

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: UNDER THE ARCH OF FRIENDSHIP:  
CULTURE, URBAN REDEVELOPMENT  
AND SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE IN D.C.  
CHINATOWN, 1970s-1990s.

Evelyn Khoo, Master of Arts in History, 2009

Directed By: Professor James Z. Gao, History

This thesis explores the history of the urban development and architectural changes in Washington, D.C. Chinatown in the late twentieth century. Urban development in D.C. Chinatown traces the way in which local politics, ethnic community elites and the larger international backdrop of geopolitics and the globalizing economy found expression in the visual streetscapes and architecture in the neighborhood perceived to be a predominantly ethnic site. This essay argues that the case of D.C. Chinatown represents a larger call for a spatial turn in Chinese American history, where more emphasis can be placed on the uses of symbolic architecture in determining Chinese American identity and settlement.

UNDER THE ARCH OF FRIENDSHIP:  
CULTURE, URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND SYMBOLIC ARCHITECTURE  
IN D.C. CHINATOWN, 1970s-1990s.

By

Evelyn Khoo

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History  
2009

Advisory Committee:  
Professor James Z. Gao, Chair  
Professor Lisa Rose Mar  
Professor David Freund

© Copyright by  
Evelyn Khoo  
2009

## Table of Contents

Introduction: D.C. Chinatown, Then and Now .....	1
Chapter 1: Saving Chinatown, 1970s.....	22
Chapter 2: Designing Chinatown, late 1980s .....	40
Chapter 3: Globalizing Chinatown: Building the Friendship Arch, 1986 .....	54
Chapter 4: Selling Chinatown, 1990s .....	67
Conclusion: Reading Chinatown Architecture .....	82
Bibliography .....	86



## Introduction: D.C. Chinatown, Then and Now

Just off the National Mall, in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C., many tourists take a quick break from the rounds of monuments by having lunch at the area around 7<sup>th</sup> and H Street, NW. Known as Gallery Place/Chinatown by the red line Metro hub that disgorges crowds of people at regular intervals, the small six-block radius of commercial frontage is lined with restaurants such as Legal Seafoods, or clothing chains like Urban Outfitters. At the busiest intersection, a big screen television monitor blares a constantly changing slideshow of commercial and news. The bright lights of the television monitor and the flash of car headlights as they stream continuously down H Street, reflect off the saffron tiles of the giant, Chinese archway that spans 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Echoing the Chinese script on the Archway, every store, from CVS to Hooters, has an adjoining street sign declaring its Chinese name. This is a brief but brightly lit snapshot of Washington D.C.'s Chinatown today, in 2009, with its strange intermingling of overt Chineseness laid atop commercial chain stores. But if we rewind the camera of time, about forty years ago, the same strip of downtown D.C. would be a far cry from the bustling commercial center it is today. Instead, there would be quiet, empty streets with older Chinese men sitting on their stoops playing *fan-tan*, or watching from their small apartment windows at an empty lot, where Chinese teenagers play volleyball on the weekends.<sup>1</sup> If it were a Sunday, we would hear the African American church choirs singing, in the Turner African Memorial Episcopal Church or New Hope Baptist. In between hymns, we might see and feel the rumble of an occasional large truck as it drives down 'furniture row,'

---

<sup>1</sup> Betty Medsger, "Chinatown Not Home to Most Chinese," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1972.

where Leon Weinraub, among other merchants, have had their furniture stores, some open and bustling, others closed and their space for rent, for the last twenty-five years. What happened in the last forty years to turn this scene in 1972 of small stores and crumbling rowhouses into the flashy commercial success it is today? This essay will attempt to replay the camera of time and focus, as we roll slowly over the decades between the 1970s to the 1990s, on the many people, players, emotions and motivations that transformed this place in D.C. called Chinatown.

The period of the 1970s to the 1990s marked a time of incredible building and development in Chinatown. However, what makes this period particularly intriguing is that this commercial development became wrapped up in the blanket of ethnic pride and cultural tourism via public facades. Why did the D.C. government pursue efforts to partner with the Chinese community despite the fact that it was one of the smallest Chinatowns in the country?<sup>2</sup> In this essay, we will try to answer this question by examining some of the more compelling aspects of this partnership – the institution of Chinatown design guidelines that required developers to submit their blueprints to a panel which then decided if they had enough Chinese elements in their proposed designs, to the construction of the D.C. Friendship Archway, which was partly funded by the Beijing government through the auspices of the D.C. mayor of the time, Marion Barry. We will also take a look at the hidden tensions between factions within the community. These factions include the pro-Taiwan and pro-Beijing Chinese immigrants, the historic preservationists who included part of Chinatown in the downtown Historic District application, to the various merchants

---

<sup>2</sup> Steven Knipp, “Lost in Transformation: Can A Tiny American Chinatown Survive Its Success?” *Pacific News Service*, May 12, 2005.

along 7<sup>th</sup> Street, some of whom opposed and some of whom welcomed the promise of development. Although we will be training our lenses closely on this particular case study of D.C. Chinatown, we will also bring in to bear the larger forces of the time period, as well as take into consideration the historical literature, to better understand why people might have acted and reacted the way they did.

There are many strands interwoven in this story of commercial development and cultural preservation and it behooves us to begin with an understanding of where these multiple historical writings intersect. The historical literature on Chinatowns, Washington, D.C. as well as architectural urban history all provide some useful analytical tools with which to view D.C. Chinatown but each strand fails to take into consideration some aspect of the story of D.C. Chinatown and its positioning in the larger story of cities, Chinese communities and the symbolic uses of public architecture.

Although the literature on Chinatown and Washington, D.C. provide a useful, historical context for our study of D.C. Chinatown, neither of these fields reflect upon D.C. Chinatown's marketed ethnicity and how the preservation of Chinatown expressed itself in the form of architectural and visual elements. It is instead, in a few and scattered essays in the field of architectural history that the first forays into understanding this spatial aspect of Chinatown history is begun. This essay will attempt to knit these strands together to better understand the particular case of D.C. Chinatown and how its story can fill a niche in the larger narrative of immigrant ethnic communities and their contested spaces.

## Writing Washington, D.C. History

Before we adjust our analytical lenses to zoom in on the case of D.C. Chinatown in particular, it will be helpful to zoom out and look at how the experiences of the Chinese community fit into the larger physical community of DC itself.

The historical literature of Washington, D.C. is rife with books discussing the creation of the capital, the prime example of people seeking to create in a physical space an idea and a mythology. In Fergus M. Bordewich's "Washington: The Making of the American Capital," which represents the most recent in a long string of popular history books focusing on the 18<sup>th</sup> century plans for Washington, D.C., Bordewich writes:

"the invention of Washington, D.C. is in part a soaring story of national aspiration, in part a cautionary tale of the first great land-grabbing boondoggle in American history and in part a grim record of slavery's buried history. It is much more than the story of the mere physical construction of a city where none existed before...ultimately it is an epic tale of the often faltering, sometimes delusional, and ultimately triumphant quest to create the *first great physical symbol* [italics added] of the nation's identity."<sup>3</sup>

Bordewich's book understands in depth the uses of space and architecture, as part of the quest to create a sense of identity and informs much of the history written about Washington, D.C. However, very little is actually written about the actual residents and communities living in Washington, D.C. Much is made of the statesmen who sought to create the monuments and federal buildings that represent American ideals today, but there is not as much on the smaller neighborhoods or communities actually

---

<sup>3</sup> Fergus M. Bordewich, *Washington: The Making of an American Capital* (New York: Amistad Press, 2008), p9.

living and working in D.C. Although Bordewich's book does try to untangle the buried history of slavery in Washington, it is does so to uncover their part in creating the mythical, federal Washington, not to tell their story as their lived experience in Washington, D.C.

David Lewis's "District of Columbia, A Bicentennial History," does a better job, in 1976, in telling the hidden story of Washington's residential communities. In his book, written as part of a larger project, organized by the American Association for State and Local History, he pays greater attention to the people actually living in Washington, D.C. in the section titled "Behind the Marble Mask," where Lewis consciously references the tendency of scholars and visitors alike, to see only the federal history and experience of Washington via its marble monuments and buildings. This effort to expand upon the local history of Washington turns its attention to the African American lived experience in Washington, noting the changes in demographic and land use in Logan Circle, for instance. Although Lewis's history does an admirable job of uncovering the much neglected history of the significant and historic African American population in the city, Lewis does not, in 1976, pay much attention to the other ethnic minorities or other residential groups also prevalent in D.C.

It is however, Francine Curro Cary's compilation of historical essays that make up the book, "Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital," that is the seminal work that does justice in writing the histories of the multiple ethnic communities present in Washington, D.C. Again, Cary unconsciously references the

symbolic importance of the built environment when telling the history of Washington, D.C:

“interspersed among the national monuments and federal buildings that dot the urban landscape of Washington are other institutions – both religious and secular – that stand as silent sentinels in a city whose role as the nation’s capital has eclipsed its own history. If these structures of myriad purpose, lineage and architecture could speak, they would tell the untold stories of the community-building efforts of thousands of migrants and immigrants who came to Washington in search of opportunity, and stayed to shape the social fabric of an evolving city and changing region.”<sup>4</sup>

Cary’s compilation encompasses a broad sweep of communities: the first section telling the story of Native Americans, African Americans and Irish merchants who were living in the area before D.C. became the capital. The second section, the largest section of the book, is titled “Race, Ethnicity, Class and Community Building,” tracing the hectic nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the origins of multiple immigrant communities, from the Germans, the Jewish, the Greek to the Chinese. This section is the one that most compellingly portrays the book’s claim that “the common thread...is the quest for community, a quest embodied in efforts to transplant cultural traditions and rebuild familiar social networks, rituals and support institutions on unfamiliar terrain.”<sup>5</sup>

One can thus see this shift towards telling local history, and within that, of its social and cultural landscapes, as particularly distinct during the more recent era of the 1990s and 2000s. However, although the study of D.C. Chinatown would fall within that trend of looking to expand upon local social and cultural history, the case of D.C. Chinatown also reflects upon the growing need to understand the importance

---

<sup>4</sup> Francine Curro Cary, ed., *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation’s Capital*, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Books, 1996), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, xiv

of symbolic architecture in local history and urban minority populations' desire to create community via myth-making architecture. Thus, this study will be able to fill in the gap of the story of the D.C.'s Chinese community in both Chinatown and D.C. historical literature. In doing so, this study's focus on the role of architecture in the redevelopment of D.C. Chinatown will also help to expand the repertoire of analytical tools, to use the visual streetscape to tell a fuller story of a community. Thus, to respond to Cary's introduction, who wishes that these "silent sentinels...could speak," this essay argues that they can and will speak of a rich cultural and complex history, if we ask the right questions.

### **A Spatial Turn in Chinese American History?**

Architecture as a form of cultural expression and myth-making thus should not be solely the purview of the European mainstream, as dictated by the lists of the National Register of Historic Places, which seems to imply, given the dominance of its chosen buildings, that a place is historic when it is important in the European narrative of American history. We need to become more aware of the visual streetscapes of Chinese American communities as much as we take note of the economic, artistic or literary forms of Chinese American identity, to better understand the expressions in which ethnic community identity and transformation take place in Chinese America.

