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Chinatowns are disappearing

Can architecture ensure their future?

Andrea Lam

Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship Journal Series 2023

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As Lecturer-in-Charge of the architecture course at Sydney Technical College, Hadley built “one of the finest schools of architecture in the Empire” and is credited with gaining Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) recognition of the course, which gave post-1923 graduates exemption from the RIBA examinations.

As an architect in private practice, Hadley drew from a wide range of revival styles in his designs for significant urban and suburban commissions, which included two town halls, several multi-storey city warehouses, numerous suburban churches and Sydney University’s original Wesley College and chapel.

Hadley’s “greatest contribution to NSW architecture remains his insistence on the importance of travel in Australian architectural training.” In 1928 and 1929, Hadley sponsored two £25 scholarships through the Board of Architects of NSW. The success of these must have provided the catalyst for his 1937 bequest.

The Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarships have been awarded since 1951 as a result of the Trust established by the Byera Hadley estate. The list of scholarship recipients over the years includes many architects who have contributed enormously to the profession and the broader community.

The Scholarships are awarded annually and administered by the NSW Architects Registration Board (the ‘NSW ARB’), in close collaboration with Perpetual as trustee.

Andrea Lam was awarded the Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship in 2023.
Cover image: New York
Photo by: Andrea Lam

Chinatowns are disappearing. Can architecture ensure their future?

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Chinatowns are at once, both globally ubiquitous and deeply unique. Each one is a spatial representation of the history, traditions and rituals of Chinese diaspora living abroad, creating rich enclaves within our cities. But as these spaces evolve - are they at risk of disappearing?

From eight cities around the world, the journal shares the current state of Chinatowns and how they are changing.

1 Introduction

My earliest childhood memories of the city aren't that of the architectural marvel of the Sydney Opera House or the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but rather the interior mall of Market City in Sydney's Chinatown. I have distinct memories of mini-me trying on plastic hair accessories from the stall owners on the ground floor, after sharing a feasting of wonton noodle soups and hainanese chicken rice plated on bright colour plastic trays with my parents and sisters in the bustling food court upstairs. Chinatown provided me with a true cultural connection to Sydney, one that I hadn't experienced elsewhere in the city.

Fast forward a couple of decades to today as an architect, I wanted to understand why I was so drawn to the nostalgia of Chinatown as a physical space, more than just a place of nostalgia. How did they come to be? How have they changed? And what is their future?

In the mid to late 19th century, there was a mass emigration of people from the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Fujian provinces to locations such as Singapore, US and Australia. China was undergoing massive population growth and combined with the affects of recovering from a war, natural disasters and famine, the promise of a better life in places abroad appealed to many.

These southern Chinese migrants settled in enclaves on the fringes of emerging commercial districts, and became known as Chinatowns. However, as migration patterns from China changed over time, so did the demographics of these spaces. In Sydney's Chinatown today, migrants increasingly come from the larger cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. At the same time, newer Chinatowns established to reflect a wider Asian diaspora (e.g. renaming to 'Chinatown International District' in Seattle, establishment of 'Asiatown' in Houston.

For the common person, the term 'Chinatown' evokes stereotypical features of red lanterns, traditional gates and 'cheap' Chinese restaurants - as though one may find a timeless Chinatown identity, but those who have truly experienced it know that these spaces are more than that - they are the circular banquet tables of steaming yum cha breakfasts, the sticky floors of a late night karaoke with friends, the outdoor weekend family adventures to Chinese supermarkets, the celebrations on Lunar New Year. Most importantly, they are the shared spaces of belonging for the Asian diaspora. However in recent days, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions to these spaces.

In early 2020, when news of a Wuhan-originated virus began to spread, food and hospitality businesses of Chinatowns were particularly affected. With many Chinatowns serving as familiar spaces for international students and visitors alike, the global downturn in migration during the pandemic was another blow to these ethnic enclaves.

In the subsequent year, there was a rise of violent attacks on Asian-Americans in Chinatowns across

the U.S., and in particular against the elderly. In recent years, Chinatowns - primarily based in and near, central business districts - have had to compete with the exponential popularity of new ‘ethnoburbs’, Chinese suburban hubs outside CBDs, catering towards demographics of younger families with children beyond traditionally ‘Cantonese’ speaking neighbourhoods (e.g. Burwood, Hurstville, Chatswood in Sydney). Visitation numbers to Chinatowns around the world are falling - so what role can architecture play in ensuring their future?

“Chinatowns are disappearing” is a survey of eight cities around the world, exploring how these communities are fighting to keep diaspora spaces thriving in the face of rapid change. Through site visits, interviews with community leaders, urban planners, and residents, and analysis of spatial patterns and policy strategies, the research highlights a range of responses — from grassroots organising, land trust models to adaptive reuse and emerging design voices and creative spaces. These learnings reveal a fundamental truth: the future of Chinatowns depends not just on preserving buildings or symbols, but on sustaining the social infrastructure — the everyday spatial practices, networks, and cultural expressions — that make these places meaningful.

Ultimately, this survey does not claim that Chinatowns must remain unchanged or “frozen in time.” Instead, it advocates for embracing their dynamic, hybrid nature and for architecture and urbanism to become tools of cultural justice — tools that can support inclusion, resilience, and belonging in an era of rapid urban transformation.

Image caption: View of Chinatown's Portsmouth Square from rooftop of the I-Hotel
Credits: Andrea Lam

2 San Francisco

Locating Chinatown

This research report begins its journey in San Francisco Chinatown, as one of the largest Chinese ethnic enclaves outside of Asia with over 15,000 residents and covering twenty-four urban blocks.

San Francisco's (SF) Chinatown is also believed to be the earliest known mention of the word 'Chinatown' in the Western world. (Anderson et al. 2021, 19). Understanding its origins is essential to recognising the significance and notion of Chinatowns around the world more broadly.

SF's Chinatown traces its beginnings to the 1850s, when a wave of Chinese migrants primarily from the Guangdong region in southeastern China arrived in the United States. At the time, China was recovering from the aftermath of the first Opium War and was undergoing a mass population increase, compounded by the effects of natural disaster, famine and political instability. In this context, many Chinese were lured to by the riches of the California Gold Rush and the prospect of a better life. (PBS, n.d.)

Initially, early immigrants settled in various areas of San Francisco to find employment in the mines and railroads, however the economic downturn combined with rising anti-Chinese rhetoric led to policies that confined where and how the Chinese community could reside and work. In 1875, the Page Act effectively banned Chinese women entry into the country, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act; (Mishan and Chow 2023) prevented Chinese labourers from immigrating and restricted their land ownership and employment across the United States. Between the discriminatory laws and the need to find sanctuary in numbers amidst anti-immigration sentiment of the city, San Francisco's Chinatown became its own enclave where Chinese migrants were forced into densely packed streets around Portsmouth Square; Sacramento, Kearny, Pacific and Stockton Street - the core of what we know today as SF's Chinatown.

Today, San Francisco's Chinatown is defined by a fine-grained urban fabric that contrasts starkly with the larger-scale, high-rise structures of the surrounding downtown area. The enclave's layout follows a formal Victorian-era street grid, with small lots and blocks that support high pedestrian activity. Its spatial logic — narrow laneways, intimate building footprints, and low-rise forms — creates an "inward-looking" neighbourhood, (Stevens and Thai, n.d., 8) where many businesses are located not only along the major

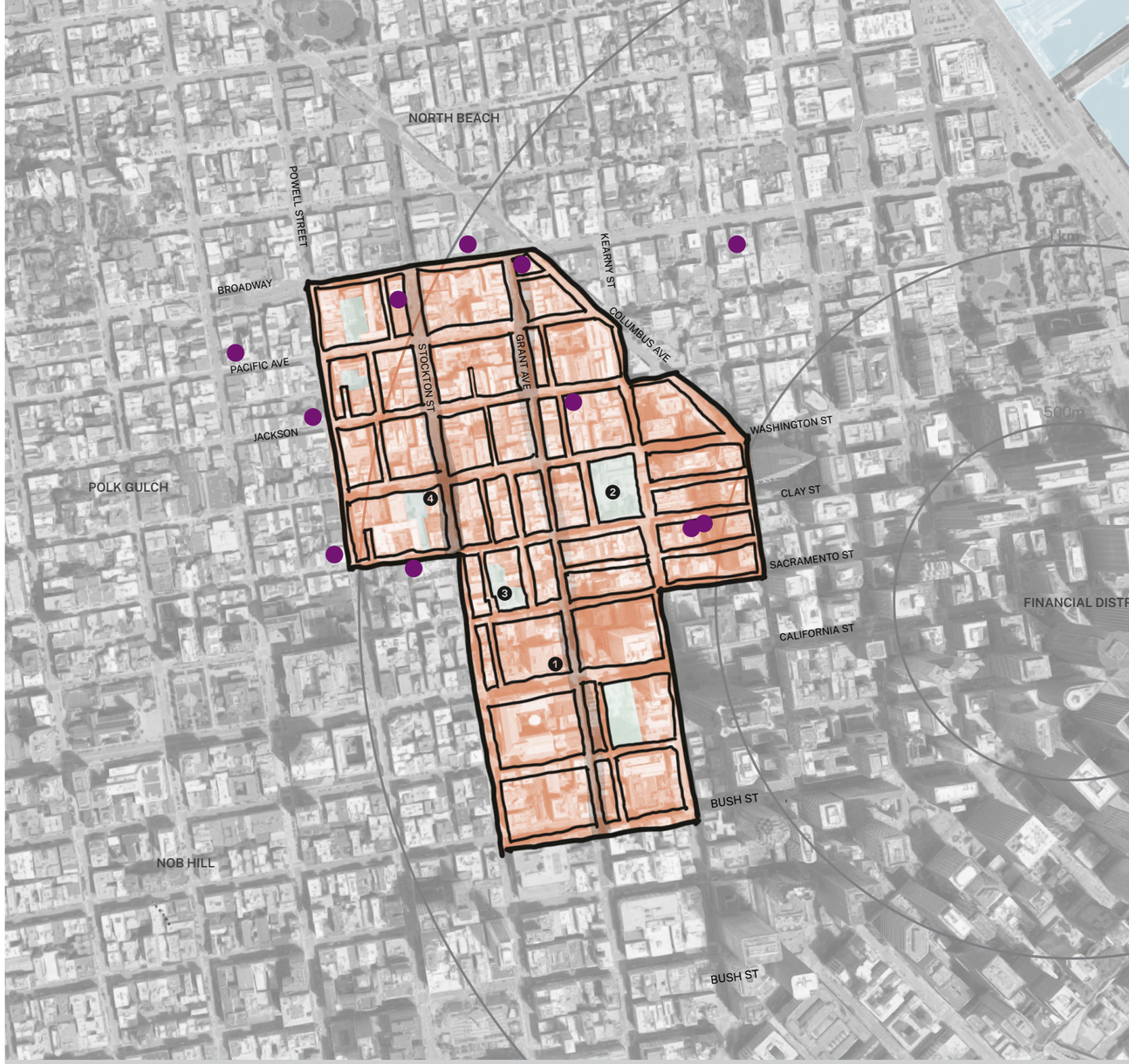

Image caption: Aerial map showing extent of Manhattan's Chinatown district and key streets and location within the city
Credits: Andrea Lam

Key

- SF Chinatown
- Primary Streets
- Open Space
- 1 Chinatown Community Development Center
- 2 Portsmouth Square
- 3 Willie Woo Woo Playground
- 4 Rose Pak Station
- 5 Chinese Historical Society of America Museum
- Affordable Housing Sites

The neighbourhood’s architectural identity is therefore both a resistance to and a performance of cultural visibility.

thoroughfares but also extend into a labyrinth of interconnected laneways and alleys. This intricate network of passageways snakes it way through the district, providing hidden on-foot routes that foster exploration, social interaction, and daily commerce away from the noise and scale of the city’s main arteries.

Walking through Chinatown

Chinatown is a dense and vibrant place, filled with a variety of fine grain storefronts - restaurants, groceries, jewellery shops, Chinese medicine dispensaries and variety stores. Architecturally, tourists and visitors may come to distinguish the “universal” urban markers of Chinatown - pagoda-style roofs and awnings, ornamental calligraphy signage, murals of bright reds, golds and green, lanterns criss-crossing overhead - however these decorative expressions stem not from the original wave of Chinese immigrants, but from the aftermath of 1906 earthquake and fires that razed the city. Here, a local businessman named Look Tin Eli saw an opportunity to re-brand Chinatown - not as a negative place of ‘vice’, but "a positive, recognisable identity catered to the dominant white society in the face of continued marginalisation and ensured its future survivability” (Chan and Hanna 2022, 11). He hired a white architect - T.Paterson Ross and engineer A.W. Burgren to rebuild this image of Chinatown. They referenced outdated historical books that heavily relied on religious vernacular create a spatial 'emblem' of China that ultimately held no relevance for the local migrants in SF. (99% Invisible 2018). However, the 're-branding' was a success - visitation to the area grew and more business followed suit in the pastiche design and allowed business to flourish. The neighbourhood’s architectural identity is therefore both a resistance to and a performance of cultural visibility. To visit Stockton Street, Chinatown’s commercial strip, is to experience a sensory overload. The wheels of shopping carts pulled by elderly women rattle over concrete footpaths, while the hiss of buses syncopate with the thuds of fresh-produce boxes being unceremoniously unloaded by their handlers. Steam from a dim sum cafeteria fogs up the window - I order a plate of cheung fun, and the server shouts out my order to be collected over the steel countertop. Slippery folds of rice noodle sheets, doused in soy sauce, coddle plump pieces of prawn. I devour one roll, then another. Chinatown is a place where the auditory, visual and tactile blend into a vibrant and at times overwhelming symphony.

Image caption: (L to R) A group of women practice tai-chi under the shade of a community center at Willie Woo-Woo Playground, a group of residents in an affordable housing complex take part in the community excercise classes offered during the week
Credits: Andrea Lam

But there are places to retreat. At Willie “Woo Woo” Wong Playground, the sharp noon sun casts a shadow in the undercroft of the community clubhouse. A group of women practise slow, graceful tai chi movements as a warbling, tinny melody plays on a set of small portable speakers. Nearby, a trio of elderly men practise dribbling a basketball on a blue sports court, their motions deliberate and unhurried. These leisurely moments of respite in public open spaces highlight the presence of a large residential community, predominantly of senior age, many of whom live in high-density affordable housing. The protection of housing was and continues to be a deliberate tool by the Chinatown community to fight against forces of displacement of the poor and working class, and safeguard spaces where daily rituals and social interactions can thrive.

