vietnamese restaurants and shops, but the bustling ambiance of old Chinatown still pervades. There are approxi-



Honolulu's Chinatown, view along Maunakea Street. Photo by William Chapman, 1993.

mately 80 Chinese Associations that still exist in or near Chinatown. Most are family surname, sub-district, and district societies. Others are trade guilds, special-interest clubs, and secret societies. Generally, these organizations can be considered to be social clubs in the 1990s, and most own one or more pieces of land in Honolulu.

It is acknowledged by most owners and residents, as well as city and county officials, that the old and historic buildings need to be preserved, and the existing ordinance, which governs signs, facade changes, and the streetscape, addresses this issue. However, it is recognized that social issues, including housing in particular, are critical problems. The Downtown Neighborhood Board, for one, believes that more residents will improve the security and crime problems in Chinatown. As a result of increased emphasis, a number of recent housing projects and condominiums have been built at the fringes of the district, taking advantage of higher-density zoning allowed in the peripheral area. The city has also underwritten parking facilities at the edge of the district, hoping to attract more visitors.

Today, potential threats of gentrification and rapid redevelopment appear to be held at bay for the time being, though Honolulu's Chinatown remains a fragile resource.

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Act blocked Chinese resident aliens from purchasing land. In 1882, the first of a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts barred Chinese laborers from immigrating; it was extended and expanded to include other Chinese classes in 1884, 1888, 1892, and 1902. Finally, in 1924, the Exclusion Act was made permanent and Chinese women were specifically excluded. Any American marrying a Chinese man or woman was liable to lose their citizenship. In more than 30 states, laws against intermarriage with Chinese were enacted. The body of state and federal legislation blocked the expansion of the Chinese-American community by new immigration, and made increase by births exceedingly slow since there were so few Chinese-American women (both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the Chinese-American population) at the time the Exclusion Acts were passed. The legislation heightened the sense of being in a hostile environment since they were passed during a period of anti-Chinese hostilities throughout the Far West.

The predominantly male Chinese population clustered into the blocks of Chinatown because it offered low-cost residential hotels and commercial space in the heart of the city between the central business district and the first residential neighborhoods above the downtown. There they found safety within an ethnic community and affordable space close to employment opportunities generated by the central business district. In San Francisco's Chinatown, possibly as many as 20,000 people lived in a 12-block area of one-to four-story brick and wood framed structures. Discriminatory housing practices and the desire of landlords to maximize their profits generated crowding and poor living conditions. Virtually all of the Chinese in San Francisco had to live within the confines of Chinatown with the exception of house servants and laundrymen who lived at their laundries in the various neighborhoods of the city.

Absentee landlords had no incentive to improve or even maintain their Chinatown properties since they rented to a captive market. The landlords expected their tenants to maintain the property, and the Chinese tenants devoted as little of their modest incomes as possible to that task. A survey conducted by a hostile Board of Supervisors in 1885 examined a residential hotel on Oneida Place. The plan showed a multiple storied rectangular structure with a short side (2 rooms wide) to the main street and a long side along the alley. The ground floor contained 22 rooms in two rows with almost every room having direct access to an alley or yard. One staircase led to the floor above. The plan eliminated the need for an interior corridor on the ground floor. There were 40 beds in the 22 rooms; 5 rooms had 1 bed each, and 1 room con-

tained 5 beds, the most of any room. Cooking facilities were located outside in the spaces along the sides of the building. There the Chinese built simplified versions of the traditional brick stoves used in South China. Since there was little storage space and no refrigeration, a person or small group had to purchase the food and fuel for cooking everyday at the various shops in Chinatown.

Activities normally considered a part of the "home" spilled onto the alleys, and streets, and into the businesses, and the institutions of Chinatown. One slept and stored one's few belongings in a room which was often shared with a number of other men to keep the cost of rent down for each person. Some slept at their places of employment. The entertainment and social functions were scattered throughout the community. One would meet friends on the streets, in the association rooms, and have gatherings at the many Chinese restaurants.

The few families either squeezed into one or two rooms in a residential hotel, obtained one of the few available apartments, or lived behind or above their businesses. The structures with frontages onto streets inevitably had commercial activities along the street, and residential hotels and association rooms above. Often small factories, gambling rooms, brothels, or more association rooms were wedged into the basements and back spaces of buildings.