### **External Discrimination and Internal Enclaves in Chinatown Formation**

The historical literature on Chinatowns has been numerous, but Chinatown scholars discussing the urban formation of Chinatowns have often revolved around two main factors – the 'push' effect of racial discrimination by a non-Chinese, white

majority or the ‘pull’ effect of the social and economic advantages of living with other co-ethnics in an enclave. The early sociological literature on Chinatowns, exemplified by Rose Hum Lee, writing in the early 1940s, is informed by this assumption, arguing that as immigrants assimilate due to upward mobility and diminishing racism, “it appears that the number of Chinatowns in this country will decrease almost to the vanishing point. Only those of historical or commercial importance, as in San Francisco and New York, will remain.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly although with a different conclusion, Kay Anderson, writing about Vancouver’s Chinatown, also framed her discussion of Vancouver’s Chinatown on racial formation: “the book attempts to demonstrate empirically the workings of the racialization processes about which theorists have written.”<sup>7</sup> Although Anderson explicitly traces the growth of Chinatown from the perspective of the predominantly white Vancouver society, she seeks to reveal the essentialist nature of racial stereotyping, from the overtly exclusionary period of the 1800s to the more subtle but, to Anderson, just as essentialist forms of tourist Chinatown in the name of multiculturalism and historic preservation in the 1960s to the 1980s.

This focus on race formation, assimilation theories and external factors ignores the community’s own motivations in the historic preservation of their physical communities. The study of D.C. Chinatown, particularly in the case of their redevelopment in the late twentieth century, will show us how these motivations can

---

<sup>6</sup> Rose Hum Lee, “The Decline of Chinatowns in the United States,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 54, no.5 (1949):432.

<sup>7</sup> Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Chinatown, 1875-1980* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), p3.



sometimes make them complicit in furthering racial stereotypes and enclaves that Anderson and Lee seem to argue against.

In addition, the race relations focus of Anderson and Lee, creates an external frame of reference locates the power of the workings of Chinatown on external forces. In considering the history of D.C. Chinatown we need to look at studies which turn inward, at the 'pull' factor of ethnic enclaves. These studies tend to celebrate the historic Chinatown community, rather than focusing on its eventual integration into mainstream society. One classic Chinatown work in this style is by Victor and Brett De Bary Nee, in their documentary study of San Francisco Chinatown in the 1970s. Nee and Nee seeks to highlight the length of the history of the Chinese community in America and their ability to carve a particular place for themselves in society. Their book, unlike Rose Hum Lee, celebrates the historical enclave, rather than the temporary ghetto. Peter Kwong, who writes on New York Chinatown does a similar inward turn, arguing in his book, "The New Chinatown" written in 1987, that Chinatown's inability to move forward is based on its very nature as isolated from the larger American political and economic mainstream. In "The New Chinatown," Kwong notes that there are many factors maintaining the non-integration of Chinese communities, not the least of which is "dominance in their communities of a traditional political structure."<sup>8</sup> This is in direct contrast to Rose Hum Lee's claim that "Chinatown [has] no independent economic structure but [is] attached symbiotically to the larger economic, political and social base."<sup>9</sup> In this way, Nee and Nee as well as Kwong argue that both the social community and the political structure

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, 421.

of Chinatown heralds the physical and continued significance of downtown Chinatown enclaves. This essay's case study of D.C. Chinatown thus seeks to move away from the focus on assimilation theories that permeate the earlier literature and delve more deeply into the internal workings of the enclave as Nee and Nee and Kwong do.

### **Downtown and Suburb – Never the Twain Shall Meet?**

However, although Nee and Nee and Kwong both do a good job in countering the earlier literature's focus on race relations, they still presume upon a firm distinction between downtown and suburban Chinese communities. Indeed, Kwong actively argues that the success and geographic distance of uptown Chinese (who would be predominantly suburban) obscures the plight of downtown Chinese. Wei Li a scholar who focuses on ethnic suburbs, argues that "ethnic suburbs have been replacing traditional inner-city enclaves as the more important "ports of entry" for new immigrants in some large metropolitan areas."<sup>10</sup> However, these studies that focus on the distinct characteristics of the historic downtown enclave and the newly emerging ethnic suburbs fails to take into consideration the fact that there continues to be tangible and intangible connections between the suburban community and the downtown enclave, as the case of D.C. Chinatown will show.

Michel S. Laguerre, studying San Francisco's ethnic enclaves, teases out these tangible and intangible connections and attempts to break down this artificial physical barrier between suburban communities and historic downtowns. Laguerre does not see ethnoburbs as replacing the downtown ethnic enclaves. To Laguerre, an

---

<sup>10</sup> Wei Li, ed., *From Urban Enclave to Ethnic Suburb: New Asian Communities in Pacific Rim Countries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 15.

“ethnopolis” is a place “that refers not only to enclosure and physical boundaries, but implies the implosion of the ethnic enclave as a center to which satellite clusters of the population may be connected.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, Laguerre seeks to trace the social as well as economic connections between these satellite ethnoburbs and their relationship to the downtown ethnopolis. Laguerre notes that the ethnopolis is:

“for second and third generations, it is the place where they grew up, the site that holds their parents’ memories about the homeland, and their space of symbolic attachment. For members of the ethnic enclave living outside of the enclave, it is their capital city: it is the place they do their marketing for homeland products, where they visit on holidays, eat native foods, meet friends, and keep in touch with homeland traditions.”<sup>12</sup>

Laguerre thus highlights the importance of symbolic and historic attachments to a particular space, even if there is no longer a true economic structure or physical residence in the space. This aspect, missing in discussions in the literature about assimilation, suburbanization and Chinese American history, is an important point to note when analyzing a community’s construction of space. The case of D.C. Chinatown, where the majority of the community resides outside of D.C. but felt such a strong historic and symbolic connection to the deteriorating downtown that they fought over the Archway and sought to institute design guidelines for a place they no longer resided in, will provide a useful example in which we can analyze the pull of attachment to a historic space.

### **The Role of Architecture in Chinatown**

Although Laguerre is able to deftly argue for the blurring of the lines between downtown and the suburbs and touches upon the spatial connections between the

---

<sup>11</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *The Global Ethnopolis: Chinatown, Japantown and Manilatown in American Society* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 15.

communities, he does not fully take into account the role of urban planning and visual architecture in the formation and preservation of downtown Chinatowns, which becomes particularly apparent in the late twentieth century. This occurs not only in Washington, D.C. but in many cities across the United States, Canada and Australia. This remarkable similarity across international and national boundaries thus indicates that there might be a larger impulse motivating communities than race relations, economic benefits or the desire to assimilate into white society.

David Lai, a professor of geography at the University of Victoria, is one of the first proponents for considering the role of architecture in Chinatowns.<sup>13</sup> Lai's conceptualization, which classifies the physical growth of Chinatowns into four categories: surviving Old Chinatowns, New Chinatowns (which emerged after the Second World War), Replaced Chinatowns, built to replace demolished Old Chinatowns and Reconstructed Historic Chinatowns, helps to insert a spatial element into the understanding of Chinese communities and culture. In addition, his comprehensive study helps us compare the similarities and differences across Chinatowns, to see what might be shared elements of experience and what might be particular to local situations, such as in Washington, D.C. However, Lai's background and training as a geographer as well as his personal participation in Chinatown architectural monuments in Victoria, leads him to focus on the more specific physical characteristics than on the symbolic impact and complex motivations surrounding their creation and preservation.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, (Victoria, Canada: University of British Columbia Press), 1988.

<sup>14</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Building and Rebuilding Harmony: The Gateway to Victoria's Chinatown* (Victoria, Canada: University of British Columbia Press), 1997.

Marie Rose Wong's more recent study provides greater analysis on the symbolic impact of spatial and architectural character of Chinatown. Wong, in a section titled "Culture and 'Built-to-Suit' Architecture,"<sup>15</sup> describes the architecture of early 1900s Portland Chinatown as buildings with their 'Oriental' components such as pagoda-style roofs, turrets, upturned eaves, balconies etc, that were decorative elements that paid "historic reference to the cultural forms [but] were not structurally or functionally authentic as in traditional Chinese architecture."<sup>16</sup> Instead, Wong argues, that "it is critical to recognize that Chinatowns were cultural hybrids, neither purely American nor purely Chinese."<sup>17</sup> Wong continues to note that:

"Chinatown was not created by abrupt boundaries such as fences, but by *indicators in the built environment* [italics added] that visually separated the enclave from the surrounding community. These elements included the residents' homes and businesses, signs expressing their language, ornament (flags, banners and statues), use of color, kinetic occurrences such as open markets or commercial fruit and vegetable stands that physically defined the area, and the presence of Chinese people as part of the regular identity of specific city blocks. Combined, these intuitive boundaries created an image that became recognized over time by both the peer society and the ethnic community, and in great part, these elements remain as the reliable identifiers of the appearance of Chinatown in an historical and contemporary sense."<sup>18</sup>

And yet, despite Wong's astute observations regarding the social and psychological impact of architecture on the urban form of Chinatown, she does not go beyond the time period of 1950 to examine the Chinatown in Portland in the 1980s and see how these culturally hybrid yet reliable identifiers continue to work in the late twentieth century. Wong herself noted in the beginning of her book that Portland dedicated

---

<sup>15</sup> Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 220.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

their official Chinatown Gateway in 1986 (the same year that D.C. built their Arch) and was also involved, as Wong observed, “like many Chinatowns, in fighting to retain its ethnic historic identity and preserve the economic viability of its shops and restaurants under the pressures of urban change.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, Wong does not seek to reconcile the impact of architecture and its imagined boundaries, with what she distinguishes as the formation of enclaves versus non-claves. Wong argues that enclaves are created based on acts of violence or explicit legislation, such as in San Francisco, which forces Chinese to seek refuge in their own urban communities. In contrast, Wong states that in Portland, “although city authorities monitored the specific location of Chinese American activities, the white community as a whole did not use violence or local legislation to coerce immigrants into living or working only in certain areas.”<sup>20</sup> According to Wong, this lack of coercion thus allowed Chinese immigrants in Portland to develop a non-clave, which has no locational restrictions and the community grows in a diffuse and scattered pattern. This is the underlying reason, for Wong, that Old Chinatown gave way to the city’s growth and redevelopment and left room for the “Chinese themselves [to be] active participants in determining their future in Portland and in deciding on the eventual location of their business community.”<sup>21</sup>

Wong’s analysis and case study thus provides us with much food for thought to an alternative spatial model than the ones presented by San Francisco or even Victoria or Vancouver, all of which, given their larger communities, faced violence and discriminatory legislation on a wider scale. Portland’s scattered community and

---

<sup>19</sup> Wong, p3

<sup>20</sup> Wong, p266

<sup>21</sup> Wong, p270

disappearing original Chinatown could be a more useful reference point to compare the experience of D.C. Chinatown than to larger Chinatowns such as San Francisco or New York. However, despite the new angles of analysis that Wong's book provides, her conclusions still leave several gaps to be explored. Wong does not reconcile her claims about the importance of the architecture and the built environment in determining Chinatown's boundaries with her discussion of enclaves versus non-enclaves. Why would a non-clave such as Portland or Washington, D.C. with its scattered and diffuse population and lack of coercion or discrimination, have the incentive to build such Chinese structures that proclaimed a historic district that did not have the same connections and internal, self-contained structure that larger enclaves possessed?