Learning from SF Chinatown

A critical pillar of San Francisco’s Chinatown’s enduring success is its large population of elderly Chinese residents who live in rent-controlled housing, enabling many to age in place within the neighborhood’s tight-knit social fabric (Anderson et al., 2021, 155). This struggle to protect affordable housing is powerfully embodied in the history of the I-Hotel on Kearny Street. In the early hours of August 4, 1977, hundreds of elderly Filipino and Chinese tenants faced eviction as building owners sought to demolish the site for a parking garage. Despite thousands rallying in support, police forcibly removed the residents. Yet, the fight did not end there: over the following decades, tenants, activists, and city officials engaged in persistent advocacy to secure the site’s future as affordable housing. The new I-Hotel, opened in 2005, now provides 104 low-income units — standing as a lasting symbol of community resilience and the ongoing battle against displacement.

As gentrification and urban development threaten Chinatown’s housing and public spaces, the need to protect these multi-sensory sites of community is greater than ever. Preserving these experiences is not about keeping Chinatown as a static cultural exhibit, but about embracing its dynamic and evolving identity and ensuring its future as a living, breathing space for generations to come.

This demographic anchors community memory and continuity, even as the neighborhood stands on the cusp of a generational shift. While new cultural ventures such as restaurants like Mister Jiu’s and On Waverley (AAPI-owned gift store) symbolise emerging

Image caption: (L to R) Local morning shoppers cross the road at the intersection of Stockton St and Pacific Ave against the backdrop of a public art mural on the wall of affordable housing block. Clothes dry out the windows of the iconic alleyways of San Francisco's Chinatowns. A group of elderly women pass through shady Ross St Alley. Credits: Andrea Lam

dimensions of Chinatown's evolution, as community advocate Jeremy Liu observes, this renewal is still limited in scale and scope.

Importantly, the true markers of Chinatown's vibrancy are less about tokenistic architectural icons — such as gates or pagoda roofs — and more about the cultural and social institutions embedded in everyday life. The Lee Family Credit Union, for example, operates with unusual hours (Tuesdays 2–5 pm, Saturdays 9–11 am) that reflect the rhythms and needs of its member-based, federally chartered cooperative structure. These credit unions, alongside social service agencies, act as vital nodes of community organization, empowerment, and financial self-determination — far more authentic markers of Chinatown's resilience than decorative facades.

Complementing these social infrastructures are new creative spaces like the arts-focused "Edge on the Square", headed up by Joanne Lee near Portsmouth Square, which serves as a community hub that activates public space and cultivates cultural expression. These emerging venues represent hopeful experiments in blending tradition with innovation, helping to sustain Chinatown's dynamic identity.

San Francisco's Chinatown teaches us that the future

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of diaspora neighborhoods lies not simply in preserving physical heritage, but in nurturing the living social and cultural ecosystems that sustain everyday life. It is in these interwoven layers — between built form, community institutions, and creative expression — that Chinatown continues to thrive.

3 Boston

Locating Chinatown

Boston's Chinatown spans approximately eight to ten city blocks, bordered by Essex Street to the north, Tremont Street to the west, Kneeland Street to the south, and the Leather District to the east. It is the last remaining historic Chinatown in New England, geographically small but culturally and politically significant. Situated between the Financial District, Downtown Crossing, and the South End, it has long been a landing place for Chinese immigrants, beginning in the late 19th century with arrivals from Guangdong and later Fujian.

The architecture reflects its layered history: three-to-five-storey brick tenements, narrow laneways, and ground-floor shopfronts housing small businesses and associations. Much of the housing stock is aging and modest, with single-room occupancy dwellings still in operation. The area retains a distinct, medium-density, mixed-use character, where residential life is closely interwoven with commerce and street-level social exchange.

While once part of the so-called "Combat Zone" — Boston's former red-light district — Chinatown has undergone significant spatial and social transformation. It has also withstood aggressive urban interventions, including the construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike and the expansion of Tufts Medical Center, which have encroached on its footprint and intensified land pressures.

What remains is a compressed yet resilient piece of urban fabric, where the built form continues to support intergenerational living, cultural continuity, and informal economies, even as external development pressures mount.

Walking through Boston's Chinatown

A weekday morning in Boston's Chinatown is buoyed by quiet, local rhythms. Near the Chinatown Gate plaza, artist and landscape architect Ponnapa Prakkamakul sets up for another day working on her public art installation. Beneath the criss-crossing lanterns and leafy canopies, elderly men cluster around chessboards — some playing, others silently observing. Compared to the frenetic energy of San Francisco or New York, Boston's Chinatown moves more slowly. There's a sleepiness to its streets, but also a plethora of incidental connections. On a walking tour through the neighborhood, local writer Cynthia retraces the boundaries of her childhood on

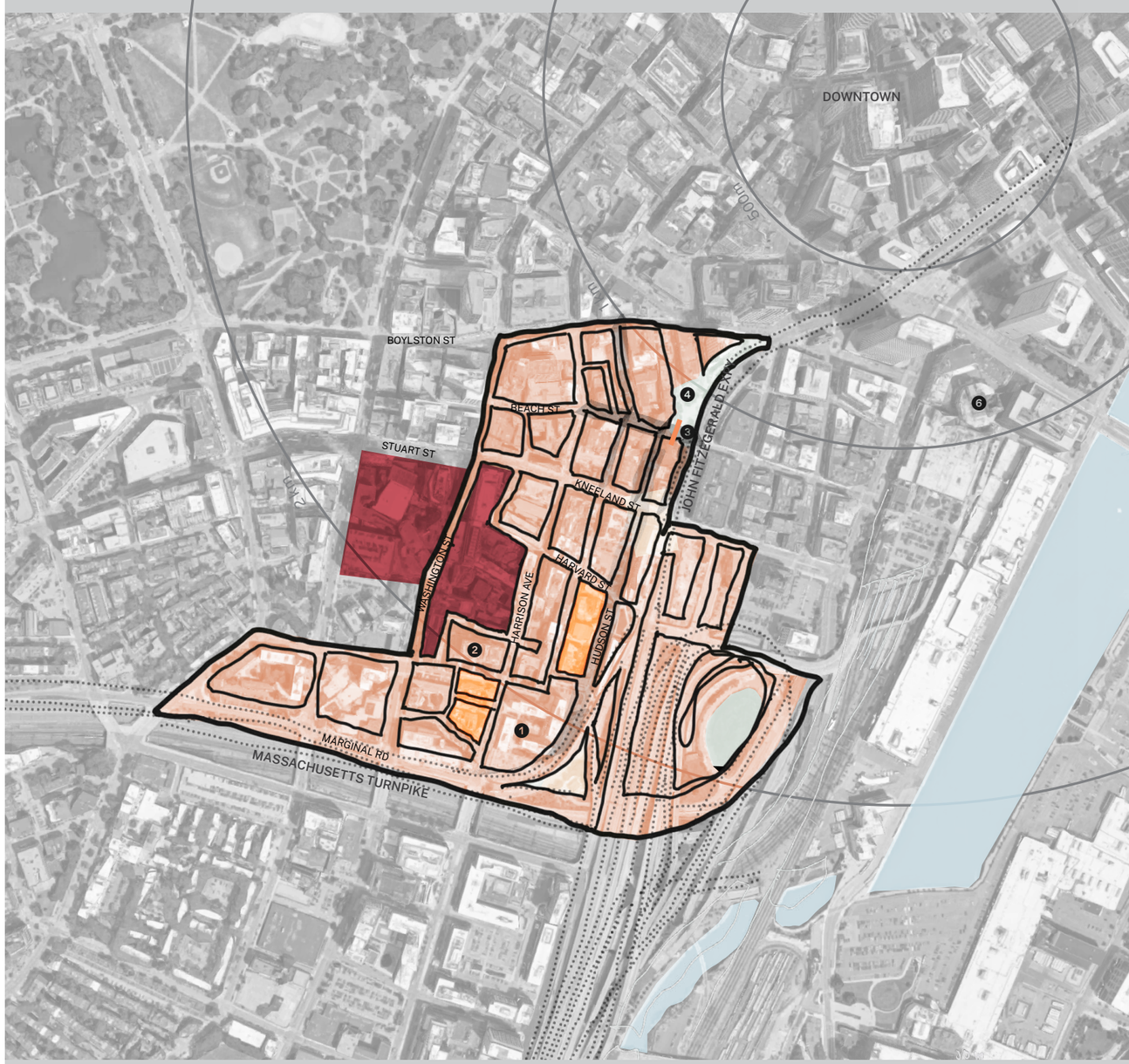

Image caption: Aerial map showing extent of Boston's Chinatown district and key streets and location within the city
Credits: Andrea Lam

100m

Key

- Boston Chinatown
- Primary Streets
- Row houses considered for heritage protection
- Tufts Medical Centre
- ❶ Tai Tung Village (Affordable Housing)
- ❷ Boston Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)
- ❸ Chinatown Gates
- ❹ Rose Kennedy Greenway
- ❺ Pao Arts Centre
- ❻ South Station

Image caption: L to R Hudson Street row housing, the other side of Hudston St, the Massachusetts highway turnpike which razed its way through Chinatown in 1957. Credits: Andrea Lam

Hudson Street. On one side stands a row of red brick tenements — remnants of the early 20th-century fabric. On the other, the elevated stretch of the Massachusetts Turnpike barrels through what was once home.Constructed in the early 1960s under the guise of urban renewal, the elevated highway tore through Boston's Chinatown and the neighboring Leather District, forcibly displacing over 100 Chinese and Syrian families. What was once a walkable, interconnected neighborhood became concatenated in two by concrete and on-ramps. "Zeus did not release a lightning bolt and level a neighborhood," Cynthia reflects. "A group of people, most likely men, most likely white men, sat around a table, and decided a certain group of people (us) were less valuable, less important than other people." (Yee, 2025)

In the decades following the Turnpike's arrival, Boston's Chinatown has faced mounting pressures from institutional expansion — particularly by Tufts University and its affiliated medical center. Once committed to developing on "underutilised" land, Tufts' hospital campus has gradually encroached upon Chinatown's borders, replacing historic housing and small businesses with parking garages, clinics, and taller administrative buildings. In recent years, gentrification has added another layer of threat. New luxury towers rise just beyond Chinatown's borders, their reflective surfaces visually consuming the neighborhood even as they displace longtime residents through rising rents and property speculation. What little remains of Chinatown's affordable housing stock is under pressure. Community-led developments like Parcel 24 — where activists successfully advocated for housing on land formerly occupied by the highway — offer a glimmer of what might be possible. But these victories are hard-won and incomplete. The scale and material language of these new developments often stand in stark contrast to the human-scaled urbanism of the historic core.

The Chinatown zoning district — originally created to cap building heights and preserve neighborhood character — has been under pressure from developers seeking variances for large-scale residential towers. Community resistance has pushed back on multiple proposals, including luxury high-rises at 120 Kingston and the South Bay development (Chinatown Master Plan 2010). In 2019, a proposed Business Improvement District (BID) for Chinatown raised further alarm. While BIDs are often marketed as tools for cleanliness, safety, and economic vitality, they're also known to accelerate gentrification through targeted policing,

"Zeus did not release a lightning bolt and level a neighborhood. A group of people, most likely men, most likely white men, sat around a table, and decided a certain group of people (us) were less valuable, less important than other people."

privatsation of public space, and prioritisation of business interests over residential needs. The BID proposal — ultimately withdrawn due to community opposition — would have shifted public realm oversight to a private board, diminishing local control (Wang, 2020).

As Boston continues to develop, the question isn't simply how to preserve Chinatown's architectural character, but how to safeguard the spatial conditions that allow the community to flourish: compactness, adaptability, intergenerational cohabitation, and the informal ties that keep it together.

Learning from Boston

What makes Boston's Chinatown particularly instructive is the way the community has mobilised — through protest and policy and alternative systems of land governance. Today, one of the most promising tools is the Chinatown Community Land Trust (CLT) — a relatively young but growing effort to shift ownership models away from speculative real estate and toward collective, community-held land. While Community Development Corporations (CDCs) focus on building housing, a land trust moves upstream: it's not only about what gets built, but who owns the ground beneath it. The Chinatown Land Trust has slowly begun acquiring buildings, one parcel a(CLT) t a time, often negotiating with aging landlords or second-generation families who have long since relocated to the suburbs and face pressure to sell for top dollar.

The process is slow and uneven (as discussed further 'In Conversation with Suzanne Lee' . And yet, it signals a shift — from temporary resistance to long-term control. Larry Chan — a longtime urban designer, community advocate, and review board member — describes this transformation as both inevitable and survivable. "Not everyone's children are going to run the bakery," he says. "But Chinatown doesn't disappear just because its demographics evolve. The street-level presence — the spatial compactness, the informal exchanges, the associations, the elders playing chess under the trees — these are what endure." He points to recent sidewalk and street tree improvements as tangible signs of advocacy paying off. "These things matter," he notes, "because they reflect how the community is shaping public space — not just responding to decisions made elsewhere."