Chinatown was completely razed by the earthquake and fire of 1906. Yet, the Chinese returned to the site. The landowners rebuilt the community quickly to lure back their Chinese-American tenants. The structures that composed most of Chinatown after 1906 were commonly rectangular multi-storied commercial buildings with commercial frontages along the street or alley, residential hotels on the middle floors, and associations occupying the top floors which were considered the most prestigious even though the buildings in Chinatown were walkups without elevators. To express their importance, it was common for wealthier associations to decorate the top floor by using balconies, lights, and curving bracketed eaves to create a presence along the street. Temples often occupied top floors and also created an elaborate sinocized effect to visually state their importance. The ground floors of the commercial blocks were activated by the businesses who sought to attract passersby. Grocers normally crowded the sidewalk with fruits and vegetables.

While other ethnic groups rapidly shifted from single-male to family-centered communities, the Chinese only slowly made the transition. The Chinese community shrank while other ethnic groups increased steadily in numbers due to the Exclusion Acts which generated a decline in the

male population. The Chinese-American population reached a low in the 1920 U.S. Census. As elderly men either died or returned to China to be with their excluded families, the slow growth of a native-born population began to shift the Chinese community from one of single males to a numerically smaller community with a rising number of families. In 1920, the ratio of men to women was 7 to 1, and in 1930 it reached 4 to 1.

The majority of Chinese, both single males and families, continued to live in residential hotels and apartments in and around the Chinatowns that hugged the edge of central business districts. These residential hotels normally occupied multi-storied mixed-use buildings with commercial space in part or all of the street frontages, and individual rental rooms in the upper floors lined up along corridors. Interior rooms received some ventilation and light from light wells. Toilets, bath and shower rooms, and kitchens were located along the corridors for the use of the tenants. In San Francisco's Chinatown, small residential hotels had as few as 10 rooms, and large ones as many as 100. Families would try to rent 2 or more rooms next to each other, and the corridors became play areas for the children. Some cooking was done in the common kitchens or on the ad hoc cooking facilities set up in the rooms by the tenants. Many meals were taken in the Chinese restaurants which catered to the tenant market.

The decline in population made the businesses of Chinatown even more dependent upon tourism and sales to people living outside of the community. This led to an ever-increasing emphasis on picturesque signage and "oriental" decorations in the storefronts to create a special image for Chinatown and thereby attract more business from outside of Chinatown.

The Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943 and Chinese Americans were allowed to become naturalized citizens as a gesture to China, which was an ally of the United States in World War II. Jobs in industry and government opened up, and the Chinese-American middle class grew. This did not immediately lead to a migration out of the Chinatowns. Discrimination in housing kept middle class Chinese families in Chinatown. The Alien Land Law of California was not found unconstitutional until 1952, and it took the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to open most residential areas to the Chinese.

Given the opportunity, middle class Chinese Americans dispersed into residential areas and suburbs. After having been trapped in urban ghettos for a century, Chinese-American escapees eagerly adopted the values and comforts of suburban life. This became possible after the Civil Rights Act and the decline of segregated housing prac-

tices. Second, third, and fourth generation Chinese Americans fled from the housing conditions towards the suburban ideal. Former residents of Chinatown now only came to Chinatown to buy groceries and eat in the restaurants, further accentuating Chinatown's role as a tourist and commercial center.

Three groups continued to occupy Chinatown in large numbers—the working poor, the elderly, and new immigrants. The working poor could not afford to purchase homes in the suburbs and often needed to live near their jobs. The single elderly knew no other lifestyle except that of Chinatown where they could live out their lives in a familiar setting. Elderly couples, widows, and single men continued to rent rooms in the residential hotels of San Francisco's Chinatown. They might raise their beds high above the ground for warmth and for extra storage space underneath. They shared facilities with others on their floor, and often set up small cooking arrangements in their rooms.

Many immigrant families found themselves in the residential hotels and small apartments of Chinatown. Poor immigrants refilled the Chinatown as the more affluent native-born Chinese Americans left for the suburbs. In 1980, an immigrant family of 4 (a husband, wife, and 2 young sons) lived in a 10' x 10' room. They cooked in the community kitchen and ate on their folding table in their room. They all slept in one bed.

Chinatown's structure and appearance resulted from the particularities of Chinese-American history. One finds an interweaving of at least two sets of cultural patterns within the context of historical conditions. For this or any other ethnic group in the United States one needs to uncover the subcultural differences that have gone into the making of place rather than assuming that the archetypal period styles of designing and building describe the experience of any and all groups. Each ethnic group inhabiting the American landscape must be examined for its own particularities if we are to understand the true history of the built environment. Understanding general stylistic archetypes is not enough to explain the richness and diversity of the American-built environment.

Suggested Reading

Yip, Christopher. "Chinese" in Dell Upton, Ed.

America's Architectural Roots: Ethnic Groups that Built America. (Washington D.C., The Preservation Press, 1986).

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Photos by the author.