Anna Lisa Mak, writing about the Chinatown in Sydney, Australia, goes into greater detail about the significance of architecture in this form of place-creation and solidifying of the mythology of Chinese diasporas seeking to belong but at the same time, seeking to proclaim their cultural heritage, in a host country with a largely European population. Mak focuses on how Sydney's tourist industry created a repackaged and more palatable form of tourist Chinatown for the consumption of non-Chinese visitors:

“complicity of members of the Chinese community in the design and construction of Chinatown created an interesting tension that complicates the theories of western domination....in a joint decision by the council and the Dixon Street Chinese Committee, the appearance of Chinatown was deliberately designed to conform to accepted notions of what a Chinatown should be. The Dixon Street Chinese Committee exercised its agency in exploiting these notions of Chinatown for profit, undermining the premise that these notions were imposed solely by the west. The reconstructed identity, though defined

and constructed by the west, became a partially self-imposed stereotype for the sake of economic gain.”<sup>22</sup>

Although Mak deftly teases out these complicated dimensions of the Chinese community's own motivations, her final conclusion, that these Orientalizing architectural forms were done solely on the basis of economic gain, overlooks the more complex psychological and social motivations of the Chinese community. The role of architecture in these scholarly works on Chinatown formation, character and preservation is often secondary to the larger goal of explicating a Chinese community's social history and these nuggets of information about the role of architecture is often mentioned in asides or tangential sub-chapters, rather than as a predominant factor in Chinatown history. Instead, we have to turn to the realm of architectural history rather than Chinese American history and sociology to find scholars who reflect upon the primary impact of architecture on identity formation and social cohesion in Chinese communities, rather than purely through race and economic forces.

David Lai, who wrote the comprehensive comparative study on Chinatowns in Canada, also wrote a more recent article titled “The Visual Character of Chinatowns,”<sup>23</sup> highlighting and reiterating the importance of the built environment in our understanding of Chinese communities. Similarly Christopher Yip wrote a detailed study called, “Association, Residence and Shop: An Appropriation of Commercial Blocks in North American Chinatowns,” wherein Yip argues that the architectural facades of association buildings help to “[create] a special identity for

---

<sup>22</sup> Anna-Lisa Mak, “Negotiating Identity: Ethnicity, Tourism and Chinatown,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 77 (2003), [http://api-network.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77\\_mak.pdf](http://api-network.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77_mak.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, “The Visual Character of Chinatowns [Vision, Culture and Landscape]”, *Places*: 7, no. 1 (1990), <http://repositories.cdlib.org/ced/places/vol7/iss1/DavidChuenyanLai>



the urban Chinatowns of the Pacific Coast.”<sup>24</sup> More recently and particularly pertinent, Jia Lou has written about the signs in D.C. Chinatown, where “the language choice, text vector, symmetrical composition and physical emplacement of signs in contemporary Chinatown with those in Chinatown at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has revealed a Chinatown that is simultaneously old and new.”<sup>25</sup> The aim and audience of the project is both the community and urban historians as Lou writes that, “it is hoped that this critical semiotic analysis of Chinatown’s shop signs will alert the involved parties as well as observers of the complexity involved in urban revitalization programs.”<sup>26</sup>

In this way the burgeoning trend in discussions of symbolic architecture can knit together the literature on Chinatowns and Washington D.C. history. Both these fields have separate impulses motivating the two historiographical traditions – a concern with assimilation theories be it physical or cultural, in the books on Chinatown, and a focus on D.C.’s architectural history and symbolism circa the 1800s, for histories about Washington, D.C. When considered together, through the lens of symbolic architecture, the case of D.C. Chinatown thus fills a gap in both literatures – it highlights the importance of architectural symbolism and how it plays into community methods in which imagined space is constructed or used as a form of resistance in assimilation arguments. In turn, D.C. Chinatown helps to flesh out the story of a living, residential Washington not mentioned in popular histories, but does

---

<sup>24</sup> Christopher L. Yip, “Association, Residence and Shop: An Appropriation of Commercial Blocks in North American Chinatowns,” in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 5: Gender, Class and Shelter (1995), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Jia Lou, “Revitalizing Chinatown into a Heterotopia: A Geosemiotic Analysis of Shop Signs in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown,” *Space and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2007), 190.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

so by picking up on the tradition of writing about architectural Washington as a way to view the social and cultural history of the people involved. In this way, D.C. Chinatown and the historical literature on Washington, D.C. can present a spatial turn in Chinese American history, as a call for Chinese American and other ethnic studies scholars to consider the importance of architecture in the built streetscapes of Chinese communities.

### **Studying D.C. Chinatown**

The focus on architecture and its symbolic uses is particularly apparent in the documentary record of D.C. Chinatown. The Chinese community has had a long history in Washington, D.C., stemming from its earliest days in the late 1800s, when Chinatown consisted of half a dozen buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets NW.<sup>27</sup> Despite this history, much of the typical primary source material for telling the story of a community, such as personal letters, community newspapers or other instruments of a community voice is scarce in the case of D.C. Chinatown, particularly in the public collections. However, there is an extensive vein of material focusing on the physical redevelopment of Chinatown space, starting in the early 1970s. *The Washington Post* historical archive has a voluminous number of articles on Chinatown during this period, focusing on the development efforts of the Convention Center and sports arena, indicating the significance of the spatial uses of Chinatown to the broader Washington society during the 1970s to the 1990s. In order to present a fuller and more nuanced picture of D.C. Chinatown during this development period I attempted to find more community-based documentary sources that I could read these *Washington Post* newspaper articles against, in order to see if

---

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Lim, p25

there were discrepancies in the view of the larger society versus the localized ethnic community. Trying to locate the multiple voices of the community and their experience of Chinatown during this tumultuous era was more difficult. One of the only secondary sources on D.C. Chinatown was a community history written by a community non-profit group, which contained a crucial timeline and key leads into people and players within Chinatown during this time period. The names, dates and places listed helped provide a useful context in understanding the primary source newspaper articles as well as the Harrison Lee Papers (HLP), a rare and richly detailed primary source of the community elite's role in Chinatown development. This collection consists of the papers of Harrison Lee, a longtime resident of Washington's Chinatown. Lee was a retired CIA officer who sat on several key committees that governed D.C. Chinatown, such as the Chinatown Steering Committee and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA). His papers included the minutes of the Chinatown Steering Committee, correspondence between Lee and the D.C. city government regarding their visions for the development of Chinatown and CCBA papers concerning the development of Wah Luck House, a low-income housing project in Chinatown. His pivotal roles in determining the development direction of Chinatown and the administrative records and papers that are preserved in his collection helps clarify the choices and perspective of the Chinese business and professional elite during this period of development. The Harrison Lee Papers combined with *The Washington Post* historic newspaper articles helped to piece together the story of D.C. Chinatown. The common emphasis in the written rhetoric and justifications in both these sources upon

the uses of architecture in anchoring the visual identity and character of Chinatown was very revealing.

The structure of this essay will focus on the different epochs during the late twentieth century, tracing how the role of architecture in D.C. Chinatown has changed and shifted over time to reflect the rhetoric and motivations of the community. In Chapter 1, we will explore how the architectural streetscape of Chinatown of the 1970s was used as a force of community resistance which elicited sympathy from the general public that encouraged the city to give up potential economic gains and move the Convention Center as well as declare the area a historic district. In Chapter 2 we focus on the 1980s, and see a shift from this grassroots-based activism against large-scale urban development towards a more planned emphasis on the visual streetscape to design and create a culturally nostalgic Chinatown. In addition, the loudest voices in the debate have become those of the Chinese business elite in their positions on the advisory board to the D.C. government, the Chinatown Steering Committee. We will see how the Chinese business and professional elite sought to take control of the streetscape, and with the agreement of the D.C. city government was able to successfully institute a set of design guidelines that encouraged the growth of an increasingly “Chinese” streetscape, with traditional-style Chinese lanterns, pavements and buildings. By Chapter 3, we will see how this increasing trend towards Orientalization of Chinatown coalesced into the creation of the D.C. Archway, which encapsulated the business elite’s vision for Chinatown as a global tourist and commercial mecca. This chapter will also explore some of the external factors motivating the Chinatown elite’s focus on redevelopment, such as the

post-industrial economy and normalization of relations with China and the double-edged sword this international backdrop had on D.C. Chinatown. In Chapter 4, we will see how the story of Chinatown development came full circle – the sports center that was rejected and successfully resisted in the 1970s was embraced in the 1990s by Chinatown residents and businesses alike, reflecting the changing social and economic motivations as well as the renegotiated role of architecture in the neighborhood and larger society.

## Chapter 1: Saving Chinatown, 1970s

If we take ourselves back to that pair of contrasting images, of quiet, relatively residential but poorly maintained D.C. Chinatown of the 1970s and the Technicolor commercial of Chinatown of today, how did one morph into the other?

We could say it all really began on June 8, 1972 when entrepreneur, Abe Pollin, announced that his new, professional hockey team and the transplanted Baltimore Bullets would play in a stadium built in D.C. if he could be assured, in ninety days time, that the stadium would be “ready for play in September 1974.”<sup>28</sup> Thus began a flurry of activity, both within the Rayburn House (D.C. had not yet fully instituted home rule, and these were still matters that required congressional approval) and on the pages of *The Washington Post*, where the matter was debated hotly by congressmen and community members both for and against the proposed development of a 25-acre convention center/sports arena, south of Mount Vernon Square and smack in the middle of Chinatown.

On the surface and in the initial stages of debate, there appeared to be a clear demarcation of who was on the usual sides of the development fence: “Washington’s established and powerful business community” arguing for the construction of the arena, and on the other, “a vocal coalition of residents, commercial entrepreneurs and church-goers.” As *The Washington Post* so evocatively put it in their headline, it appeared to be the age-old fight of “Progress versus People.”<sup>29</sup> The Metropolitan Washington Board of Trade, along with other organizations such as the Washington

---

<sup>28</sup> Carrie Johnson, “The Convention Center/Sports Arena: A Status Report,” *The Washington Post*, July 3, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> Bar Barnes, “Sports Arena Fight: Progress vs. People,” *The Washington Post*, February 3, 1972.

Board of Realtors and the D.C. Chamber of Commerce strongly supported the building of the convention center, claiming that to do so would help to increase city revenue by \$112 million, create about three thousand new jobs (twenty-five hundred of which are directly related to the construction of the center) and help to decrease crime in the area.<sup>30</sup> A *Washington Post* columnist cited similar arguments for the advantages that the convention center/sports arena would have for the city's depressed economy: "the plums from a sports arena alone would be many. There is no doubt that if the Eisenhower complex becomes a reality, Washington would get major-league hockey and basketball franchises. The complex could feature an 'Avenue of the Nations' with all sorts of exotic restaurants."<sup>31</sup> Yet the columnist was also conflicted and sympathetic towards the plight of the Chinese community:

"But to the Chinese Americans in Washington, who could be displaced persons, their situation is as pressing as any international problem...the proposed convention center-sports arena complex...would swallow the heart of Chinatown and perhaps eliminate the colorful colony. Once before the colony was uprooted when the Federal Triangle was built but the Chinese merchants feel that the Eisenhower complex would scatter them for good. It is useless to argue with them that the new center would be good for business and would revive a blighted area. Not all the money gained after the government exercises its eminent domain would compensate for the loss of their businesses, according to the involved merchants."<sup>32</sup>

Chinatown community members, such as restaurant owner George Moy, owner of the Joy Inn at 609 H Street, also began speaking on their own behalf, testifying at a public hearing that "I'd like the Chinese community to stay together. The way it looks

---

<sup>30</sup> Open Letter to the President and Members of Congress, by D.C. Groups Supporting Arena, *The Washington Post*, August 15, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Bob Addie, "Chinese Puzzle," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1972.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

now, we're going to be in Southwest, Northwest, all over the city.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the February 1974 issue of *Eastern Wind*, the self-proclaimed “Washington D.C. Asian American community newsletter,” published “An Open Letter to the Asian Community,” which urged Chinatown residents to “write letters to the chairmen of the House and Senate Appropriations and District Committees....to express your opinion on the Center and the need to preserve Chinatown to the Mayor and City Council.”<sup>34</sup> The letter argued that “making the downtown livable means preserving and fostering the present community, and not pushing it out for projects which really benefit only a few individuals.” The Eastern Wind group also circulated a petition to protest the displacement of the community by the proposed site.<sup>35</sup> This sentiment, that the spatial integrity and cohesion of Chinatown would be affected by the building of the arena, seemed to be an argument that most resonated against the convention center/sports arena in public opinion. *The Washington Post* editorials on the subject cite Chinatown frequently:

“We share the Board of Trade’s enthusiasm for building a convention center and sports arena in downtown Washington in time for the bicentennial celebrations in 1976. But to build this complex, as originally proposed...would further impair rather than restore the economic health of the downtown business district. To destroy the 129 business establishments of Chinatown and furniture row, to say nothing of two active churches, is hardly a way to ‘revitalize’ them.”<sup>36</sup>

In this particular editorial, not only do they place the ‘129 business establishments of Chinatown’ at the forefront of their argument, they conclude by stating that, in their proposed alternative, of moving the center/arena to the Union Station area, the

---

<sup>33</sup> Bart Barnes, “Cut in Arena Site Fails to Satisfy Local Critics,” February 18, 1972.