Larry also reminds us that the visual markers we associate with Chinatowns — the paifang gates, red

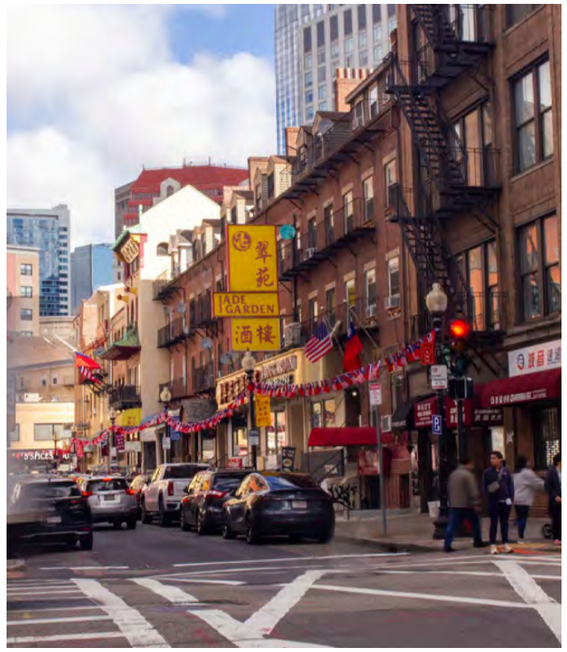

Image caption: L to R Chinatown Boston Gates, Mid-rise mixed used buildings with looming Tufts administrative buildings beyond

lanterns, pagoda phone booths — were often imposed by city planners, not requested by residents. “For the most part,” he says, “Chinatown architecture is just the city’s architecture, adapted. These weren’t purpose-built ethnic enclaves. They were created out of necessity — sometimes by exclusion, sometimes by choice. They were ghettos, and they were sanctuaries.”

This duality — of marginality and resilience — is critical to understanding how preservation must operate. It’s not about freezing buildings in time or fetishizing stylistic motifs. It’s about maintaining the conditions for cultural continuity: rent control, local governance, multigenerational housing, and ground-floor uses that serve community needs. In Boston, the lesson is clear: the future of Chinatown cannot rely on aesthetics or nostalgia. It must be fought for, politically and structurally

Image caption: Groups of men play Chinese chess at Rose Kennedy Greenway near the Boston Chinatown Gates
Credits: Andrea Lam

Journal Note:

In Conversation with Suzanne Lee

On my second day in Boston, I spoke to Suzanne Lee, a longtime educator, community organizer, and the President Emeritus of the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) — an organization she co-founded in 1977 in response to the lack of political voice among working-class Chinese immigrants in Boston. Our conversation explored the history of activism in Boston's Chinatown, from early fights for housing, workers' rights, to current strategies to defend the neighborhood's cultural and physical right to the city.

AL I'd love to start by hearing about what drew you into this work and how those early experiences shaped your understanding of community, identity, and power.

SL When I was a college freshman, I started teaching English to garment workers — many were my mother's friends. Through their stories, I began to understand how much of immigrant life was shaped by forces beyond their control, like the Chinese Exclusion Act. That shifted my perspective. It helped me see that my parents didn't really have a choice — and it changed my relationship with my family.

I learned that my grandfather arrived here (Boston) in 1890, when he was just 12, with his uncle. My grandmother never came — she stayed in the village in China. I used to wonder: how did my grandfather manage to build a life here while starting a family across the ocean?

My father didn't come to the U.S. until 1932, and he was already married. My grandfather didn't want any of his children to immigrate — he didn't think they could survive the hardship in Boston. His fears weren't unfounded: my father's older brother came here in his early twenties and was killed — shot in East Boston just a year or two after arriving. When I learned that, I understood what my grandfather meant when he said, "If you leave Chinatown, you might not come back."

AL That's extremely devastating and a painful story to carry. How did that shape you and your experience when you came to Chinatown?

SL My mother came to the U.S. in 1956 for family reunification. I was six years old and left behind in Hong Kong, raised by my grandmother. I carried a lot of resentment — why was I the one left behind? I was born in China and sent to Hong Kong at age two, but I didn't join my family in the States until I was 11, in 1961.

As a young girl, I had so many unanswered questions — "Am I not part of the family?" But in immigrant families, no one really explains those things. They just don't talk about it.

It wasn't until I started teaching English to garment workers that I heard stories that mirrored my own - families being ripped apart. Over and over, I saw how women held families together in the villages, and then again when they came to the U.S. They kept everything running while the men worked long hours in restaurants. That's when I began to understand why Chinatown exists. It wasn't built because it was

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Image caption: Suzanne Lee at 28 Ash Street, Boston
Credits: Andrea Lam

desirable — the streets were narrow, the buildings were old, it wasn't clean. It was necessary.

As young people at the time, we were inspired by the civil rights and student movements - and that was our slogan - to serve the people. It wasn't about what we needed, but what our community needed. That's really where my work started.

AL No, super relevant to understand the why.

SL But by profession, I'm an educator. As a public school teacher and principal and CPA is my volunteer work and now I'm the President of the Land Trust.

AL You wear many hats. That's great.

AL I'm really interested in the role the CPA plays in Boston right now. I was just in San Francisco, and it felt quite different — there's a real density of affordable senior housing in Chinatown there, much of it run by the Community Development Corporation (CDC). Their focus seemed less on formal heritage recognition and more on sustaining everyday life and community. It feels like a different strategy is at play in Boston. What kinds of projects are you working on now, and how does the approach differ?

SL Well, the key difference is that while both Chinatowns started around the same time, San Francisco's was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and had a chance to rebuild. That's why a lot of their buildings look newer. Boston's Chinatown building stock — especially the business district — dates back to the 1860s.

That said, we do have a number of affordable housing developments. One of the first was Tai Tung Village, just down the street — it was built in the 1960s to replace homes lost to a highway expansion project. Cynthia, (who you met*) grew up there. Her family's home was demolished — she told me, "I'll never forget that."

Boston's Chinatown is smaller — both in size and population. In San Francisco, Chinese people make up nearly a quarter of the city. That demographic power translates into more leverage. But here, because we're smaller, we've had to organize strategically to protect what we have. And despite our size, we've managed to secure quite a bit of affordable housing — not just for seniors, but for families too.

We come to figure out we cannot be just organising in opposition - unless we own something, it's always going to be a danger.

That's why there's this perception that Chinatown is stable. People see these buildings and think, "Oh, it's safe now." But in reality, displacement is still a real threat. Back in the 1950s and '60s, the downtown core went through so-called "urban revitalization," and we saw luxury developments creeping in. CPA led protests against the first high-end building proposed here. Around the same time, Tufts Medical Center started buying up residential buildings. So the fight's been long — and it's ongoing.

AL So you have multiple forces of gentrification happening at the same time.

SL Exactly — what we saw was both institutional expansion and the early waves of gentrification, with luxury housing starting to go up. And now, it's become a global phenomenon. In most major cities, you see this same pattern of luxury development. We first confronted it back in the 1980s, which is when we formed the CPA — to make sure working-class people had a voice in the decisions affecting their lives. We became very active in organizing and pushing back against many of these developments. And like any movement, you win some and you lose some.

We come to figure out we cannot be just organising in opposition - unless we own something, it's always going to be a danger.

Although the Land Trust movement began much earlier, Boston only had one by the late '90s — originating in the Black community. They combined organizing with efforts to clean up vacant lots. At the time, the city welcomed the initiative since it wasn't an area anyone wanted to invest in. Through that work, they gained eminent domain over some city lots, which became the foundation for their housing stock. We looked to them to learn how to start a Land Trust, but by then, it was already a bit too late — there was no vacant land left.

AL I can imagine the cost of land has skyrocketed — Chinatown isn't viewed as marginal anymore, but rather as prime real estate."

SL Everybody wants it, so it really pushes up the rent - other than those affordable buildings, anything that's privately owned, the rent is just triple, quadruple and pushes out other people who normally live here that need Chinatown, so we formed the Land Trust is trying to figure out - how do we own land?

AL That reminds me of an early example in San Francisco — when the Clayton Hotel, one of the first single-room occupancy buildings, was at risk of being sold. The Chinese owner could've made more selling to a bank, but the CDC convinced him to sell to the city instead, so the residents could stay and remain connected to their community. Are you having similar conversations with owners in Boston? Is there any traction in encouraging them to keep those community ties?

SL That's been one of our strategies. If you look at who owns the older buildings in Chinatown, it's usually either small businesses or longtime Chinese families. But now, as the older generation passes on, many of their children don't live here — and don't want to. They're not interested in holding onto the property, but they also see the potential to cash out.

These buildings were originally designed as single-family homes — very small, around 600 square feet per floor. The ground floor is usually just a studio. The second floor might have one small bedroom, and only the top floor, with an attic conversion, has space for more rooms.

One developer bought a building for $1.05 million — we were able to buy it back for $1.2 million. But now, it's all about the money. That's the game we're in.

AL Yes, that always seems to be the case.

SL Government has to play a role — city, state, and federal. The housing crisis we're in today goes all the way back to the Reagan era, when the federal government pulled out of housing creation and left it to cities. But with what money? Development is always about money.

And it's not just about owning buildings — it's about organizing the people who live there, raising their voices so they can fight for their community. That's slowly starting to take hold. When we first started, city and state officials would just pay lip service. But in the last election cycle — for mayor, governor, and even state legislators — Community Land Trusts were finally being discussed as a real tool to address the housing crisis. That's a huge win.

Every step is a fight. During the pandemic, when federal relief money came in, no one knew how to use it at first. But housing advocates pushed hard, and eventually the state set aside funds for small property acquisition. That was a critical moment — finally, some real money to back community ownership.

So we have lost a few buildings, because we couldn't move fast enough against developers who come in and swoop in - it's easy for them. For us, we have to go through all the red tape.

AL And apply for all these different pools of money

SL Yes exactly, and so the first building that we bought was really because of our political will and political connections that got us the building. There was a city councillor and the Boston Chinatown community helped elect her and we did so because she is a housing expert advocate - she always remembers that. And then, she uses her clout and her network and says to the developers - "I'm not talking to you until you go talk to the CLT." So that's how it got started.

SL It doesn't matter if we (CLT) want it, but people have to want it and be willing to come out to fight for it. It's same way that we got the land back for this building. (current building at 28 Ash Street). It was a 10 year struggle.

When push came to shove, I was getting calls from our people asking if we should stage a sit-in at the planning meeting — a final stand. The question was whether it would be worth it. I asked, "Who's going to be there? How will it work? Who's actually moving now?" — those constant organizing questions.

But it was the elders in the neighborhood who really gave it momentum. They'd say, "If we lose this one, we'll lie down in the street and let them roll over us with their bulldozers." And when young people hear that, it lights a fire. They think, "If our elders are ready to do that, then what are we going to do?" To do this kind of work, your political power comes from organising the residents and people who live here. Without that piece, you cannot be effective.

AL How long ago did these events occur?

SL The building was finished in 2004, so that was so the whole struggle was conducted during the 90s.

AL That's super interesting - do you think that same form of activism - conducting sit-ins, the corralling of people and the protest movements - has become more difficult in this increasingly dispersed digital age?

SL Online never works - it has to be the people. Because there's a power in when people are face to face with the real person. Something changes. You're no longer just dealing with a number or a list of names online. When we bring our folks, particularly working class folks to hearings to the State House and in the City Council - let them see their faces and let them say, right, let them say no to their face - never underestimate that power. But not many people are willing to do that kind of work anymore. That's the challenge.

AL Are you suggesting that that's a demographic issue? With the newer generation of Chinese community, even people like me, they might not live in Chinatown anymore?

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SL Yes, many young people have that background living outside because there is no place to live in the community, right? People do want to come back, but there's no place for people to live and they want to see Chinatown that's home - and it's not. People would say that they're willing to do whatever it takes, but then at the end of the day, it's only people who live here who will be the ultimate last line of defence, because people who are outside, they can come and have other options. Many people who live here that don't have that. So when it comes to that kind of struggle, their voices have to be at the centre. And it's a hard lesson and hard thing for young people to learn.

I had a one-on-one with a young organiser in Dorchester yesterday — it's a largely Vietnamese, Black, and Latino community. He was talking about engaging students and said, "Most of the time we just put out a flyer or post on social media and hope people show up." And I said, "That's not organising!"

Eventually, he made a smart call — to start with a local school where we already have relationships. Some students there are eager and engaged; we worked with them over the summer. It might not be what people see as the "neediest" school, but that's not the point.

I told him, if you want to build real momentum, start with people who are ready. The truth is, the most vulnerable often don't have the time, energy, or capacity to organise — it's a privilege to do this work. That's why some of the best organisers come from the middle class.

AL Interesting.

SL It doesn't mean that people have to come from the working class in order to have time.

AL Sure, sure.

SL Many communities in need, often also have the expectation of the family, particularly for immigrant family,

AL And the expectations and the need for dependence on the children that may weight heavy on people

SL I see a lot of challenges ahead to continue to do this kind of work and it's a big question. So who's willing to do it?

AL You've spoken about using housing and land as a lever but more broadly, what do you kind of hope the future of Chinatown will look like? Is it just about historical preservation and preserving what it looks like at a certain point in time forever?

SL No, in fact that we never even pushed to have. What they call the current definition of historical preservation is preserving the building. Our goal, our centre is always about the people, so we're good at the buildings without the people. Preservation is allowing the people who are there to stay and develop and maintain. In order to do that you really do have to have ownership. That's the key.

And how do you have that ownership? There's two ways, but the two have to come together at some point. One is that you develop people's civic engagement and political understandings about Power, City State - how decisions get made, when we need to be at the table and that takes a lot of that kind of legal education. And people said that you do have the power, so voting is such an important piece of that. And the second piece is to figure out how we get to own something. And unless we can figure out the money part, I don't know.

AL And what does that financial portion of activism look like? Is it funding from the government or is it about community donations? Or is it about, like, kind of negotiating with, like, private organisations?

SL There's no single donor, community, or family that can cover it all. Right now, we're looking at about 11 buildings we're trying to negotiate. One of them is especially important — it's old and run-down, but it sits at a key corner in Chinatown. When we offered $4 million, the owner wouldn't even come to the table. He wants $8 million. We're confident we can raise the $4 million, but $8? That's where city, state, and federal support needs to step in. It's incredibly difficult.

We did just manage to acquire a smaller building behind another property we already own on that block. The owner, an elderly woman in her late 90s, had recently moved into a nursing home. Her children — doctors, engineers — don't live in the area and don't need the money. The mother had always wanted to sell to the land trust, but her kids still wanted their cut. We know them — one's an optometrist who doesn't even come to Chinatown anymore, another lives in a wealthy suburb.

In the end, they sold it for what they saw as the "market price" — $1.1 million for a tiny building. We'll be able to create just two units from it. Even that is a win. If we can secure a few buildings on the same block, it prevents outside developers from buying it all up and tearing it down. That's what we're working toward.