<sup>34</sup> James Huie Zepp, “An Open Letter to Asian Community,” February, 1974, *Eastern Wind*, p7.

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, (Washington, D.C: Asian American Arts and Media, Inc.,1991), 51.

<sup>36</sup> *The Washington Post*, “The Convention and Sports Arena Complex,” February 23, 1972.



preserved and “refurbished Chinatown with all its potential charm and bustle,” will be added incentive for center-goers to be attracted to shop, eat and linger in the downtown D.C. business district. Others, such as Herb Franklin, vice president of the housing and urban growth of the National Urban Coalition, noted that “such a ‘tightening’ of the site [reducing the size of the planned arena] would permit the preservation and enhancement of the Chinese owned and operated businesses that now appear to contribute to the strength of the vicinity.”<sup>37</sup> Rep. James J. Howard (D-NJ), a member of the subcommittee for the Public Works committee, said that “he had been particularly impressed by the presentation of Chinese community members. “As far as I’m concerned all bets (on the arena) are off,” Howard said.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, although the House Public Works Subcommittee had initially unanimously approved the proposed 25-acre convention center/arena proposal, the lobbying and protest efforts by the Chinese community, in conjunction with the African American churches and furniture store owners in the area, were able to sway public sentiment to such an extent that a public hearing in the New Hope Baptist Church, located at 816 8<sup>th</sup> St NW, in the heart of the community, was held, which was attended by 300 people and lasted for 6 hours. Testimony was given by Chinese community members as well as the African American church goers and furniture store entrepreneurs. Their testimony proved convincing. After listening to the community’s appeals, Representative Kenneth Gray, head of the House Public Buildings and Grounds Subcommittee, agreed to whittle down the proposed size of the arena from 25 acres to 15 acres, and promised that “whatever happens, the heart

---

<sup>37</sup> Eugene L. Meyer, “Approval of Arena Opposed,” *The Washington Post*, February 3, 1972.

<sup>38</sup> Bart Barnes, “Cut in Arena Site Fails to Satisfy Local Critics,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1972.

of Chinatown, two inner-city churches and furniture row would be saved.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, James O. Gibson, chairman of the city’s bicentennial commission that supported the building of the arena in time for the bicentennial celebration in 1976, also emphasized that they would continue to be for the construction of the center, but with the condition that the Chinese community be preserved.<sup>40</sup>

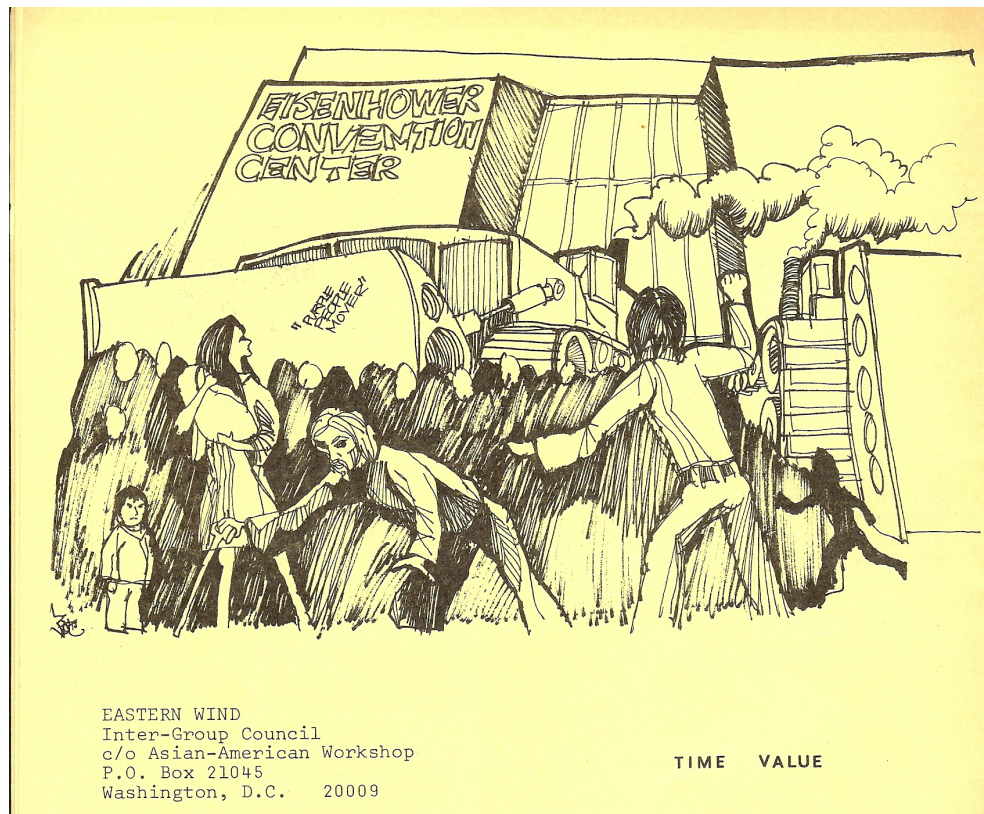
Thus, the most compelling rhetoric used in *The Washington Post* articles against the arena site was often for the preservation of the D.C. Chinese community – numerous articles waxed lyrical about Chinatown, likening it to San Francisco’s Chinatown (“would San Francisco think of razing its historic downtown for the sake of a sports arena and parking lots?”), reiterating the Chinese community’s history and roots in the Federal Triangle area and printing many residents’ reminiscences about the Chinese community. Similarly, a cartoon on the back page of the Eastern Wind newsletter depicted a drawing of the Eisenhower Center and a giant truck labeled ‘purple people mover’ looming over a crowd of Chinese, including a woman holding a child and a young man standing and shaking his fist at the truck (see Illustration 1).

---

<sup>39</sup> Carrie Johnson, “The Convention Center/Sports Arena: A Status Report,” July 3, 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Bart Barnes, “Cut in Arena Site Fails to Satisfy Local Critics,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1972.

**Illustration 1: Eastern Wind Newsletter Cartoon of the Center Controversy, 1974**



This image of citizen protest, of buildings and machines against women and children, evocatively portrays the perception that this was a fight between ‘progress’ and the (Chinese) ‘people.’ But who were these people? And could one group really speak for an entire community?

In reality, those opposed and those for the arena were much murkier and complex. Some Chinese restaurant owners actually embraced the promise of increased economic activity that a downtown arena would bring. Douglas Y. Toy, owner of the Kowloon Restaurant, near 11<sup>th</sup> and H St, just at the edge of the proposed new convention center, seemed to harbor no sentiment about the potential demise of the historic buildings in the area: “an old town, an old city, must be improved, renewed. You can’t keep the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you can’t keep the houses rotting. You have to build

and go forward, not look back. It will be good for everybody.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, none of the traditional Chinatown leadership, such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), the umbrella organization for family, merchant and fraternal associations in the Chinese community, the president of which is usually considered the unofficial mayor of Chinatown, were quoted in any of the articles discussing the Convention center/arena controversy in 1972-1973, as the voice for the community. Instead, it was the Chinese Community church that took the lead in the fight to save Chinatown. The CCBA’s mysterious silence in the public controversy over the building of the center/arena is curious given their normal role as the “official” voice and representative of the Chinese community to society at large, not just in D.C. Chinatown but in Chinese American communities throughout the United States. Although their representative leadership might be disputed, as we see later in Chapter 2, their historic role in the Chinese American community makes them a recognizable voice, both within Chinatown and the larger mainstream society. Their silence in some activities and efforts in others, thus speak volumes for what the CCBA members, these community leaders in clan associations and Chinatown businesses, felt was important for the Chinatown community.

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) is a Chinese American institution with an extended history and significance, reaching far beyond the boundaries of D.C. Chinatown and having roots in San Francisco and chapters in most major Chinese American communities from their beginnings in the 1800s. Formed in 1850 originally as the Chinese Six Companies, so named after the six

---

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Camp, “Center Site Residents Hail, Condemn Plans,” *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1978.

original associations, it was instituted to serve as a board of arbitration with overall jurisdiction within the community, to mediate feuds between the plethora of clan and district associations.<sup>42</sup> Renamed the CCBA in 1880 as the organization began lobbying more intensely against anti-Chinese legislation, the CCBA in San Francisco became known for its public works within the community, such as the building of schools and hospitals, not just for business mediation. This growing responsibility and programming within the larger Chinese community made it known in the outside world as the official representative of the Chinese community.<sup>43</sup>

This historic business-orientation and mercantile interests might explain their silence in the terms of the Convention Center proposal, possibly suggesting that the CCBA members were conflicted about how the proposed center/arena could potentially economically benefit Chinatown, as Douglas Toy, quoted above, felt? This seems possible, given the later efforts on the part of the CCBA to encourage hotel and other commercial development in the area. Although further research is required to find out the specific motivations and opinions that the CCBA had regarding the Convention center/arena plan, their very silence in the public channels of debate could represent differing, but silent, opinions within the Chinatown community.

### **A Home in D.C. Chinatown?**

Despite this curious silence, the CCBA's demonstrated emphasis on public works indicates their continued prominence in the development decisions of Chinatown in the 1970s. The CCBA took strong and effective action when it came to the

---

<sup>42</sup> Diane Mei Lin Mark and Ginger Chih, *A Place Called Chinese America*, (Dubuque, Iowa: The Organization of Chinese Americans and Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982), 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

development of Wah Luck House (House of Happiness), a low-rent apartment complex that the CCBA built in conjunction with the National Housing Partnership in 1982. In September 1978, the CCBA had applied to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to acquire the vacant lot located at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and H Street, in the heart of D.C. Chinatown, to build an apartment complex for the Chinatown residents that were being displaced by the building of the Convention Center, scheduled to be completed in 1982.<sup>44</sup> Permission was granted, and groundbreaking began on May 9, 1981. The business-orientation of the CCBA is evident in the way the CCBA created the Chinatown Development Co. to own the \$8 million property, which was then leased and operated by the National Housing Partnership, a federally chartered, private organization that helped community groups with rental housing and housing projects.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, the Wah Luck House, despite its Chinese-style apartment balconies, moon-door entrances and graceful red script trickling down one long wall, masks the more complex reality of D.C. Chinatown's changing demographic patterns and the fact that many of the Chinese who run its restaurants, associations and gift shops, no longer live in the District but out in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. In the 1970 census, there was a recorded 7354 persons of Chinese birth or with one or two Chinese-born parents living in the Washington metropolitan area, of which only 2,099 of them actually lived in the District of Columbia; 3982 lived in suburban Maryland and 1273

---

<sup>44</sup> Neil Henry, "Chinatown: Civic Center Plan Arouses Hope, Anxiety, in Enclave," *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1978.