AL I've also been thinking beyond housing — about the commercial side of Chinatown. I was talking with a cousin who didn't grow up here, but many of his friends did in the towers. They mentioned how many of the banquet halls they used to go to have disappeared. So it's not just about housing; it's about maintaining social infrastructure — restaurants, event spaces, shops — that support the community's life and culture. It made me think about succession planning and future-proofing these commercial spaces — deciding what kinds of uses we want to preserve or encourage going forward.

SL It's crucial that we work with the Old Family Associations — they own much of the property in Chinatown's core and are key business players. I always knew they'd be allies in preserving Chinatown, but they're also struggling with high property taxes and building upkeep. Still, they want Chinatown to survive more than anyone else — you don't have to convince them. The question is how.

For example, my own Lee Family Association owns a prominent building here. There were rumors the current leaders wanted to sell it and move to Quincy, outside Boston, because people are relocating there. That caused an uproar — "What are they thinking?" But they said they rarely come to Chinatown anymore and parking is awful.

The truth is, if you lose any building in Chinatown's core, the neighborhood disappears. So we're pushing for a historical cultural district designation as part of a zoning battle to protect these properties.

AL Yes, someone pointed me to the fact that there's a Chinatown master plan being drawn up.

SL We're going through them. Since the 80s, every 10 years we developed a master plan and it wasn't until the 2021 that we figured out that it's not good enough to just develop the plan. You have to have a grouping of people to oversee it and continuously monitor it and that's been relatively successful because regardless of everybody's political leanings and thinking we all come together once or twice a year in that one space to talk about that. The city is at the table, the housing development folks are there. This is why we felt like Boston Chinatown still has a shot.

There is a building in in the middle of Chinatown that's owned by a union. And we have an eye on that building that we've been negotiating and talking to them - that's what this land trust work is, constantly, boots on the ground, looking in people's doors, having chats constantly.

SL People have mentioned to me that there's a lot of Chinese investment money, and some in the community say, "We should consider it." But for me, the key question is — who owns it? At the end of the day, any investor wants a return. Just because the money is Chinese doesn't mean it comes from Chinatown or benefits the community.

Take the proposed 25-story hotel right in the middle of Chinatown. Many local businesses support it because they want the increased foot traffic, but that doesn't erase concerns about ownership and long-term impact

AL It's also tricky because, there's groups like the CDC, the CLT as well as the business owners, all with the overall same aim - to keep Chinatown thriving, but there's also never one monolithic voice of Chinatown, right? How do you work together?

SL The thing is, once you say yes to certain kinds of development, you can't go back. And without a shared understanding of history, it's hard to defend the right to exist. That's what makes organizing today so difficult — young people are trying, but it's harder without that long legacy behind them.

A land trust isn't just about building housing. It's about collective ownership — having a say in what happens in the community. It's a much more holistic approach.

We need to ask ourselves: without new immigration, without working-class families, how do we keep Chinatown alive? It's not just about preserving a place — it's about preserving the people who give it meaning.

The above transcipt has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

4 New York

Locating Chinatown

New York's Chinatown occupies the dense southern portion of Manhattan, bordered by the Lower East Side, Little Italy, Tribeca and the Financial District.

Its history was shaped by early waves of Chinese migration - largely from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historically, Manhattan's Chinatowns flourished through the garment trade, with many immigrants finding work in the factories that formed the backbone of the neighbourhood's economy.

Many Chinese immigrants initially settled in this area due to a combination of economic opportunity, racial exclusion, and self-reliance. In the late 19th century, discriminatory legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricted immigration and curtailed rights, pushing Chinese communities to cluster together for safety, cultural continuity, and mutual support. Chinatown became a sanctuary where immigrants could find familiar language, food, and customs, as well as access to 'family clan associations' (based upon your surname) and 'tongs' that provided housing, employment connections, and legal assistance. The proximity to the city's ports and industrial districts also made it a practical location for new arrivals seeking work in laundries, restaurants, or factories.

Despite challenges, these tight-knit networks enabled residents to maintain a foothold in the city, turning Chinatown into a vital enclave that balanced economic survival with cultural preservation.

Walking through Mott Street

To walk through Chinatown in New York is to be overwhelmed with the senses. On a sunny afternoon on Mott Street, one may wind themselves through a seemingly never ending tunnel of scaffolding and construction zones with al spillover of grocery store boxes on the sidewalks. All whilst the ever-present sound of car horns that distinguish New York as its own city reverberate betweeen the hard surfaces of the built environs.

The urban character is one of dense compression - fine grain ground floor shopfronts - Chinese bakeries, herbal medicine stores and restaurants, topped with four to five storey tenement housing builidngs. These narrow brick walkups are consistent in the layered signage, externalfire escapes, lanterns and weathered awnings.

Passing by Columbus Park, arguably the distrct's most vital open space - a community basketball tournament in full swing. Spectators - both young and old lined were cheering loudly. On the other side of the fence of the basketball court, there are a series of tables around which elderly men area clustered around playing chess together. Multi-generations of the local community patronising the park using it as their backyard.

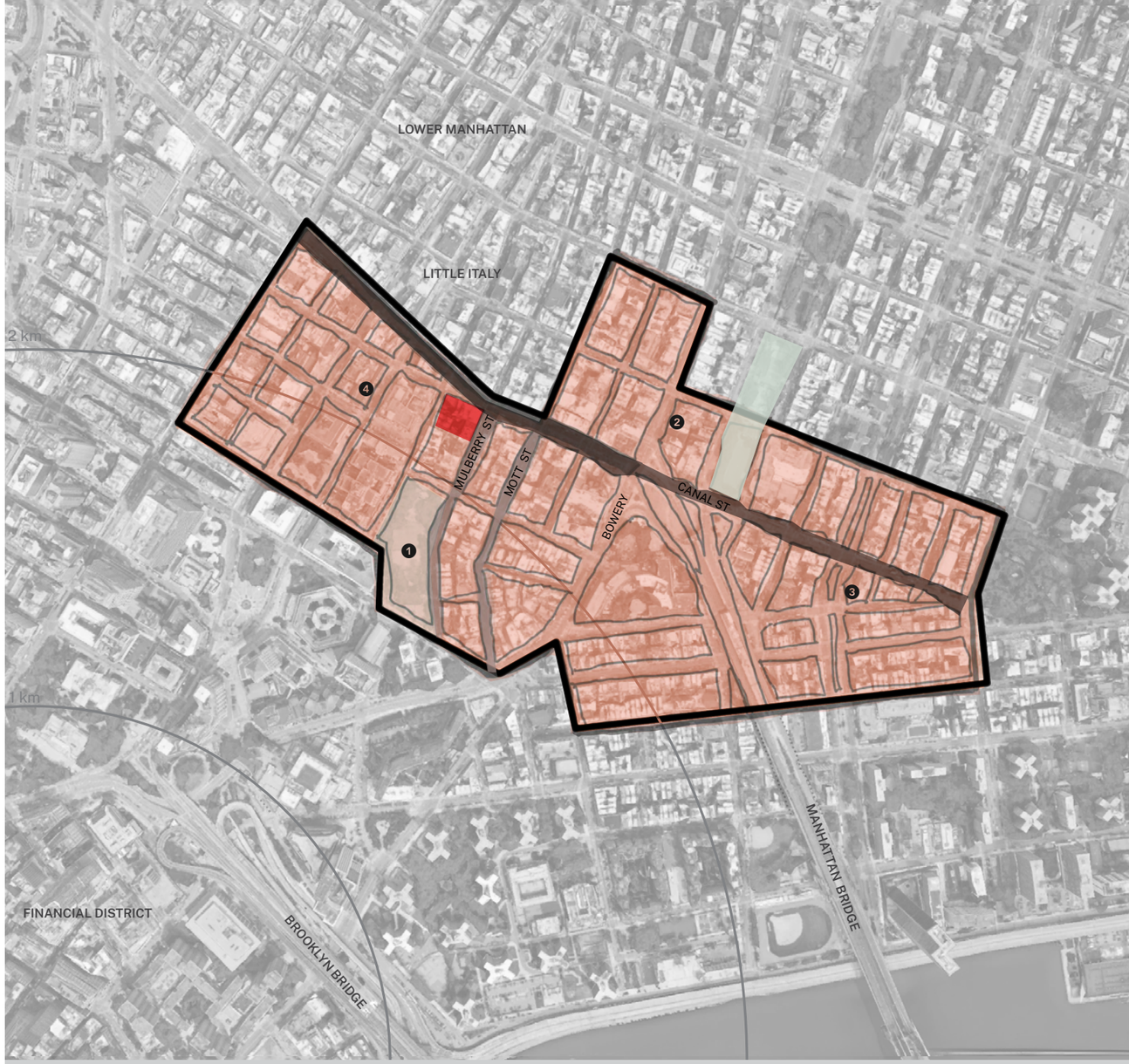

Image caption: Aerial map showing extent of Manhattan's Chinatown district and key streets and locationS within the city
Credits: Andrea Lam

100m

Key

- Manhattan Chinatown
- Canal Street
- Secondary Streets: Mulberry & Mott
- 1 Columbus Park
- 2 Welcome to Chinatown Innovation Hub
- 3 Think!Chinatown HQ
- 4 Museum of Chinese America (MOCA)
- Proposed Megajail

“Narrative and framing matters. We must find ways to tell and amplify our stories to engage the public and preserve our history.”

Image caption: Layering of signage, street lights and fire stairs along Mott Street
Credits: Andrea Lam

Yet for all the moments of activation and joy are visible signs of strain. Glazed shopfronts are plastered with newspapers, metal roller shutter doors thick with graffiti and closed day in and out - an unsettling number of vacancies suggest a Chinatown at risk. In fact, vacancy rates in the area have soared to 11.2%, nearly double the 6% recorded before the pandemic in 2019. (City Meetings NYC 2024). Is Chinatown under threat?

This is made particularly terrifying by the scenes at 125 White Street. A ginormous mount of dirt and a crane occupies a corner block of what used to be a bustling block - giving an usually clear view to sky in the dense metropolis of Manhattan. It’s the future site of the “MegaJail” — a vertical prison development announced as part of the city’s plan to close Rikers Island.

While the plan was advertised as a move toward more humane incarceration, the siting of the jail in the heart of Chinatown has sparked outrage and grief. Community members see it as a new wave of state-sanctioned erasure in an enclave that has time and time again been marginalised and pushed. The demolition that has preceded construction has already displaced businesses and disrupted the social fabric of the neighborhood. That this carceral infrastructure is being inserted into an already vulnerable working-class immigrant district is cruel — it repeats historic traumas of urban renewal and displacement.

At the New York Solidarity Chinatown Conference (discussed later on in the report), hosted by Welcome to Chinatown, grassroots organisers, policy researchers, and youth leaders gathered to strategize around ongoing threats to the neighborhood. The proposed ‘Megajail’ was discussed through the provision and development of an ‘Alternative Plan’ (Welcome to Chinatown, published 2nd June 2025) with community goals to relocate the jail to an alternative site, including providing high-quality affordable housing at the site, build a pedestrianised public green space to sky. The fight is ongoing to ensure Chinatown remains a hub to survive the decades to come.

Learning from New York

Manhattan’s Chinatown is under threat. The physical force of the Megajail development has razed blocks to the ground and are putting long-standing businesses at great peril. In addition, recent upzonings and real estate pressures, particularly around Canal Street, the Bowery, and the East Broadway corridor, are accelerating the displacement of both residential and commercial tenants. Without deliberate policy interventions — such as contextual zoning protections, anti-displacement measures, or cultural heritage designations — Chinatown risks hollowing out its working-class immigrant base and evolving into a symbolic rather than functional ethnic enclave.

And yet, there is resilience. A new generation of young Asian Americans — artists, urbanists, organizers — is stepping up to advocate for Chinatown’s future. Groups like Think!Chinatown are creating space for dialogue, cultural production, and collective memory. At one of their listening room events, sound, storytelling, and sensory memory were used as tools of preservation — a quiet, radical act of reclaiming space that acknowledged culture is not static, and that intergenerational modes of memory sharing and discussion was a vital tool to keep its spirit alive.

In conversation with architect Dong-Ping Wong (referenced later in this report), founder of FOOD New York, raises that for Chinatown to evolve, it needs to privilege the younger, creative voices in the community in order to survive and that a conscious undertaking by this generation to mark its place in Chinatown is needed.

Image caption: New York building stock with ground floor Chinatown shopfronts on Bowery
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: Fine grain shopfronts spill out onto the streets in the form of informal eating areas and outdoor display of fresh groceries
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: Current state of destruction, the site of the Megajail underway
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: A busy weekend street market takes place, filled with Chinese residents and Manhattan locals alike
Credits: Andrea Lam

Journal Note:

In Conversation with Dong-Ping Wong

The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Dong-Ping Wong at Silk Road Café in New York's Chinatown. Dong-Ping is the Founding Director of FOOD New York, a design firm based in Chinatown, and Co-Founder of Mahjong Club — a project that began as a way to invite friends back to the neighbourhood after the COVID-19 lockdown. More than just a space to play mahjong, the ongoing project seeks to rekindle appreciation for a community that continues to face the pressures of change and gentrification. He generously gave up his time and spoke about how Mahjong Club came to be, what it means to practice in Chinatown, and how he imagines its future might unfold.

ANDREA (AL) Could you please tell me a bit about yourself, who you are, and what your connection to Chinatown is?

DONG-PING WONG (DPW) I'm Cantonese, my parents are from Hong Kong and I grew up in California, so there's that ethnic connection. But for me personally, the real connection was around the 10-year mark of being in New York (I've been here for 21 years now). I remember coming back from a trip, crossing the Manhattan Bridge into the city and having that "Oh, I'm home feeling". My whole body relaxed. And I realised I'd never felt that before in my life.

So New York became really important to me because it was the first place where I felt that psychological comfort. And it was as simple as, "I could disappear if I wanted to". From there it evolved into feeling that comfort, to actually finding community and then eventually being part of a community.

I wanted to slowly understand what it was like to be in Chinatown. I moved the office here. We've had three offices in Chinatown now - and that's brought an understanding of the economic, developmental, social, political ... all the interesting and challenging aspect of this Chinatown but a lot of Chinatowns more broadly as well.

So then in itself, Chinatown became a really interesting site of research. Now it feels very much like home. I live right outside of Chinatown on the Lower East Side. My fiancé lives 15 minutes past Chinatown, so our whole lives orbit within and around this strip.

AL And do people start to see FOOD now as a 'Chinatown' office? How has it become a site of research for you? Is it through residential work? Retail?

DPW Different types, actually, some retail. One we're talking to is an arts foundation, which is really exciting. Some are installations. A lot of times, it's being part of a conversation or an interview or a panel. It was never intentional to be identified as a Chinatown office, but I always knew that if it happened, I hoped it would occur organically and I'd be very proud. So, it's nice that it's starting to happen.

AL Yeah, awesome.

Image caption: Dong-Ping Wong at SIlk Road Cafe, New York
Credits; Andrea Lam

“Mahjong Club was really important to me personally because it was like part of this larger project of my own work which was trying to figure out what an Asian American aesthetic is...”

Image caption: Mahjong Club in New York
Credits: David Chow

Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship Journal Series 2023

DPW At this point, this [Chinatown] is my favorite neighborhood. In so many ways, I think it saved my life — especially in terms of understanding what being part of a neighborhood feels like, which I never quite had before.

It also informed a lot of both our office work and my personal work around Asian American identity — thinking through what it means to build a certain type of architecture, and to explore all that. I've been very lucky to be located here.

AL I want to know a bit more about the projects that you have going on, how does the Mahjong project feed into it?

DPW It's basically just a Mahjong party that we throw. There's no set schedule. It's averaging every three or four months. Whenever we have time or a little bit of extra cash to spend on the event.

AL Does FOOD sponsor or get external funding to run these events?

DPW Slowly with each event, we end up putting in a little less than the one before either through funding, sponsors or other partners we work with, but we still put in at least half of the funds. But at least that's less than the full funding. At the same time, they're getting more elaborate and better put together so it also gets more expensive.

AL Yeah, even when I was at that Think!Chinatown event, I heard people talking about meeting through the Mahjong Club events!

DPW Oh really - that's so cool. So it started with the managing director at the office, Bella, - she was the one who actually brought up that we should play Mahjong in the office. We were just coming out of 2020, post-covid so it was about “Let's have a reason to get friends together. But we don't really have to talk to each other. We were all learning how to re-socialize. So, you can kind of hang out and have, a reason to sit around. But you didn't have to small-talk, or even, talk haha.

And then it ballooned. That was always the secret goal - to eventually build up some version of a community center with Mahjong as the Trojan horse of getting people into a place. I would love it if we could design a physical place for it.

And the test for our office was,”How is it for the public or for the community?” I wanted to make sure we could do that first. Are we even capable of putting on an event and creating a space that's welcoming? So a lot of it was just a test. And then how do we tweak it? Food's obviously very central - what do we serve? How do we even do the invites? Who do we invite? How do we make sure it's, both diverse but actually still feels really tight? All of those questions feed back into our more let's say, traditional architectural projects.

AL I love that - and what does that Mahjong club community look like? Would you say the main demographic of the people who come to your events is younger? Perhaps not the older generation that we might traditionally associate with Mahjong and Chinatown?

DPW We might have had a couple of older attendees as unintended stragglers. And I say that in the best way. Like, we love that they were there but I don't think we would have figured out how to invite them. For the most part it is our generational crowd, plus one or two degrees separation at most. It's nice that most of the people I actually don't know. It's either word of mouth or now they've seen it on Instagram. A lot of people now show up just to play. A decent amount of people are there, like, very seriously to play and then the rest are just learning or never played before or just there to socialise and hang out, get some food, so it's a good mix right now. Although it's still relatively within the same age group - roughly related to art or design or creative industry in some way - and like that New York Times[1] article you mentioned, to have a physical place for, like, just kind of the majority Asian, Asian-American creative community in real life has been really cool.

AL What I find really interesting that seems to be done really well in New York Chinatown is that using art and culture as a tool to uplift Chinatowns to bring in a new generation of an existing community that might evolve its identity. In your 10 years that you've lived here - have you noticed that shift?

DPW I think that Times article was really nice because it cemented the sense that there's a swell of relatively like-minded creative people in and around Chinatown To me, that's one of the keys to keeping Chinatown Chinatown. Chinatown needs to evolve, but it'll evolve in creative ways - ways that really privilege a younger voice.

AL I find that stance interesting as I have spoken to people working in different Chinatowns each with their own identity. For example, in Boston, it seems like the community wants to focus on tools of historical

> “Chinatown needs to evolve, but it’ll evolve in creative ways that really privilege a younger voice. Especially ones that are exploring, different identities and producing what a Chinatown can look like.”

Image caption: Mahjong Club in New York
Credits: @foodmahjong instagram

preservation - i.e. putting certain buildings on historical charters to protect them from changing and pushing for building height restrictions to prevent large scale developments from consuming Chinatown. New York feels different - the pre-existing fabric is already so dense in terms of development. Would you want to see those historical tools - zoning and heritage protections in New York? Or is that kind of change inevitable?

DPW I would love to see some level of protections for Chinatown but my main concern is protecting the people that live here as opposed to necessarily the building stock. There’s some building stock that is really worth preserving, but a lot of it in itself is not necessarily remarkable, i.e. old-school New York building stock. In an ideal world, if there is a way where the physical building stock in New York evolves, without displacing current residents with another demographic that would be great to me.

My understanding is that Chinatown especially has resisted for a long time through the Chinese family associations ownership models and that was a big reason why it’s been hard to buy those families out and develop. But a lot of those contracts are timing out in the next five years, so you can already start seeing some buildings for sale.

Naturally these families want to recoup some money, so I don’t know how you completely resist those pressures. Economically, Chinatown needs to kind of have a new, like, a next generation of what it’s about. It’d be great if it was around arts, for example. But again, can you do that without displacing people?

AL Is there a sustainable model of that?

DPW I feel like - no. Like, you don’t see a lot of models for that. Can you do that - that is an architectural challenge.

AL I completely get that. I’m coming at this from the perspective of looking at Chinatowns globally and collectively there does need to be more strategic thinking about its future identity.

You can’t ignore the reality that; yes many of these Chinatowns still house an elderly population in affordable housing, that’s great. We should be doing everything possible to make sure they can age in place for as long as possible. But at the same time, Chinatowns no longer serve as that gateway and the residential base is shrinking because of lack of succession in business tenure and the pattern that families move away to larger ‘ethnoburbs’ to start families - how can we maintain Chinatown as a place where people still find belonging?

It’s something I’ve thought about a lot. At a previous office I worked at, we were looking at refurbishing the key pedestrian strip in Sydney’s Chinatown and when we met with community stakeholders, it was interesting. They really just wanted to see more lanterns and dragons. That was the version of identity they were attached to, which is totally valid, but it raises the question: how do we support and make space for an evolving or emerging sense of identity too? It’s tricky.

DPW In these conversations, I have found myself sympathising with the ‘tourist orientalized identity of Chinatown’. At first being, “Why would you want that?” and to now understanding that it’s so unique to the US, not necessarily Chinese people but with Chinatown as a notion and having some pride in it. If you’re old generation, that identity is what allowed you to make some money and survive in Chinatown.

I was talking to my mom about this, she said “I don’t understand why you’re doing the Mahjong club - don’t gamble!” but I understand the concern, that idea of gambling and an underground ‘club’ was considered illicit. But as we started talking about it, I explained how Mahjong Club was really important to me personally because it was like part of this larger project of my own work which was like trying to figure out what an Asian American aesthetic is.

I think it’ll happen over time but I think without an identity it’s very easy for other people to co-opt it and impose their own version of identity or to lean on an outdated identity. an arts identity coming up is now solidified a little bit and it’ll hopefully keep growing, but I feel like there’s a version of Chinatown that could be known for that side of it like the creativity side of it that’d be really nice if that happened in New York.

Journal note:

2nd Annual Chinatown Solidarity Conference

When 11 October 2024
Where Welcome to Chinatown's Innovation Hub

Opened in mid-2024, the Small Business Innovation Hub is a community-driven space designed to support "empower small businesses, build bridges, and champion sustainable growth" (Welcome to Chinatown 2024). The Hub provides co-working spaces, event facilities, and incubator programs for local entrepreneurs and community organisations to come together, share resources and thrive. Welcome to Chinatown, was established as a direct response to the economic challenges and cultural disconnection exacerbated by COVID-19, aiming to create a central platform for collaboration, innovation, and storytelling within the neighborhood.

Who Over 21 Chinatowns across North America including Calgary, Honolulu, Washington DC, Phildalphia, Oakland, Vancouver, Seattle, Chicago, Las Vegas

Image caption: Closing remarks of the 2nd Annual Chinatown Solidarity Conference, hosted at Welcome to Chinatown's Innovation Hub

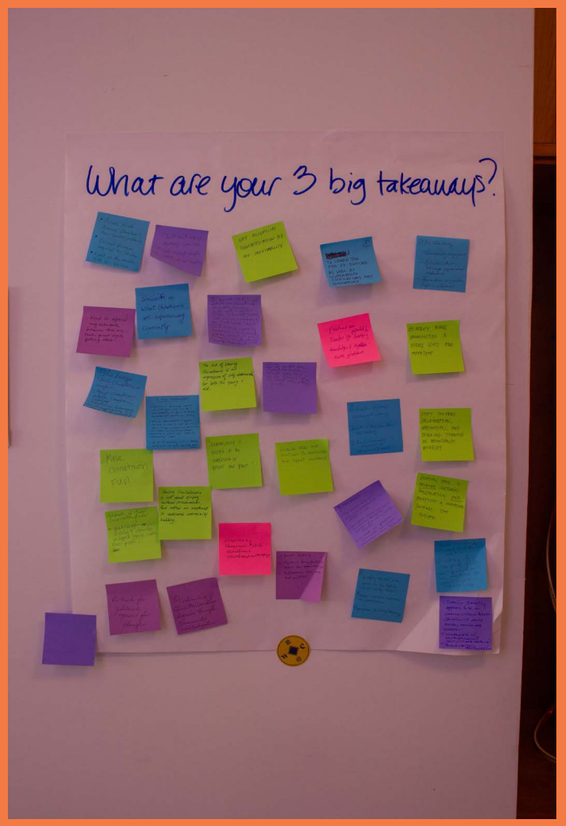

Image caption: '3 big takeaways': Key findings and call to action for attendees to take back to their respective Chinatowns.

The 2nd Annual Chinatown Solidarity Conference, hosted by Welcome to Chinatown, convened at the newly opened Innovation Hub in New York's Chinatown. The event brought together representatives from 21 Chinatowns across North America, creating a rare platform to share strategies and build collective resilience against the economic, cultural, and policy challenges affecting these historic neighborhoods. Founded in response to the xenophobic rhetoric and economic downturn during COVID-19, Welcome to Chinatown has become a key advocate for empowering local communities through data, storytelling, and grassroots organizing.

The 3-day event featured talks and workshops designed to equip community leaders with tools for advocacy and sustainable revitalization.

Key strategies discussed included:

- Fundraising and political accountability – Targeting policymakers and holding them responsible for the long-term wellbeing of Chinatown neighborhoods
- Narrative change through storytelling – Shifting public perception by amplifying positive stories and reframing Chinatown's cultural and economic value.
- Tourism and collective branding – Proposals like a "Chinatown passport" to connect visitors across different Chinatowns and position these neighborhoods as destinations for the Asian diaspora.
- Succession planning and workforce development – Addressing culinary staffing shortages by creating apprenticeships and career pathways.
- Public policy lessons – Tackling structural issues like segregation, redlining, and inequitable development policies.
- Sustainable and ethical tourism – Highlighted by Vic Lee (WTC Founder), drawing parallels to neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant in Manhattan
- Collective resistance and historical advocacy – Stories such as Denver's Chinatown highlighted how preserving history can be an act of resilience.

Closing reflections emphasized a sense of optimism: maintaining the spirit of Chinatown as a multi-generational gathering space while resisting ongoing threats like the Manhattan Jail redevelopment — a $3 billion project criticized for inadequate community benefits and projected delays.

The conference concluded with a shared call to action: to preserve the stories, spaces, and cultural legacy of Chinatowns while embracing data-driven policy, community-led tourism, and grassroots storytelling as tools for change.

5 Milan

Locating Chinatown

Milan's Chinatown is situated approximately 2.6 kilometers northwest of the main plaza Duomo and just beyond the historic Spanish walls that once delineated the urban core. Spanning around ten urban blocks, the precinct is concentrated around Via Paolo Sarpi — its principal pedestrian spine and secondary streets such as Via Antonio Rosmini, Via Giordano Bruno, Via Giuseppe Giusti, Via Aleardo Aleardi. This location, historically a semi-industrial zone characterized by silk, textile and leather workshops, (Balducci et al. 2006, 4) [1]became the site of early Chinese settlement in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly by migrants from the southern Zhejiang region of China, in the rural areas of Wenzhou, known for its tradition of entrepreneurship and artisanal manufacturing. (Balducci et al. 2006, 2-4) This population steadily grew the manufacturing businesses and attracted other adjacent businesses to supply the textile trade through the supply of metal fixing parts, sewing machines, zippers and rivets etc. This significant contribution to the economic development of the city district led to the area being recognisable as Milan's 'Chinese district".

However there came a significant turning point when the People' Republic of China ended its 30 year isolation and launched its policy of reform and open-ness, allowing migration to flow from Southern China to the West. (Manzo 2023) At the same time in Italy, there had been a decline of artisan activities and workshops, over a period of decades (1980s to 2000s) and the increased population of the Chinese migrants who settled in Milan saw an opportunity to take over the decline of these craft workshops and turn it into wholesale trade. With the expansion of local infrastructure — including Chinese real estate agencies, grocery stores,bookstores, agencies, money-transfer businesses, travel agencies, — the area supported both residential and commercial activities tied to the Chinese community. From 1984 to 2004, the Chinese population grew from 500 residents to 11,500, representing a 23-fold increase. (Kington 2007) By the early 2000s, Milan's Chinatown had become an established node in the city's multicultural landscape.