<sup>45</sup> Martha Mueller, "Wah Luck Apartment Erected in Chinatown," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1982.

lived in suburban Virginia.<sup>46</sup> Some, possibly the majority of the total Chinese population in the greater D.C. area, moved to D.C. from other parts of the United States and did not feel any compulsion to live in the downtown Chinatown: “Yim [a Chinese American originally from Hawaii who moved to D.C. in the 1950s and lives in Glen Echo, Maryland] said his family never thought once about living in Chinatown. He said he feels very assimilated, more so, he assumes, than he might be if he lived in New York or San Francisco.”<sup>47</sup> May Zung, who was a volunteer at the Chinese Cultural and Education Center at the Federal City College in Chinatown, noted: “my own feeling is that the immigrants are better off if they move out of here as fast as possible. If they continue living here, they’ll never learn to speak English. They don’t make progress if they stay down here.”<sup>48</sup> If the majority of Chinese do not live in downtown Chinatown, and they feel no historic ties or even that there are socioeconomic detriments to living in an ethnic enclave, why did the CCBA push to develop the Wah Luck House and later, to develop and preserve Chinatown? Their reasons and motivation perhaps stem from the sociopolitical context of the 1970s. This post-civil rights era marked the growing ethnic pride and cultural development of Chinatowns across the United States. The views expressed by Yim and Zung were not entirely true of many Chinese who felt strong family or historic ties to downtown Chinatown, despite not living there. Medsger in her article, also describes the Chinese teenagers, of families who used to live in downtown Chinatown and had moved to the suburbs, who continued to travel down to Chinatown regularly on Sunday afternoons

---

<sup>46</sup> Betty Medsger, “Chinatown Not Home to Most Chinese,” *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1972.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

and Wednesday evenings to play volleyball in the parking lot at 6<sup>th</sup> and H Streets NW. Wesley Chin, a University of Maryland graduate was quoted saying: “He would like to move to a different neighborhood, but he would always want to come back downtown occasionally to be with other Chinese people. Although he has other aspirations for himself he did not want to see the family’s Chinese grocery store leave Chinatown. If one of his brothers does not choose to stick with the business, “maybe our wives can run it.””<sup>49</sup> The subsequent generations of Washington-area Chinese, it seems, no longer wanted to live in downtown Chinatown, but wanted to preserve Chinatown, for the memories and the cultural connections they felt from being with other Chinese. Jean Lee, whose family moved to D.C. Chinatown in 1949 from Hong Kong and set up shop at 608 H Street, translated for a *Washington Post* reporter as her father reminisced about how people used to dress up on Sundays and flock to Chinatown, to go to the Chinese community church, visit relatives and then dine at one of the Chinese restaurants in the area.<sup>50</sup> Jean’s brother, William Chin, described how “Chinatown in those days was like Georgetown...at 2 or 3 in the morning, people walking in the streets going to restaurants.”<sup>51</sup> Tom Lee, manager of Chinatown Tropicals fish store in Chinatown in the 1980s and frequent visitor to downtown Chinatown, also had fond memories of Chinatown: “ I remember how the old Chinese used to sit out on the stairs...they would read their Chinese newspapers and play mah-jongg with ivory tiles and Chinese characters written on them.”<sup>52</sup> This all

---

<sup>49</sup> Betty Medsger, “Chinatown Not Home to Most Chinese,” *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1972.

<sup>50</sup> Saundra Saperstein, “Chinatown Dreams for a Better Life,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Morgan, “Wrecker’s Ball Threatens Way of Life in Chinatown,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1981.



changed, in the 1960s. The race riots that rocked Washington D.C. also made their mark on downtown Chinatown. Although no Chinese restaurants or stores were actually looted or destroyed in the riots, the proximity of the danger scared people away from downtown. Chinese residents moved away, or were forced to when business declined.<sup>53</sup> By the late 1970s, all that remained were the elderly Chinese who were reluctant to leave the area, or the new immigrants who could not afford to move out to the suburbs or who wished to stay close to an area with Chinese-language support. Businesses had also declined, leaving only about 10 restaurants and businesses and since only 25% of these were actually owned by Chinese, the chances of this dwindling even more was very real.<sup>54</sup> Yet, as we have seen in the fond descriptions above, the suburban Chinese who moved away still retained strong nostalgic ties to downtown Chinatown and to the sense of history it represented for the community. The Chinese Community Church, located at 10<sup>th</sup> and L Street, drew most of its funding and volunteer help from its 300 suburban Chinese members, who drove downtown every Sunday to attend services or to volunteer with English classes for new immigrants. Jack and Evelyn Lee continued to attend services downtown even after moving to Hyattsville in Maryland: “We are so used to going down there. I was baptized there. We’re so used to going to the church. We just don’t feel like going anywhere else.”<sup>55</sup> If the Chinese Community Church represented living ties to the downtown community, the Chinatown Mural project represented the symbolic ties that the suburban Chinese community had towards Chinatown as well as the

---

<sup>53</sup> Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Morgan, “Wrecker’s Ball Threatens Way of Life in Chinatown,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1981.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Eng, “Chinatown Churches: Easing the Burden of Passage,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 1981.

increasing awareness of Chinatown to the mainstream public. In 1975, the D.C. Bicentennial Commission, the CCBA and Eastern Wind, a group of Asian American college students, came together to work on a large, 32 feet by 24 feet mural called “The Chinese in America: Past, Present and Future,” which was painted by the Eastern Wind group and depicted images of the history of the Chinese in America. The mural was completed and hung on the wall of the Jade Palace Restaurant, in the heart of downtown Chinatown, at 8<sup>th</sup> and H Street,<sup>56</sup> proclaiming to all who walked its streets the symbolic ownership the Chinese community felt over this particular urban space.

Thus in the face of dwindling demographics but simultaneous increase in this sense of ethnic history-making, the CCBA saw the construction of Wah Luck House as a chance both to ease the woes of the elderly and poor currently in Chinatown in the most explicit sense, but also in a perhaps more implicit and subconscious fashion, to try and retain some of the residential aspect of downtown Chinatown. To the CCBA and other suburban Chinese, an apartment complex owned by the CCBA, the representative of the Chinese community and housing Chinese elderly, is a tangible, living symbol to the community, as a means to preserve an anchor of their historic presence in downtown D.C. Wah Luck House, despite its modest rents and quiet, struggling occupants, seem to carry on its back the weight of history, memory and cultural heritage – literally as well as figuratively – of the Chinese community’s historical and continuing imprint on the physical and visual streetscape of downtown D.C.

---

<sup>56</sup> Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, 62-63.

## Officially “Historic”

Given this sense of nostalgia and yearning for a living downtown Chinatown, it is interesting to note the Chinese community’s lack of involvement and occasional opposition to the movement to preserve the 7<sup>th</sup> Street corridor and turn it into an official downtown Historic District. This happened in 1976; right after the victorious coalition of Chinese community members, church goers and store owners were able to push the Convention Center and scale it down to preserve their small collection of historic worship places, stores and residences. A citizen activist group called ‘Don’t Tear It Down’ had begun to agitate for historic preservation of D.C. landmarks in the early 1970s. Don’t Tear It Down had successfully lobbied for the preservation of several D.C. historic buildings, such as the Old Post Office Building and the Willard Hotel, making it “socially acceptable” in D.C. public opinion to be concerned about historic preservation.<sup>57</sup> In 1976, in a proposal to save the buildings facing G, H, I, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Street NW and in the area where they intersect,<sup>58</sup> Don’t Tear It Down had sent a letter to Harrison Lee, then chairman of the CCBA asking if the CCBA would like to be involved in a survey of the area for their application to the Joint Committee of Landmarks of the National Capital.<sup>59</sup>

There was no record of a reply in Harrison Lee’s files, but a small detail recorded in a later *Washington Post* article speaks volumes of the disapproval that the Chinese community, as represented by the CCBA, felt about the plan towards

---

<sup>57</sup> Jeremy W. Dutra, "You Can't Tear it Down: the Origins of the D.C. Historic Preservation Act " (May 1, 2002). *Georgetown Law. Georgetown Law Historic Preservation Papers Series*. Paper 1. <http://lsr.nellco.org/georgetown/hpps/papers/1>

<sup>58</sup> Don’t Tear it Down, Historic District Application Form, Downtown Surveys, vol I, Historical Society of Washington, D.C., [1981].

<sup>59</sup> George Washington University Gelman Library Special Collections, Harrison Lee Papers (HLP), Box 6, Folder 30: Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Washington, DC: Correspondence -- WRC-TV editorial 06/21/1976.

creating the Historic District. In 1982, after the Historic District application had been submitted, Harrison Lee, then vice-chairman of the CCBA attended the public hearings for the D.C. Joint Committee on Landmarks and was quoted as opposing the historic district, saying that “his community wants to invest in ‘new, contemporary Chinese-style buildings’ in the area centering on 7<sup>th</sup> and H Street.”<sup>60</sup> This remark is significant in the way it helps us understand the more nuanced vision that the Chinese community had about ‘saving’ Chinatown. It was not merely to save the 19<sup>th</sup> century structures of rowhouses in which they had lived or worked in since the 1930s. Rather, the residents and business owners saw that to save Chinatown was to bring in economic development and other means of maintaining a living neighborhood, rather than a historic façade. Further evidence of this view can be seen in the fact that the city had hired Edward Park, a Baltimore architect, to consult with the Redevelopment Land Agency to conduct a \$200,000 study into what the Chinese community wanted to do to “preserve and beautify” Chinatown. For the Chinese community of businessmen and other residents, the study found that a “Chinese Trade and Community Center” was the most favored, along with a square featuring stores, exhibition hotels, space for importers and exporters to display their wares, hotels, offices, theaters for Chinese opera and acrobatics, a Chinese library, a medical clinic, a nursing home, a Chinese temple for tourists, a vocational training center as well as housing.<sup>61</sup> For the Chinatown residents and business owners, rejuvenation and preservation of Chinatown was about creating economic opportunities and bringing in amenities and services for a residential neighborhood.

---

<sup>60</sup> “Community Groups Fight Historic District,” *The Washington Post*, March 17, 1982.

<sup>61</sup> William H. Jones, “Chinatown Rejuvenation,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1973.

Despite the lack of a response from the CCBA, Don't Tear It Down included a flattering description of the Chinese community's history in the 7<sup>th</sup> Street area, and their development and architectural efforts in their application:

“As an anchor for the new Chinatown, the On Leong Tong immediately renovated the buildings it purchased at 618-620 H Street, remodeling two buildings into one, adding a pent tile roof over the first floor, a balcony at the second level, and a tile roof above the third floor. Similar Chinese-ization of existing buildings has occurred throughout Chinatown, giving the area a distinctive appearance and character.”<sup>62</sup>

The 7<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District was officially approved and designated in 1984, as “historically important to the commercial life of the city before World War II,”<sup>63</sup> and included the area along the 7<sup>th</sup> Street corridor between Mount Vernon Square and Pennsylvania Avenue, the F Street corridor between 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets and the Chinatown area along H and I streets between 8<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets. Developers and business owners in the 7<sup>th</sup> Street area had voiced opposition to the boundaries of the district since this would necessarily curtail or limit their plans for modern commercial development in the area. But to the historic preservationists:

“these buildings [would help to] maintain the appearance and scale of an earlier era – a kind of main street shopping district of small, individually interesting stores and offices. Not only do these buildings illustrate the developmental history of the downtown area, but they provide amenities of scale and architectural variety which should be preserved in the midst of large-scale twentieth century development, and which should form the basis for design of this new development.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the development debates of 1970s and into the early 1980s represented a tussle between differing conceptions of what successful development could be –

---

<sup>62</sup> Don't Tear It Down, Application for Historic District, 6.

<sup>63</sup> *The Washington Post*, “D.C. Historic Districts,” October 21, 1985.

<sup>64</sup> Don't Tear It Down, 17.

modern and efficient or through a form of cultural nostalgia, a lot of which centered on the preservation of D.C.'s seemingly most commercially visible ethnic community. These debates proved a tumultuous yet invigorating epoch in the life of the city as well as the Chinese community. The first and successful efforts of the neighborhood coalition, to simply save existing Chinatown from the specter of a convention center/arena which would have completely demolished it, raised awareness of the history of Washington's tiny Chinatown in the minds of the larger D.C. community. The political and social climate of the time, where reporters were doing large feature stories on the city's 'hidden ethnics', meant that the prospect of Washington, D.C. having a historic Chinatown similar to that of San Francisco and New York, was an exciting one both for extending and expanding the city's hidden cultural complexity and history and, as we shall observe in more detail in the later chapters, for the prospect of these cultural areas to bring in tourists to the city. For the Chinese community, it generated similar consciousness of their own history. The younger suburban Chinese felt a sense of belonging and community with the existence of a downtown Chinatown that had been there since the 1930s and in the Washington area since the late 1800s. The suburban Chinese rallying towards saving Chinatown through the Convention Center petition, the Wah Luck House and mural, represented the deep-seated symbolic and nostalgic bonds that the thought of a preserved downtown Chinatown could generate. However, the divergence of opinion in the case of the historic district represented the conflicting ideas of Chinatown salvation: one version which saw Chinatown as a source of historic nostalgia in

contrast to the vision of the Chinatown residents, who saw it as a living neighborhood.

## Chapter 2: Designing Chinatown, late 1980s

The spirit of the times, in the post-civil rights era of burgeoning ethnic pride, prompted the Chinese community and in particular, its business and professional elite, to push for even greater steps towards creating a Chinatown that they believed represented the vitality of the community. But this vitality, represented in the 1970s by the preservation of small business, apartments for the Chinese elderly and historic rowhouses, changed dramatically in the 1980s. Unlike Chinatowns in other parts of the United States such as San Francisco and New York, and in contrast to its earlier efforts, the banner of Chinatown was no longer taken up by community activists or non-profit organizations located in the community. The group of young community activists who formed Eastern Wind and its attendant newsletter seems to have dissolved by the 1980s. Instead, there seems to have been a shift of focus in the non-profit community towards developing the arts scene. In 1985, the newsletter *AAMPLITUDE*, “bringing you news, views and items of interest – both serious and light-hearted – in the arts and media world,”<sup>65</sup> was started by the Asian American Arts and Media Inc (AAM), which also began the first Washington, D.C. Annual Asian American Film Festival in 1982. AAM’s efforts in documenting and promoting the arts scene, through its successful film festival and its newsletter which ran until 1997, did not regularly mention the downtown Chinatown development process.

Whether this shift in interest was due to changing personal inclinations or a more complex blend of factors, such as political differences or the genuine lack of

---

<sup>65</sup> Asian American Arts and Media, Inc. *AAMPLITUDE*, Spring 1985. Personal Collection of Wendy Lim.



interest in downtown Chinatown for nonprofit organizations, is hard to determine from the front face of the written records. Either way, it left the space clear for the business elite, who ran restaurants and other businesses in Chinatown to have the dominant voice in controlling Chinatown's physical development. These business owners had mercantile connections in Chinatown but did not always reside in downtown Chinatown. This lack of a residential motivation might have influenced the business elite's conception of Chinatown success. Instead of a historic and demographic nostalgia, Chinatown vitality was believed to come in the form of ethnic tourism, creating a cultural streetscape that would enhance Chinatown as a tourist venue for potential visitors, from the suburbs and from the rest of the world.

### **Who Speaks for Chinatown?**

The 1980s also saw the reins of Chinatown shift from traditional leadership, such as the CCBA and the established fraternal organization, the On Leong Association, to the Chinatown Steering Committee, a "Chinatown community organization, formed at the request of the District government, to advise the District government on physical, economic and social impacts in Chinatown."<sup>66</sup> The Chinatown Steering Committee represented the convergence of a particular Chinese business community and the D.C. government, whose specific plans for economic development in the area started to solidify in the 1980s and whose effects on the physical landscape of D.C. Chinatown became quickly apparent.

In 1982, The Chinatown Steering Committee was formed and was established to:

---

<sup>66</sup>D.C. Government Office of the Secretary, District of Columbia Municipal Regulations Chapter 24: Chinatown Design Review Procedures, [http://os.dc.gov/os/lib/os/info/odai/title\\_10\\_part\\_2/title10\\_chapter24.pdf](http://os.dc.gov/os/lib/os/info/odai/title_10_part_2/title10_chapter24.pdf)

“serve as a liaison and advisory body of the Washington D.C. Chinatown, with public and private sectors which include the federal government, government of the District of Columbia, the Washington Convention Center and private enterprises; on the improvement and enhancement of its image for a more attractive, active and economically productive serving the residents and visitors of Chinatown...”<sup>67</sup>

The Chinatown Steering Committee consisted of vocal members of the local Chinese business elite, such as restaurateurs Tony Cheng and William Lee and also included Lawrence Locke, president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA).<sup>68</sup> When it was first formed, the Chinatown Steering Committee membership qualifications was listed as having three types of members: individual members: “Chinatown residents and owners of real estate or business enterprise located in Chinatown”; professional members, which included “Chinese lawyers, architects, certified public accountants, builders, real estate brokers, and other professionals” who are thus implied to be qualified to “provide valuable contributions to the economic development of Chinatown,” and finally organizational members, for people in “Chinese American organizations in the Washington Metropolitan area.”<sup>69</sup> Although not obviously stated in the mission statement, we can see through the membership qualifications that the Chinatown Steering Committee would end up pulling together the voices of the business or professional elite within the local Chinese community, not necessarily an entire representative breadth. Although ‘organizational members’ did include such members as the Reverend of the Chinese Community Church, other organizations, such as the CCBA often consisted of other

---

<sup>67</sup> HLP, Box 5, Folder 12: Chinatown Steering Committee: Minutes 10/09/1984

<sup>68</sup> HLP, Box 5, Folder 6: Chinatown Steering Committee: Committee membership 05/1984

<sup>69</sup> HLP, Box 5, Folder 2: Chinatown Steering Committee: Meeting notice, agenda, membership and officer qualifications 07/25/1983

businessmen, rather than representing the non-profit or low-income community. There is also no scope for individuals who may not be residents but may be heavily involved in the arts or culture of the area but are not linked to any physical organizations in D.C. Chinatown.

In addition, the formation of the Chinatown Steering Committee seems to ignore the role of pre-existing traditional Chinatown organizations such as the CCBA and its historic role as representing Chinatown. If there was not a lot of difference between the two, why was there a shift in leadership and what sort of impact did it make on the legislation and the community? In addition, there was one other major community institution in the case of Washington D.C.'s Chinatown which is not mentioned at all in the Chinatown Steering Committee documentation – the On Leong Association. In 1931, when the plans for the Federal Triangle area development meant that the Chinese community which was located there would have to move, the On Leong Association led negotiations for both north and south sides of H Street NW, between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets in order to move the Chinese merchants together. Their successful efforts, despite much protest from white business owners and residents, was the prime reason that a Chinatown continued to exist in downtown D.C.<sup>70</sup>

Why did the D.C. government create a whole new committee, as opposed to simply turning to the CCBA or the On Leong Association as the community's representative? Although there was no primary source material indicating a specific reason, some possible reasons can be inferred. Perhaps, as the official advisory body to the D.C. government, the Chinatown Steering Committee was an attempt to reach

---

<sup>70</sup> Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, 35.

out to all community groups, rather than picking just one: the Chinese Community Church, the CCBA, the On Leong Association and any others. The CCBA, with its extensive history and connections, was perhaps seen as having too many responsibilities and ties to the national Chinese American community to be able to advise the District government on the specific needs of the local D.C. Chinese community. The On Leong Association, was also perhaps not the most appropriate organization since they represented solely merchants, and the Chinatown Steering Committee, at least in its mission statement and outward trappings of membership, attempted to pick a larger breadth of society from within the Chinatown community. However, the reality of the Chinatown Steering Committee simply shifted the reins from one acronym to the other, with the business-orientation of the CCBA members within the Chinatown Steering Committee continuing to be a decisive force.

### **Home Rule, the Comprehensive Plan and the Chinatown Steering Committee**

The creation of the Chinatown Steering Committee, with its direct connections to the D.C. government, represented the marked difference between the 1980s and the 1970s, where the power of the D.C. city government had increased significantly. In 1974, the Home Rule Act was passed, allowing the District of Columbia greater authority over development within the district, land use zoning and housing. Under the Home Rule Act, the National Capital Housing Authority (NCHA) and the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), was transferred completely under the Office of the Mayor's supervision. In contrast to the early 1970s, when for instance, the Center/Arena proposal became a lengthy, drawn-out debate as plans had to go through congressional offices for approval, matters concerning District development

in the 1980s, moved more quickly and efficiently since the D.C. government had increasing autonomy to make plans and coordinate more swiftly with the relevant housing and land-use agencies.<sup>71</sup> Under the mantle of increased self-government, the Act ensured the fledgling city government had some overarching concept to guide it. As part of the legislation of the 1974 Home Rule Act for D.C. self-government, the Act mandated the need for a comprehensive plan: “a general policy document that provides overall guidance for future planning and development of the city.”<sup>72</sup> Within the 1984 Comprehensive Plan, the D.C. government made significant plans for the redevelopment of the city, with seven major goals:

“stabilizing neighborhoods, employment and economic growth, creation of a ‘living’ downtown, preserving and promoting cultural and natural amenities, respecting and improving the ‘physical character of D.C., preserving and ensuring community input, and preserving the ‘historic character’ of D.C.”<sup>73</sup>

These goals, as Lewis, a contributing writer to *The Washington Post* and an architecture professor at the University of Maryland noted, were hard to argue with. However, the Plan’s focus on the Downtown Element, which was defined as the area between the Capitol and North Capitol, Massachusetts Avenue, 15<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, Lewis found a bit more controversial. The Plan highlighted the Gallery Place and Chinatown area as the center of downtown, where the redevelopment would focus. Although the Plan promoted housing and residential development in other parts of the city and even in the downtown area, its focus for the Chinatown area was slightly different: the Plan instead encouraged retail development

---

<sup>71</sup> James G. Banks, “The Homes in Home Rule,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1974.

<sup>72</sup> D.C. Government, Office of Planning, <http://planning.dc.gov>, “Comprehensive Plan.”

<sup>73</sup> Roger K. Lewis, “D.C.’s Rewritten Plan to Make a Better City,” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1985.

on H Street, to “allow eastward extension of Chinatown retail uses.”<sup>74</sup> The Plan also frequently used the term, “design”; whether it was to “develop *design* guidelines for development surrounding the [Judiciary] square,” or to “improve the *design* or use of open space,” or “support *redesign* of the park reservation at 5<sup>th</sup> Street and Massachusetts Ave with a Chinese landscape theme.”<sup>75</sup> Lewis perceived that “these objectives [focused] on much more than land use, [these objectives] are concerned with the form of the streetscape, architectural motifs, landscaping, traffic, parking, and implicit economic issues.” The Comprehensive Plan was a strong indicator of the D.C. government’s interest and ability to utilize the increased governmental authority that the Home Rule Act has provided. Instead of, as Lewis implied, simply designating land use zones and leaving urban development to grow organically within these land use zones, the D.C. government, with its new mandate, hoped to be able to have a stronger hand in actually crafting what that growth looked like, as their emphasis on architectural motifs and streetscapes seemed to indicate. Although Lewis remarked at the end of his column that the obstructive regulations might mean that a lot of the Plan will be ‘wishful thinking,’ we know that many of these goals, such as the heightened streetscape design and instituting of Chinese design themes, were indeed put into place by the end of the 1980s.