The architectural fabric of Milan's Chinatown is typical of early 20th-century Milanese working-class neighborhoods, with four to six-storey residential

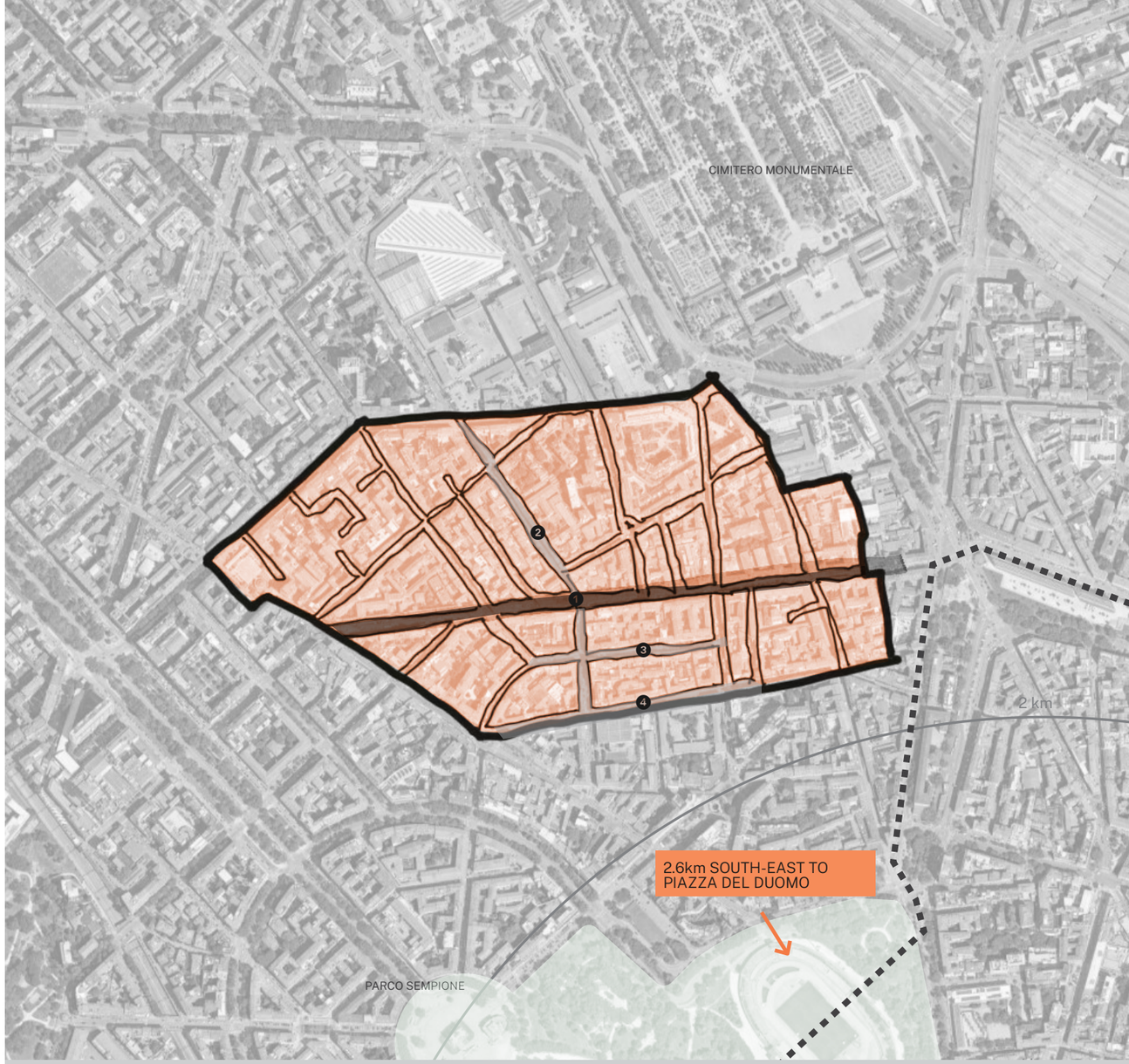

Image caption: Aerial map showing extent of Milan's Chinatown district and key streets and location within the city
Credits: Andrea Lam

100m

Key

- Milan Chinatown
- Main pedestrian strip (Via Paolo Sarpi)
- Secondary Streets
- ❶ Via Aleardo Aleardi
- ❷ Via Antonio Rosmini
- ❸ Via Giordano Bruno
- ❹ Via Giuseppe Giusti
- Former Spanish walls

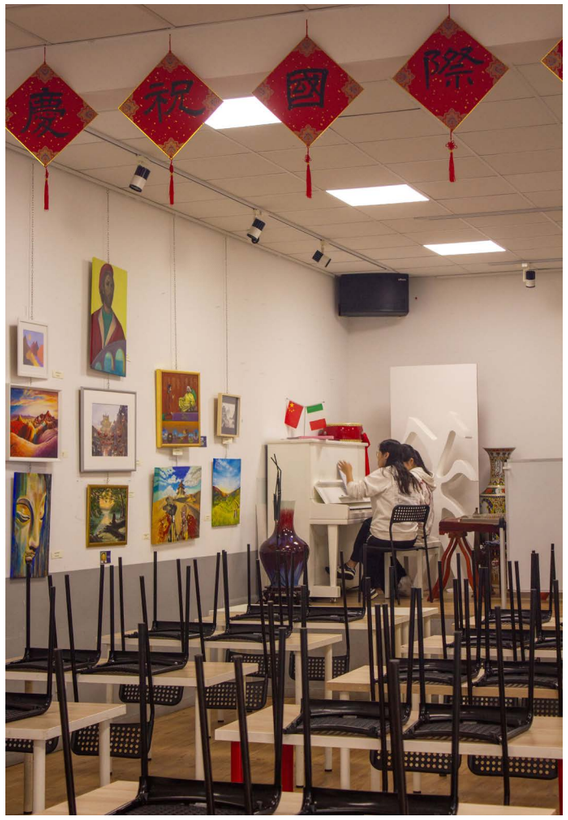

Image caption: (L to R): A quieter side street in Milan's Chinatown, Daily life continues on Via Messina with Chinese groceries serving members of the community, Centro Culturale Cinese, a Chinese cultural exchange operates in one of the courtyards off Via Paolo Sarpi where a private piano lesson takes place in a classroom
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: Via Paolo Sarpi at sundown as dumpling (Ravioli in Italian) stores begin to open up
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: Via Paolo Sarpi on the weekend with local Milanese patrons lining up for their dumplings
Credits: Andrea Lam

blocks organized around internal courtyards accessed via carriageways. At street level, the building stock is predominantly commercial, reflecting the area's evolution from small workshops to mixed-use retail and food outlets.

Walking Via Paolo Sarpi

The sun begins to dip on a Friday evening - commuters cycle past on bicycles after work, the signage of takeaway shops in Milan's Chinatown start to flicker aglow - Via Paolo Sarpi begins to open for the evening trade. Crowds made from local Milanese residents, international visitors and local students begin to line up for handmade baozi (steamed bread with filling) and fresh jianbing (savoury Chinese crepe), highlighting Milan's Chinatown as a gustatory commercial destination today.

Yet, this vibrant food scene is actually a clear marker of the profound shift in the district's identity. Until the mid-2000s, the Chinatown was characterised as a wholesale logistical area. Following PRC's open migration policies there was a sharp increase in the Chinese population in Milan, which led to an intensification of the commercial district - a constant traffic of trolleys, delivery vans, pallets of deliveries and waste.[5] - these urban grain of the narrow streets were not suitable for this level of activity. This nature of this scenario created tension between the municipal council who wanted to control the chaos, and the Chinese community who felt they were being targeted as a ethnic minority group. The escalating tensions between residents, the council, the sensationalist media and the business owners culminated the 2007 riots[6], a flashpoint in which Milan's municipal council responded with zoning changes. They introduced new traffic zoning laws and pedestrianisation of Via Paolo Sarpi, making it impossible for heavy delivery vehicles to enter the street. This decision effectively dismantled the wholesale economy and instead encouraged new forms of business to emerge. Shopfronts once stacked with wholesale goods began transforming into small eateries and takeaway outlets, redefining the street's sensory experience — from the clatter of delivery carts to the buzz of streetfood markers along Paolo Sarpi.

Beyond the main pedestrian thoroughfare of Paolo Sarpi, there are still remnants of the layered district and community. Slip through a set of heavy red doorways on Via Giordano Bruno and a Milanese courtyard opens to the Centro Culturale Cinese a Milano (f. 2017), where lantern-making workshops, language exchanges and study tour briefings bring Italian and Chinese participants together. A few doors down a modest sign notes "Hua Cheng", a restaurant serving homestyle Zhejiang cooking — seasonal greens and handmade noodles — quietly preserving regional culinary traditions amid the street's increasingly cosmopolitan crowd.

Learning from Milan's Chinatown

Unlike many other Chinatowns, Milan's precinct lacks a gate, plaque, museum or other historical defining markers, leaving its identity less legible in the contemporary urban landscape. What is most immediately visible to visitors is the food: a commercial strip rather than the deeper historical layers of labour, migration and community that once formed the district.

The Sirtori Butcher exemplifies the positive hybridisation that defines Milan's Chinatown today. Owned by Agie, a Chinese-born entrepreneur, the shop maintains its original identity as a third-generation Italian 'macelleria' run by Walter Sirtori at the street front. Yet deeper inside, patrons can sit at bar-style counters to enjoy Cantonese claypot rice and stir-fried vegetables alongside Milanese-style meatballs and ravioli. Rather than erasing tradition, this model celebrates both culinary heritages in parallel, offering a living example of how cultures can merge rapidly while retaining their distinctiveness. Agie sees this as a way of bridging gaps — an invitation for younger Chinese Italians, many of whom have little awareness of their own history, to connect with both sides of their identity through food.

Professor Daniele Brigadoi Cologna believes this kind of hybrid cultural expression underscores the need for formal recognition of Milan's Italo-Chinese heritage. He advocates for a cultural marker or museum that not only narrates the history of migration, manufacturing, and wholesale trade but also celebrates contemporary cross-cultural exchanges like Sirtori Butcher. For Cologna, this is not about erecting a symbolic gate but creating spaces that tell authentic, local stories of resilience, adaptation, and belonging.

Journal Note:

In Conversation with Dr Daniele Brigadoi Cologna

The Dr Daniele Brigadoi Cologna is an Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture at the University of Insubria and a leading scholar on Chinese migration to Italy. With decades of experience in applied social research, cultural mediation, and China studies, his work explores how migration is reshaping Italian society and identity.

We shared a homely Zhejiang meal at Hua Cheng in Milan's Chinatown - a remaining stalwart of the 1990s, and discussed the historic change the neighbourhood has gone through over the decades and the complicated nature of installing a cultural 'gateway' in Chinatown.

ANDREA LAM (AL) You've been to this restaurant before?

DR. DANIELE BRIGADOI COLOGNA (DBC) Yeah, - actually, I've known this family since they had their little kid in school because I used to be a cultural mediator. I would be helping Chinese families get through the whole process of putting their kids in school, which used to be really hard. In the 1990s and 2000s, there wasn't any real way of understanding the problems Chinese families faced at the time, so people like me were actors in between, helping them understand each other — language-wise, how to grow in school, how to enroll, and also helping schools understand the situation the family was in. Sometimes they couldn't really figure it out. The press and media at the time generally painted very horrific pictures of sweatshops, which to a certain extent was also the truth.

At that time, I was asking schools to lend me some teachers to visit the families in the sweatshops so they could see and understand the situation, so they could actually build a relationship with the parents, and kind of smooth things out. And so that's how we know each other. That was 20 years ago and the reason I wanted you to see this place is that it's like taking a time machine back to the '90s. This is what a typical Chinese restaurant at that time used to look like — 1992 to 2002. This is one of the very few left that still has the same layout, the same décor, even the same "Zhejiang" cuisine.

I wanted you to see this because the neighborhood now is so far removed from what it used to be. The way I see it, this neighborhood doesn't really have a Chinese community anymore. It's like a manifestation of something that used to be here. It's historically anchored to this place, but it's not really what it was about. But you still have some holdouts on this street.

DBC In the 1980s and '90s these streets used to be the heart of Chinatown — Via Giordano Bruno and Via Niccolò Tommaseo. But now, most of the action is on Via Paolo Sarpi, which is the main thoroughfare — and it never had any Chinese presence until the early 2000s. What you see there now — the "social media Chinatown" — is actually very recent, and mostly a creation of people who don't really live here.

AL Why did that start? Was it because Via Paolo Sarpi

Image caption: Dr Daniele Brigadoi Cologna and Agie Zhou, entrpeneur
Credits: Andrea Lam

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> “The way I see it, this neighborhood doesn’t really have a Chinese community anymore. It’s like a manifestation of something that used to be here. It’s historically anchored to this place, but it’s not really what it was about.”

just had available leases at the time?

DBC It’s an interesting and complicated story. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Chinese migration started to build up, this neighborhood still had many Chinese manufacturing activities — sweatshops that mostly produced plastic and leather bags. The whole neighbourhood was a manufacturing district.

However - the neighborhood itself was still very much a Milanese Italian neighborhood, but only at the street level. Underground, you had workshops and small factories. and a few shops and restaurants run by Chinese people. The main thoroughfare, Via Paolo Sarpi, was a big shopping street — not high-end, but not low-end either - it was popular with shoppers.

Then, from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, more Chinese migrants from Zhejiang started arriving. They needed groceries and services catered to them. That’s when the neighborhood began to grow and spread out, and became more oriented to a Chinese clientele. That phase lasted about ten years.

Then things changed again. The area became too expensive for new Chinese migrants, and the manufacturing sector collapsed. It just disappeared. People who had been living here either moved to other neighborhoods or opened different kinds of shops. Many realized import-export trading was more profitable, opening small shops — now mostly gone — that sold knick-knacks and goods for open-air markets. In Italy, each neighborhood has a weekly open-air market. Market traders from all over northern Italy came to buy wholesale from these Chinese-run shops in Milan’s back alleys.