The Plan referred specifically to Chinatown as “D.C.’s only ethnic cultural area’ and thus, required special treatment as a potential regional tourist attraction.”<sup>76</sup> This is particularly unusual, given the rich African American history of places such as

---

<sup>74</sup> Roger K. Lewis, “D.C.’s Rewritten Plan to Make a Better City,” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 1985.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> HLP Box 1, Folder 13: Objectives and Policies Relating to Chinatown 01/31/1984

the Shaw neighborhood and Adams Morgan which were not given this ‘special treatment.’ In addition, in March 1985, the D.C. city government further solidified this conceptualization when they amended the D.C. Comprehensive Plan Act with D.C. Law 5-187, which designated Chinatown as a ‘special treatment area’ and requested that ‘design standards [be instituted] that enhance the Chinese character of the area.’

This highlighting of Chinatown in the planning documents for D.C. added to the larger global trend in the Anglophone world towards preserving and redeveloping Chinatowns for both political and economic gain. As we saw in earlier scholars’ work on Chinatowns in Portland, Vancouver, Victoria and Sydney in the 1980s, other cities involved the municipal government as well as the local Chinese business community who sought to capitalize on the economic potential of a historic and touristy Chinatown. But were the collaborative efforts between the government and the local community as closely knit in other cities as it was in D.C.? Unlike the Neighborhood Advisory Councils, whose members were elected based on a majority of voters in the neighborhood,<sup>77</sup> the Chinatown Steering Committee had no additional jurisdiction and was formed, “at the request of the District government” in order to provide that “community input” that helped the formulation of the D.C. government’s Comprehensive Plan.

Given the business and professional orientation of the members of the Chinatown Steering Committee, it is not surprising then, that the Comprehensive Plan would place such emphasis on the retail expansion of Chinatown and the overall Chinese design of the streetscape. In addition, perhaps most revealing, is the fact that

---

<sup>77</sup> Stephen Green, “Hill Votes Home Rule Changes,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 1974.

Alfred Liu, the eventual architect of the D.C. Archway, and the President of the Architect and Engineers' Planning Association (AEPA), who published the Chinatown Urban Design Study, was an active member of the Chinatown Steering Committee (the minutes for July 25<sup>th</sup> 1983 were typed with his letterhead at AEPA and he was the member to forward the motion for procedures and policies to be adopted regarding membership), invited to serve as its technical advisor. A coherent architectural theme would be more compelling to restaurateurs and businesses selling Chinese goods and services, than it would be to a low-income resident living in Chinatown who would have possibly preferred more amenities and services, as opposed to street lamps with a Chinese motif.

### **Chinatown Design Guidelines, 1988**

Yet, the mission and goals of the Chinatown Steering Committee did not state explicitly that its goals were to influence the physical look of Chinatown simply that their role was to:

“identify issues concerning and in/or confronting Chinatown; to serve as an advocate for the best interest of Chinatown; to communicate the views of its members and community to decision-makers; to collect and disseminate information concerning the present and future activities and the developments which will have an impact on Chinatown; to serve as a catalyst to promote the betterment and development of Chinatown.”<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the business-orientation of Chinatown Steering Committee membership and the appointment of an architect as a technical advisor revealed the D.C. city government intention of, and the Chinatown Steering Committee's positive response to, the use of visible, architectural concepts as the means to improve Washington D.C.'s Chinatown. These architectural guidelines for the image of Chinatown that the

---

<sup>78</sup> HLP, Box 5 Folder 12: Chinatown Steering Committee: Minutes 10/09/1984



local business community, endorsed by the D.C. city government, wanted to create, went beyond general guidelines. They wanted to create a whole experience. The touristy, revenue-generating impulse that informed the D.C. city government, the Chinatown Steering Committee and in turn, the AEPA publishers, can be seen in their statement: “People drive up to eight hours to go to the ‘Old Country’ at Busch Gardens. Why not develop Washington’s only official ethnic area and make it a world-class wonder that attracts people downtown?”<sup>79</sup>

To make it a ‘world-class wonder’, the Study had building design standards for organizations that wished to build within Chinatown, with criteria ranging from ‘overall East-West integration’ to the types of paint colors they should and should not use, “so as not to insult Chinese tradition” with inappropriate colors and color placement. Beyond individual permit applications, the Study also describes recommendations for designing the public space of Chinatown – from incorporating Chinese zodiac signs into the sidewalk pavements (see Illustration 2) and making this paving pattern “incorporated into the official Streetscape Code and enforced by the D.C. Streetscape Committee,” to the suggestion of using traffic signals of a Chinese design and not overhead traffic lights, which will block the view of the Archway.

---

<sup>79</sup> AEPA, Architects Engineers, *Chinatown Design Guidelines Study: Chinatown Urban Design Study*, Point 10 (Summary).

***Illustration 2: Chinese Zodiac Signs embedded in Pavement, 2009***



Given the close connections between AEPA and the Chinatown Steering Committee, AEPA seemed relatively confident in proposing many architectural design ideas to enhance the ‘branding’ they hoped to create for Chinatown, D.C.. Many of the design elements that the Study proposes, are described in these tones of commercial culture and mass media – “they should be ‘world-class attractions’ that capture the interest and imagination of everyone, not least the media.” The zodiac signs to be placed in the pavements would attract “people [who] will come not just to see Chinatown, but also to find out something about themselves. What sign were they born in? What does it mean? Of course, the special sidewalks will attract upbeat media coverage.” These tourists and potential investors, in line with the D.C. city government’s wish to create an ‘international’ city, would come from other parts of the world: “As an architectural

showplace, Chinatown will create pride for D.C. and will generate such publicity...it will also help position D.C. to attract welcome interest and capital from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the rest of Asia.”

In addition, AEPA’s image of a successful (i.e. tourist-generating) Chinatown was to sell this exotic difference within safe confines. AEPA claims that “careful streetscape design will ensure the kind of pleasing order and uniformity of theme needed to create the clean, safe, attractive environment that Chinatown must provide.” Even as the Study encourages applicants to make sure their design enhances the image of Chinatown as a nightlife destination, and a place to play (“Why stay in the suburbs when there will be so much to do in Chinatown and the rest of Downtown?”), it reiterates that ‘Chinatown will be a family place’ and that even at night, it will be a place to go that is “colorful, safe and different.”

By 1991, these guidelines were established as the “Chinatown Design Review Procedures” as described in the District of Columbia Federal Register, which made effective the ruling that construction, renovations and other projects in Chinatown would have to submit a Chinatown Design Review application along with their permit application, to the D.C. government’s Office of Planning.<sup>80</sup> Although how much these guidelines were actually enforced is still debatable, the successful recognition at least officially, of these regulations is a crucial indicator of the partnership between the local Chinatown business community and their efforts to influence the D.C. Office of Planning. The Chinatown Design Guidelines Study was thus a successful project partnership between the municipal authority and the local business elite, who were

---

<sup>80</sup> HLP, Box 4, Folder 21: Chinatown Development: Office of Planning -- Chinatown Design Review Procedures 02/01/1991

united in their desire to redevelop Chinatown into what they saw as a more commercially viable site for attracting people, capital and revenue from the outer suburbs as well as from foreign investors and visitors.

The question then becomes how representative of the business elites' vision for Chinatown? What did others in the non-profit community or residents in Chinatown or even in the suburbs feel about this push towards heavily planned Chinatown design? Perhaps, they are not as far off as we think. In a summer enrichment program run by the Chinese Community Church in 1990, several Chinese American children commented on their wishes for D.C. Chinatown:

“I want Chinatown to look more special. I hope it’s a special street for Chinese people. I think they should build more restaurants that look like old custom houses. Make Chinatown look more interesting than any other street in D.C. that has a custom. Because that is the best way to show people and their customs.”<sup>81</sup>

“I lived in Chinatown all my life...if I can change Chinatown, first I would tear down the old buildings and build new ones in old-fashion styles, something like in China. The new buildings or houses can sell more books, clothes and shoes. They should also have a Chinese school teaching more about China. We should tear down some of the restaurants of the old, slow business restaurants ( I mean this is Chinatown, not foodtown)...and I hope it would come true.”<sup>82</sup>

Their expressed comments are an uncanny mirror of the motivations behind the Chinatown Steering Committee and their Chinatown Urban Design Guidelines Study. The way forward for Chinatown is to recreate the old, but with something newer and better, as the ‘best way to show people and their customs.’ It is through economic development, with new houses in old-fashioned styles, and getting rid of older restaurants that do not conform to the new and glitzy streetscape design

---

<sup>81</sup> Donne Joe Cen, quoted in Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, 74.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Jane Lam, quoted in Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, 74.

guidelines, since it would bring down the heightened image of the new Chinatown. Although only a few comments were selected for inclusion in the book by the community group, Asian American Arts and Media, the fact that these were chosen as the ones to highlight is an implicit nod to the comments expressed, as representative of the community. The business orientation of the Chinatown Steering Committee thus reflects the demographic reality of D.C. Chinatown, that more and more Chinese Americans have a sense of commercial ownership in D.C. as opposed to a residential one. An understanding of this skewed demographic gives an added nuance to the Chinatown Design Guidelines; there is an implicit desire to attract not just white tourists, but the Chinese American community who has moved out to the suburbs. In their quote, that “people drive up to eight hours to go to the ‘Old Country’ at Busch Gardens, Why not develop Washington’s only official ethnic area and make it a world-class wonder that attracts people downtown?”<sup>83</sup> There is an implicit paralleling of white tourists who would go to Busch Gardens to see examples of their colonial heritage, with suburban Chinese Americans, who would be interested in coming back to downtown, to see their own roots represented in the commercial city where their ancestors, or at least, Chinese Americans of a past generation, lived and worked.

The ‘living’ downtown, that goal laid out in the Comprehensive Plan of 1984, for the Chinatown community, is thus represented by streets of tourists and suburban Chinese reliving a cultural history.

---

<sup>83</sup> AEPA, Architects Engineers, *Chinatown Design Guidelines Study: Chinatown Urban Design Study*, Point 10 (Summary), 1988.

## Chapter 3: Globalizing Chinatown: Building the Friendship

Arch, 1986

The specific decisions and tensions that the Chinatown Steering Committee and the D.C. government made in drafting the Chinatown Design Guidelines reflected on the one hand, the shifting strands of motivation within D.C. and the Chinese community. However these specific, ground-level changes also reflected larger shifts in the international backdrop of geopolitics and economics – the rise of China as a political and economic power, the changing nature of the way cities do business – all of which underlay these motivations to build the Archways in the way they did in the 1980s. The symbolic means in which these forces took shape in the form of Archways was also not unique to D.C. but transnational; strikingly similar projects and rhetoric taking place in many Chinese diaspora communities throughout the world.

### **The International Backdrop**

In the 1970s, cities in the developed world such as the United States and Europe were experiencing population decline and lowered economic activity, but by the mid-1980s, cities were beginning to revive again, as Saskia Sassen notes, due to changes in the world economy towards a shift to services rather than industrial production, particularly in finance and specialized services, as well as growing transnationalization of economic activity.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, John Friedmann writes in 1986 that there has been a rise of world cities as major nuclei for the international division

---

<sup>84</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000), 56.

of labor.<sup>85</sup> This perception of cities needing to plug into the global economy clearly permeated the mindsets of the Chinatown elite as well as D.C. government during this timer period.