This shift happened in the mid-2000s and lasted until the mid-2010s. During that time, conflict in the neighborhood escalated. Residents started complaining: “What are these shops? They don’t cater to us. The streets are always crowded with delivery carts. People come here, buy things, and leave.” Local businesses that served residents began closing, one after another. Many Chinese traders would offer to buy them out in cash, saying, “You’ve got a barbershop? I’ll take it off your hands — it’s more valuable to me.”

Residents complained the shops didn’t serve them, and the streets were clogged with delivery carts. Local businesses closed, often sold in cash to Chinese traders who repurposed them profitably.

It wasn’t an “invasion,” despite media narratives. Many Italian shops were already failing, and the Chinese filled the gap. But by the mid-2010s, residents felt the area was no longer theirs. Most traders weren’t locals but immigrants from China, Bangladesh, and North Africa.

Things really started to change when the city council pedestrianized Via Paolo Sarpi. That move made the area less appealing to traders dependent on heavy street traffic and logistics.

That’s when some people — like one of my closest friends — saw an opportunity. He was the first to open a street food outlet on Via Paolo Sarpi, selling dumplings. It was a huge success. Others followed his lead and shut down their import-export businesses to focus on food instead. Import-export wasn’t doing so well anymore, especially after COVID. It just collapsed. Street food became the new thing. Did you manage to explore the area a bit over the past few days?

AL Yeah, I took a walk around here and observed it was almost exclusively takeaway food and bev, a very specific type of commercial activity, and not the kind of Chinatown most people imagine. I was recently in San Francisco, yeah, very different because so many residents still live there. There’s a lot of affordable housing with servicing for those residents, so you can still get the the feeling there of an ethic enclave.

DBC That’s something you almost never see in Italy — except in Prato. If you have a chance to go there, it would make for a really interesting comparison. It’s so different. This place is the only one around here that still vaguely resembles that kind of community. You still hear people speaking in Yongning dialect, which is almost gone from the streets. These days, you mostly hear Putonghua.

AL Actually, when I was in San Francisco, I started writing a short article about how I realised I was in Chinatown simply because of the languages I heard — like Cantonese.

DBC You don’t hear any Canonese in Italy. They’re very different.

AL And that’s been really interesting to observe — it’s clearly just a different period of migration but now that’s different. Is there a Chinese community living here in the area anymore?

DBC There are areas where some Chinese live, but not as a cohesive community. Some neighborhoods attracted Chinese residents because housing was cheaper, but they also attracted many other immigrant groups. So, you can’t really say that Boise today is a “new Chinatown” — that doesn’t make sense because you don’t see any clear ethnic markers.

Most Chinese people today live in the northern part of Milan. If people need basic services like going to the doctor or grocery shopping, there isn’t necessarily one particular place they all go to. For example, there used to be a doctor here who had a Chinese nurse, and that drew many Chinese patients throughout the 2000s and 2010s. But that has lessened because most hospitals in Milan now have linguistic or cultural mediators on call for Chinese-speaking patients.

As for groceries, there are Chinese-run supermarkets in almost every neighborhood now, so the need isn’t really here like it used to be.

AL You mentioned conversations about what a cultural marker for Milan Chinatown might be — whether one should exist and what form it should take?

DBC Personally, I agree that we need something like that and I have business-oriented Chinese-Italian friends who feel the same way - for example a cultural market or space to come together. At the same time, I worry that with how things are evolving, there’s little awareness — even among Chinese residents — about the historical significance of this neighborhood. When people talk about a marker now, it’s mostly about them, about contemporary Chinese identity overseas, and it’s closely connected to current politics in China. It’s much less about the neighborhood’s historical relevance, and that’s something I find a bit sad.

Preserving those stories is essential, especially as older generations pass on. Without documentation — written or otherwise — they risk disappearing. That’s why I’m working on an English translation of a book I wrote on the community’s origins, which I also hope to publish in Chinese so it’s accessible locally.

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“That’s why the thing about a gate or arch or permanent cultural market is so complicated. By putting up that arch it is a very definitive kind of move. You’ve made a decision about what an identity is. And this decision matters. The question is: what are you actually trying to say?”

My friend Agie says it’s such a shame that young people - the third generation Chinese here, they don’t understand how much this part of town connects to their own family histories. And unfortunately, without a push for recognition, it’s very unlikely to happen from the top down.

I’ve told him I would fully support a Chinese-Italian museum here, but the initiative has to come from the community. Many first-generation migrants either don’t know or avoid that history because it was painful. They’ll say, “Why remember when life was so hard?” But I tell them, “That’s exactly why — it’s the root of your success.”

As an Italian, I see that history as proof the Chinese community is deeply rooted here. It’s a story of belonging — one that shows the Chinese are not outsiders, but part of our shared society.

AL Yes. I saw that you were involved with the Italo-Chinese Unity organization. What is the purpose of that group? Is it mainly to foster economic ties, or does it have other goals as well?

DBC Well, I’m in a group of people who define themselves as Chinese Italians, Italian-Chinese, or Chinese in Italy — everyone has their own definition. But what they share is the idea that identity can’t be reduced to just “Chineseness.” As soon as you immigrate, there’s a hybrid kind of identity. This isn’t something the first-generation migrants or community organisations really relate to. They don’t understand why being “Chinese” isn’t enough. But for these younger people, it isn’t enough. They say, “I was born and raised here — I can’t ignore that.”

They’re not pushing an agenda. They just want to think together and build from there.

Myself, as a non-Chinese, I don’t have an agenda either — except that I want the definition of Italian-ness to expand. It should be open to hyphenation, to accommodate new articulations of Italian identity. I do have skin in the game, because I’m one of the people who knows this history well.

That’s why the thing about a gate or arch or permanent cultural market is so complicated. By putting up that arch it is a very definitive kind of move. You’ve made a decision about what an identity is. And this decision matters. The question is: what are you actually trying to say? Is this a statement about being a newfangled tourist attraction? A business gesture? A signal of Chinese national pride? Or does it reflect a deeper Italian-Chinese history? Those are completely different things. Those are completely different things.

AL It’s an issue that historic Chinatowns are still grappling with - I was recently in New York, and the New York Chinatown doesn’t actually have any formal cultural markers. I went to a nonprofit organization working in the area, and the local government had gone through a competition design process to try to design a marker. Strangely, they ended up engaging an Australian-Chinese artist — she’s quite well known in Australia — her name’s Lindy Lee. I really like her work, but it just felt a bit odd. People were asking, why her? She doesn’t even come from the same places most of the Chinese community in New York comes from. She’s not from Fujian or Taishanese, and that made it feel disconnected and there was a lot of confusion from the community. It looked strange. And of course, with anything like this, you’re always going to get reactions like, “This doesn’t represent my Chinatown.” That’s the challenge — they’re not going to get it right for everyone.

DBC Yeah, you know, with American Chinatowns, you have so many layers, because one could even question the idea of celebrating Chinatowns. I mean, they started out as ghettos. For sure. So, do you want to celebrate ghettos? Or is it rather more about wanting to memorialize them in some way?

AL From the chats that I’ve had — people seem to be celebrating their resilience and survival. Like, yes, originally it was a ghetto, and it existed because of very racist, discriminatory policies. It meant you could only live in certain areas and hold certain types of employment — especially in San Francisco - they’re very proud of how they’ve been able to rebrand themselves.

DBC But it makes you think. One thing that struck me about San Francisco was the way it was designed — even the arch itself. It was the brainchild of white American architects. They were doing it purposefully, and it had nothing to do with Chinese representation. Back then, it wasn’t even a representation — it was based on some random historical reference. It was such an afterthought that you’d question whether that should be a model for something being done here.

Why do we choose that as a model? Why do we see that as a model? Or you can look at other places in Europe, like Soho in London or Amsterdam. In London, you do have memorial arches or markers of some kind. Not really in Amsterdam, but in Amsterdam, you have a panel or a few buildings that would be considered Chinese-style, so to speak. But if we make a conscious decision to see those things as models, we should also reflect on what they were models of — what thinking went into putting those markers up in the first instance.

There definitely should be reflection, especially if we have the benefit of seeing what has gone before. The way this discussion is brought up in China and among the first-generation community association elders — it’s not deep thinking. What they do is simply say, “Oh, this is just something to say that this part is very Chinese,” and you’re left thinking, well, explain — Chinese in what way?

Plus, whenever they say things like that, I’m always struck by the way the whole Italian aspect of the story is left out. If you study the history of the Chinese ethnicity, you’ll see that the whole first generation of Chinese migrants was mixed. All those Chinese men who came over in the 1920s and 1930s married Italian women. So, where is that story? Where is that history? And that story is continuing, because if you look at the data today, most marriages registered in Italy — officially registered — are mixed marriages. Of course, we know that many unofficial marriages are unregistered and only celebrated in Chinese, but still, the data is strong. They show that every year, you have hundreds of mixed marriages. That is part of the history. So where do we celebrate it? What space do we assign to it?

The above transcipt has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Image caption: Saturday lines outside Macelleria, a butcher in Milan's Chinatown operating simultaneously as an Italian butcher and a Chinese claypot restaurant
Credits: Andrea Lam

7

Port Louis

Locating Chinatown

Tucked between the waterfront of Port Louis, Mauritius and the bustling markets of the capital city is one of the smaller and lesser-known Chinatowns in the world. Port Louis' Chinatown is one of the oldest in Africa, with the arrival of the first Chinese traders dating back to the late 18th century (Siew and Éditions VIZAVI 2016, 20). The first wave of Chinese migrants arrived from the Fujian province as maritime traders, attracted by Mauritius' strategic location as a port in the Indian Ocean. These early traders were soon followed by a larger group of Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Guangdong in the early 19th century, many of whom transitioned from trading to establishing small retail shops and workshops in Port Louis. (Eriksen 2020, 67)

By the mid-19th century, Port Louis' Chinatown had taken shape as a modest commercial hub where Hakka and Cantonese migrants clustered together, largely as traders, herbalists, and shopkeepers. The district spans approximately 4–5 city blocks in the city centre, concentrated around Rue Royale, near the Caudan waterfront and just south of the Central Market. Its building stock is predominantly two to three storeys, with narrow frontages and deep-plan shop-houses topped by residential quarters. The architectural language blends French colonial masonry, Creole timber fretwork, and Chinese ornamentation — a hybrid typology reflective of Mauritius' multicultural fabric. Most buildings are not formally heritage listed, but many date to the early 1900s and exhibit colonial-era details such as high ceilings, verandahs, and arcaded footpaths.

Walking Port Louis' Chinatown

Vendors stand on shaded stoops selling incense, steaming buns, and jars of herbal remedies, the aromas mingling with the salty air drifting in from the nearby waterfront. The colonial-era buildings — many in faded pastel hues — line narrow pavements, their façades marked by weathered heritage signage that feels like a portal to another era. Wooden shutters creak open above intricate balcony screens, tiled cornices catch the sunlight, and arcaded verandahs offer moments of shade. Walking here is like stepping into a quieter rhythm of Port Louis: calm, but not desolate.

At one end of the precinct sits the Sinfa Chinese Middle School, its pastel façade a familiar landmark.

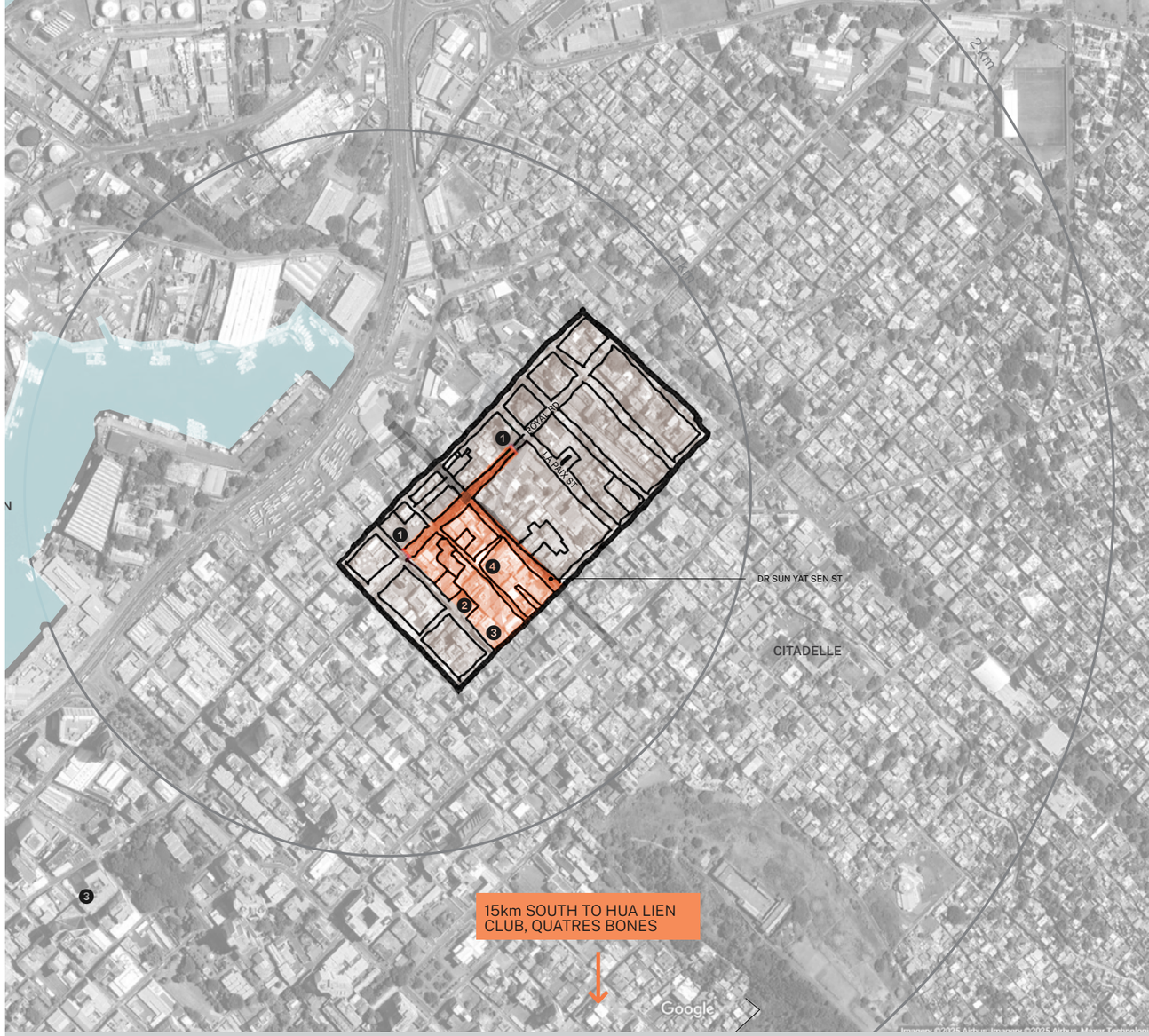

Image caption: Aerial map showing extent of Port Louis Mauritius' Chinatown district and key streets and locations within the city
Credits: Andrea Lam

100m

Key

- Port Louis Chinatown
- Key streets
- ❶ Chinatown Gates
- ❷ Heen Foh Hall
- ❸ Chinese Middle School
- ❹ Nam Shun Hall / Heritage Court
- Chinatown Gates

Image caption: Western Chinatown Gates along Royal Road, Port Louis.
Credits: Andrea Lam

The future of Chinatown hinges on the ability of the younger generations to create a new dynamic

Inside, students are immersed in lessons that span traditional Chinese instruments, calligraphy, painting, and language. Around the corner, a narrow back passage leads to a second-floor balcony where older men gather, playing cards and sipping tea while looking out over Rue Royale. Nearby, the Poo Yeng Centre occupies a multi-storey building that has been adaptively reused for social and cultural programming. Here, a young Mauritian choreographer leads a Chinese dance class for middle-aged Sino-Mauritian women, their laughter filling the hall. These social spaces, though modest and tucked away, are vital community anchors. In the absence of large-scale institutions, they quietly sustain a sense of continuity and belonging for the Chinese-Mauritian diaspora.

The sensory character of Chinatown is just as layered as its architecture. On a busy weekend, the air is perfumed with the unmistakable fragrance of boulettes (steamed dumplings) simmering in broth at small street-side stalls. Menus now often feature creative hybrids — bao with Creole spiced fillings, or noodle soups infused with local herbs — that speak to the broader Mauritian gustatory scene and its cultural mélange. This fusion is emblematic of how Port Louis Chinatown has evolved: its architecture, like its cuisine, adapts to its context. Shop-houses originally designed for trade and living now accommodate cultural clubs, cafés, and multipurpose spaces. Their narrow footprints, verandahs, and deep interiors are remarkably flexible, able to hold both intimate rituals and public-facing events.

This adaptability of the built fabric offers a quiet lesson: the success of Chinatown is not only about preserving façades, but about enabling spaces where the community's evolving cultural expressions can flourish. As author Pascale Siew notes, "The future of Chinatown hinges on the ability of the younger generations to create a new dynamic" (VIZAVI 2016). In Port Louis, this dynamic is already emerging through hybrid food culture, cultural classes, and adaptive reuse of heritage buildings — small yet potent spatial acts of renewal that honour the past while making room for the future.

Learning from Mauritius

The success of Mauritius' Chinatown is not found solely within its streets and laneways, but rather in the hidden halls and community spaces that sustain the Chinese-Mauritian diaspora — often well beyond the traditional boundaries of Chinatown itself.

Image caption: Students at the weekend Chinese Middle School learning calligraphy and painting,
Credits: Andrea Lam

In Quatres Bornes, several kilometres south of Port Louis, the Hua Lien Club exemplifies this dynamic. Founded to promote Chinese culture and the spirit of solidarity, the club has evolved into a multi-functional community hub. It plays host to cultural food festivals, line-dancing classes, third-age university courses in music and yoga, and continues to be the largest Chinese club on the island, with over 1,600 members. While not physically located within Chinatown, the club demonstrates how providing flexible, well-programmed spaces can extend the cultural life of a community even as its residents disperse geographically.

Mauritius highlights the importance of investing in distributed community infrastructure. Rather than relying solely on a concentrated enclave, purpose-built or adaptively reused halls and clubs can act as cultural anchors wherever communities live. These spaces become critical repositories of cultural memory, offering affordable venues for intergenerational gathering, festivals, and educational programming. Creating adaptable, multipurpose spaces like Hua Lien Club provides the physical framework for that dynamic to flourish, regardless of whether Chinatown's traditional street grid remains the community's core.

Image caption: Hua Lien Club holds frequent line dancing classes during the week
Credits: Andrea Lam

Image caption: Stephen Ah-Sen (choreographer and dance teacher) takes a class through a traditional Chinese dance class at Nam Shun Hall)
Credits: Andrea Lam

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8 Key findings

Learning from Chinatowns

The Chinatown case studies investigated in this reports howcase the diverse nature of these enclaves - they each have their own identities and are balancing different forces of gentrification, displacement and change to keep their communities thriving. The question posed at the beginning of this research journey - "What can architecture do to ensure their future" does not have a one-size fits all answer but the case studies suggest that a combination of spatial strategies and urban design tools can play a vital role in sustaining communities.

Invest in housing

This argument is not groundbreaking and is an applicable statement in any strategy to make our cities more equitable. Nevertheless, the most vibrant Chinatowns — San Francisco, Boston, and New York — share a density of affordable, rent-controlled housing integrated directly into their urban fabric. Buildings with residential units stacked above active commercial ground planes create 24-hour occupancy that supports both community safety and economic vitality. This housing model must be reinforced through architectural and planning policy. Adaptive reuse of underutilised buildings, protection of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing stock, and the integration of new affordable housing developments into the historic street grid are all key tools. In Boston, the success of the Chinatown Community Land Trust in securing permanently affordable housing — including the transformation of the historic Oxford Ping On building — demonstrates how community stewardship can anchor long-standing residents. Ethnic community development organisations, Meanwhile, San Francisco's Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC) maintains over 30 properties, embedding community services like youth programs and food pantries directly within housing blocks. These models must be reinforced through planning policy, such as adaptive reuse of underutilised buildings, protection of SRO stock, and requirements for affordable housing to be embedded within the historic street grid. By ensuring residents live within walking distance of shops, restaurants, and cultural venues, the street level effectively becomes an extension of the home — a collective living room and kitchen that activates the ground plane throughout the day

Inclusive markers of heritage

Chinatowns are physical archives of migration history, and their architectural language must continue to reflect this. The absence of gateways, plaques, or heritage-protected buildings in Milan makes the district's historical identity especially vulnerable. Urban planners and architects can address this by introducing culturally-sensitive interventions: adaptive reuse of historic buildings, interpretive signage, or micro public spaces that allow for storytelling and cultural programming.

Importantly, these markers need not rely solely on traditional "oriental" motifs. In New York, a community-led design process is underway to create a new gateway that balances heritage symbolism with a contemporary design that resonates with the citizens of today. In San Francisco, Portsmouth Square's planned redesign includes layered histories told through landscape and material expression — ensuring that even civic spaces contribute to place-based storytelling. Design charrettes and community co-design processes can ensure such interventions are place-specific rather than decorative. As John Liu has posed "How can the labels [of Chinatown] be renewed and serve as beacons of ethnic pride and possibility when they originate out of a racist and discriminatory legacy?" (Liu, n.d.)

The grand interiors of Chinatowns

While Chinatown's streets and squares serve as visible community stages, its interior spaces are equally crucial. Multi-functional halls, schools, and cultural centres often act as flexible gathering spaces that host language classes, exercise groups, cultural banquets, and festivals.

Urban strategies should acknowledge and strengthen these interior spaces as anchors of community life. In Port Louis' Chinatown, public schools and private banquet halls and malls fulfil this role but often lack resources for maintenance or expansion. City funding could incentivise upgrading these interiors or embed community-use spaces within mixed-use developments. In San Francisco, the Chinese Culture Center's Edge on the Square demonstrates how strong cultural interior programs that have a symbiotic relationship with the street can amplify cultural exchange and neighborhood engagement

How can the labels [of Chinatown] be renewed and serve as beacons of ethnic pride and possibility when they originate out of a racist and discriminatory legacy?

Zoning incentives could encourage developers to incorporate community halls, kitchens, or flexible studio spaces into new projects, ensuring that these often-overlooked “interior commons” remain part of Chinatown’s identity.

Creative, young & hybrid

The emergence of creative and hybrid spaces points to a promising architectural strategy for revitalising Chinatowns. San Francisco’s “Edge on the Square” demonstrates the power of strategically locating cultural spaces with strong corner or plaza relationships to public open space. These facilities attract younger, more diverse audiences while remaining rooted in the community.

In New York’s Chinatown, emergent venues and advocacy groups like Welcome to Chinatown or Think!Chinatown activate storefronts as multipurpose spaces — part gallery, part community kitchen, part cultural archive. These venues foster experimentation while meeting urgent local needs. In Milan, the Italo-Chinese hybrid butcher-restaurant demonstrates the economic potential of combining cultural specificity with contemporary retail experiences, challenging stereotypes of what a Chinatown business can be. Architects and urban planners can nurture this hybridity by designing flexible ground-floor spaces that accommodate evolving uses and by supporting small-scale interventions — pop-up galleries, night markets, shared kitchens — that allow cultural and entrepreneurial experimentation without displacing existing communities.

Image caption: SF Chinatown, Intersection of California and Grant Street, looking down the 'retail' street popularised by the rows of overhead lanterns
Credits: Andrea Lam

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Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship Journal Series 2023

8 About the Author

Andrea Lam is an architect at SJB Sydney. Her professional experience includes working closely with local councils, arts organisations, and stakeholder groups to develop briefs that respond to place and cultural context. Previous experience in projects range from the small: exhibitions and furniture, to schools and galleries, to multi-residential dwellings and precincts.

Andrea is also a casual academic, currently teaching a professional practice subject at the University of Technology Sydney, guiding students through the ethical, legal, and collaborative dimensions of architectural practice. Her teaching is grounded in real-world experience and encourages critical reflection on the role of the architect in shaping socially responsive environments.

Her project, @chinatown.atlas, celebrates the diversity of multicultural communities in space and how design and architecture can be a catalyst for articulating identity. Andrea previously worked at Sibling Architecture where she collaborated on the concept design for Dixon Street's Chinatown revitalisation alongside ASPECT Studios, Yu& Mei and the City of Sydney. This research grew from a personal connection to Chinatown and a desire to understand how we can ensue these cultural anchors in our cities continue to thrive.

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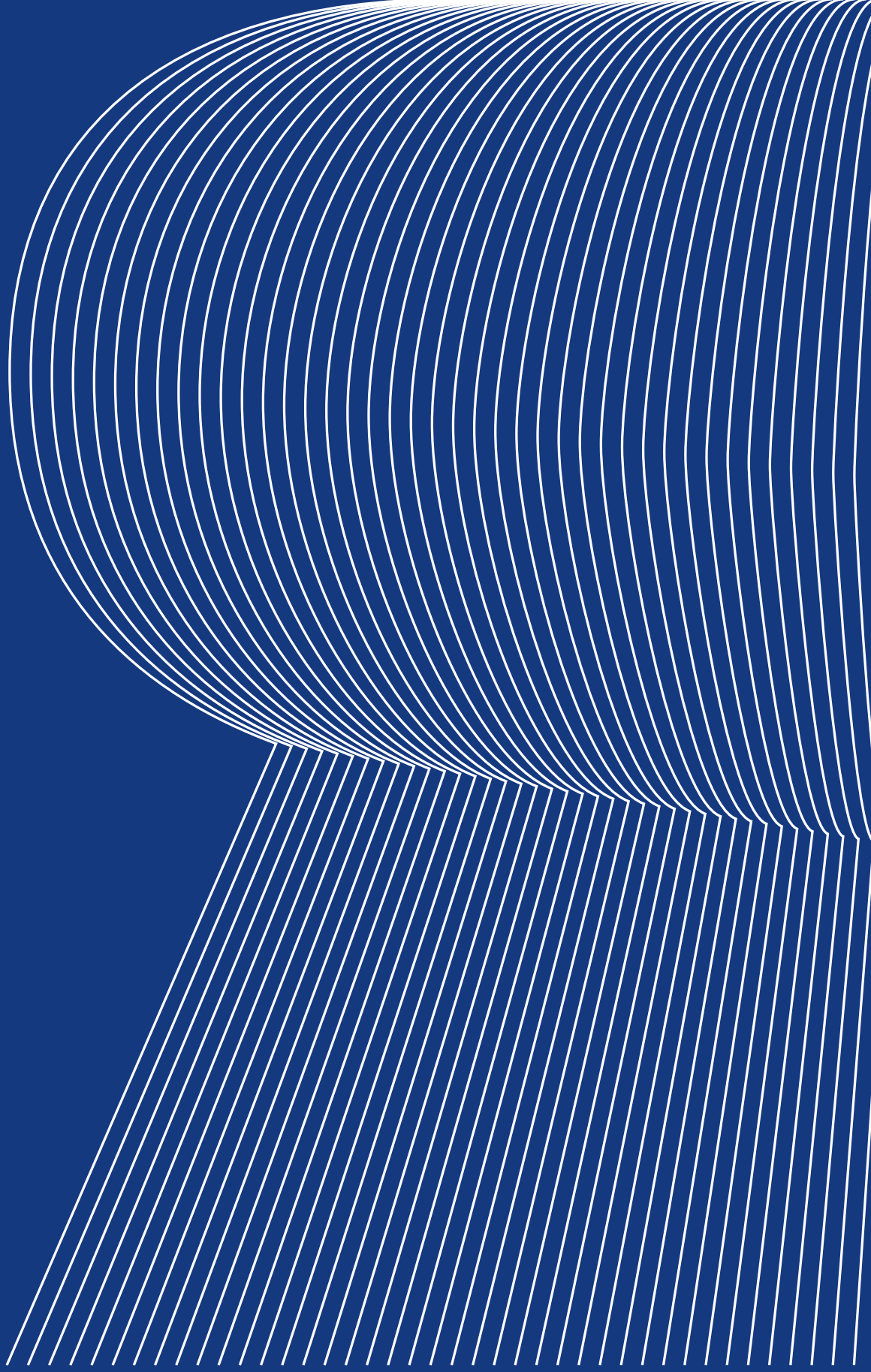

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