Despite this, Washington, D.C. was not one of the cities that saw that immediate revival. D.C.'s unemployment rate was around 9% in the 1970s and hit a high of 11.4% in early 1983.<sup>86</sup> The need for an infusion of economic stimuli to the economy and providing a source for continual revenue for the worn-out city was thus an urgent one. The D.C. government saw the national trend towards the shift to services and an increasingly global economy as a clarion call for the city to promote foreign investment in their city, in order to attract population and revenue back to the deteriorating downtown. In that vein, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry's trip to China, was organized in order to "market the city of Washington, D.C. as a place to do business."<sup>87</sup> In a prime example of the increasing transnationalization of economic activity, the trip reported a possible deal with Chinese entrepreneurs to set up a furniture assembly plant which would hire and train enough low-skilled, unemployed residents to lower the city's high unemployment rate.<sup>88</sup>

Just as the increasingly globalized environment prompted Mayor Barry to make these overtures to China, the transnational forces also created the backdrop that caused the tension within the local community over the Archway. The growing international political economy as evidenced in the open-door, modernization policies

---

<sup>85</sup> John Friedmann, "The World City Hypothesis," in *Development and Change* 17 (1986).

<sup>86</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://data.bls.gov>

<sup>87</sup> Quoting Mayor Marion Barry, in Edward D. Sargent's "Mayor Returns, Sees Benefits from Asia Tour," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 1984.

<sup>88</sup> Edward D. Sargent, "Mayor Returns, Sees Benefits from Asia Tour," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 1984.

and the U.S. recognition of China in 1978 led to an influx of Fujian migrants into the local Chinese American community, who set up clan associations, or joined existing Chinese American organizations but bringing with them a more pro-Beijing stance than the previous generation of Chinese Americans, who were predominantly from Guangdong Province (and often had sympathetic ties to Taiwan). The factionalism between traditional associations often spilled over into contemporary organizations, which as other Chinatown scholars have also pointed out, “somewhat contradicts the manifest façade of solidarity so visibly displayed in public collective action.”<sup>89</sup>

The policy climate of seeing Chinatown in the light of a cultural tourism hotspot, was thus influenced by this backdrop of growing internationalization and, with the institution of the Chinatown Design Guidelines, presents a possible reason that the D.C. city government finally looked favorably upon the community’s desire to create the Archway, albeit not in a manner pleasing to everyone within the community.

### **Why Arches?**

At first glance, the ornate symbolism of an arch, proclaiming the entrance to the Chinese community’s physical center, seems relatively benign. Yet this seemingly simple structure bears upon its tiled shoulders a varied burden of motivations, beliefs and symbolism. The Archway represented both the Chinese community’s growing desire to announce and preserve their heritage in landscape, as well as evoke the imagery of how their diasporic community can be a literal bridge between China and the West, particularly crucial during the 1980s as the West began making overtures to

---

<sup>89</sup> Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 122-3.



China. But why arches? According to David Lai, one of the main planners of Victoria, Canada's archway which was built in 1984:

“Before the Second World War, it was customary to erect temporary arches to celebrate special events or welcome dignitaries on visits. Over 120 celebratory arches were built between 1869 and 1945 in various cities throughout British Columbia, including four in Victoria. Therefore a permanent Chinese arch in Chinatown would be not only a way of preserving and recreating a historic past but also a monument to the Chinese heritage in Victoria.”<sup>90</sup>

Lai is referring to a tradition not just before the Second World War but to a historic tradition brought over from China, of creating triumphal arches to commemorate events, activities or people, as seen in the way designs for triumphal arches and Chinese gates were prevalent in 18<sup>th</sup> century China.<sup>91</sup> Thus, just as we saw in the Chinatown Design Guidelines, Chinese community elites often wanted to use traditional architectural modes, whether it is through Qing Dynasty style courtyards and colors, or through creating triumphal archways, heralding Chinese Americans' community in North America. But Chinese arches seem particularly compelling, as it is the first and often largest public marker of Chinese heritage on a city's landscape:

“although our perception of Chinatown may be shaped by our knowledge of it as a social entity, our perception is also influenced by the act of seeing...the way our serial views of Chinatown are linked may cause our minds to mold the chaotic images of Chinatown into a perceived coherent precinct....the architectural components relate harmoniously to the scale of people passing through the street: *We see a large impressive gateway* [italics added], then details of its design, then facades of the three-story buildings, then the street, sidewalks, people and vehicles, and finally, they alleys and courtyards.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, 262.

<sup>91</sup> William Halfpenny, *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste*, (London: 1755, New York: B.Blom, 1968), 25.

<sup>92</sup> David Lai, *Visual Character of Chinatowns*, 29-31.

Thus, although Lai claims that “it is the facades of buildings in Chinatown that constitute the most striking visual component of place character,”<sup>93</sup> the Archway is the first and most prominent symbol of a Chinese community and helps to frame the rest of the viewers’ image of Chinatown into a “coherent precinct.” The strength of this cultural nostalgia in the form of architectural symbolism can be seen in the growing phenomenon of construction of Chinatown archways across North America during this period – in Canada, at least six Chinese gates were built during the 1980s, in Vancouver, Victoria, Montreal, Winnipeg and Edmonton all having at least one Chinatown arch of their own.<sup>94</sup> In the United States, Philadelphia, Boston and San Francisco all have arches, of varying sizes, proclaiming the entrances to their historic community spaces in downtown. Chinatown archways are thus a unique feature of Chinese diaspora communities, particularly in North America and other Westernized countries. Archways became popular not just because of their ability to commemorate the community’s achievement in surviving the migration process, but also, as a marker bridging two cultural communities, China and their host country. In Victoria, the Arch of Harmonious Interest was built to “commemorate the cooperation of the Chinese and non-Chinese citizens of the city in the rehabilitation of Chinatown as well as the harmony of the city’s multicultural society.”<sup>95</sup> In Sydney, Australia, architect of Sydney’s Chinatown archway, Henry Tsang describes the aspects of the Archway and how it represents that bridging of cultures within the community:

“gold coins from China, symbolic of investment in Australia rather than the removal of assets that previously took place; sand and pebbles from China, symbolic of setting down roots in Australia; and the golden tortoise

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, 134.

<sup>95</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Visual Character of Chinatowns*, 31.

that represented the good luck and long life that the Chinese community would bring to Australia...it will contribute...as the symbol of Australia's multiculturalism and a symbolic centre for the Chinese community.”<sup>96</sup>

Yet, despite these claims of laying roots in their host communities and wanting to celebrate their harmonious, multicultural societies, the construction of the Archways also lay claims to competing loyalties and alternative forms of belonging. When the Philadelphia Friendship Arch was built by the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation in 1984, it was proclaimed as “the first authentic gate built in America by artisans from China.”<sup>97</sup> This statement hints at the other underlying motivation: of strengthening cultural ties to China. Given the earlier rhetoric of becoming Chinese communities, in Canada, Australia or the United States, using Chinese American labor, as opposed to “artisans from China” would seem to have been more appropriate to demonstrate their belonging in their new countries. This emphasis on “artisans from China” signals the growing sentiment among Chinese diaspora communities that authentic Chinese identity was increasingly linked to ties with mainland China.

This seems to be unique to the redevelopment of Chinatowns in the 1980s. In 1970, San Francisco's Chinatown, arguably the largest and most historic Chinatown in the United States, but its simple structure of green tiles and plain concrete pillars pales in comparison to the ornate, gleaming structures built in Philadelphia (and later, D.C.) in the 1980s. This purposeful contrast is significant for what it can tell us about the difference between the 1970s and the 1980s – that the importance of ties to China and the symbolism of the Chinatown arch becomes much more than quaint ethnic

---

<sup>96</sup> Anna-Lisa Mak, *Negotiating Identity: Ethnicity, Tourism and Chinatown*, [http://api-network.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77\\_mak.pdf](http://api-network.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77_mak.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, [http://www.chinatown-pcdc.org/accomplishments\\_timelines.htm](http://www.chinatown-pcdc.org/accomplishments_timelines.htm)

pride, but an indicator of growing nationalism, with a China just beginning to open up after the shuttered times of the 1970s.

Ties to China were not only cultural. This bridging of East and West, symbolized through this cultural arch were also used explicitly, in the rhetoric of the 1980s, as potential economic tools, where many seemed to believe that building the arch would help to generate tourism and attract visitors to downtown Chinatown. As David Lai added:

“The arch would be a symbolic entrance to Chinatown and a special attraction. Tourists shopping in the Inner Harbour area would be attracted to the north part of the downtown commercial district, thus benefiting not only Chinatown but also other parts of the downtown area.”<sup>98</sup>

Thus the grandeur of the Chinatown Arches built in the 1980s, whether it is Philadelphia’s “most authentic” arch, Vancouver’s harmonious one or D.C.’s “widest arch”, sought not just to commemorate cultural nostalgia and belonging in the host country but also to make explicit connections to a rising China and its attendant economic and political implications.

### **Foundations of the D.C. Archway**

Given the political and economic nature of Chinatown Arches during the 1980s, it would be particularly appropriate for Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown, the Chinatown in the capital city of the United States, to begin to push for their own Archway. In December 1984, the CCBA published a report titled “Chinatown Gateway: A Proposal of Giving D.C. Chinatown An Identity.” In this report, it notes:

“the existing buildings in Chinatown are mostly three to four-story brick structures that were built between 1860 to 1910. With very little changes of the exteriors, there is hardly any Chinese flavor in the whole Chinatown except the Chinese character names of the

---

<sup>98</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, 262.

stores and restaurants. There was no architectural element physically strong enough to present an image and identity of Chinatown until 1982 when Wah Luck House was erected.”<sup>99</sup>

However, the report notes regretfully that, although “all the Chinese people are very proud of the Wah Luck House,” and that it has “elevated Chinatown’s image...we do not think that, as an apartment building for the elderly, it is appropriate to serve as the symbol of Chinatown... Chinatown needs some streetscape treatments to clearly define its boundaries and identity so that people who come to Chinatown will have a sense of place.”<sup>100</sup> It is a sign of the times and as we saw earlier, the business-orientation of the leading members of the Chinese community, that an architectural monument is a greater symbol of a living Chinatown than a housing complex of real, but elderly, Chinese residents, who will not be able to contribute actively to the city’s economy. The CCBA proposal included a design for two gateways, to define the East and West boundaries of H Street as the Chinese Main Street, “where 90 percent of the stores and restaurants are concentrated.”<sup>101</sup> In addition, the CCBA proposal also emphasized that although each gateway was estimated to cost about \$310,000, the CCBA will be responsible for the project costs, money to be raised in a fundraising effort throughout the country. After construction, the CCBA also claims it will take responsibility for its maintenance. According to its proposal, “the gateways will be a pure donation from the Chinese people to D.C. Chinatown and the city. We do not

---

<sup>99</sup> HLP, Box 14, Folder 9, Chinatown Gate (Friendship Arch): “Chinatown Gateway: A Proposal of Giving D.C. Chinatown An Identity,” Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association 12/1984, pg 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p5-6

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p8

expect to need any D.C. Government's financial appropriation, but we do need its support of this idea and approval of our design.”<sup>102</sup>

There is no mention anywhere in this report, of the furor that had erupted within the community and spilled over into the newspaper pages through the latter half of 1984. Earlier in the year, in May 1984, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, on a much-publicized tour of China, had signed a sister-city accord with the Mayor of Beijing, which included an agreement to build an archway along H and 7<sup>th</sup> Street in Washington's Chinatown district, “a visible symbol of the cultural and economic exchanges which will be part of our sister-city agreement and part of my program to make the District a visible world-class city.”<sup>103</sup> This agreement was greeted with mixed emotions from the local Chinese community. It was greeted with dismay by an older generation of Chinese, particularly those from Taiwan and/or who were immigrants who fled China when the communists came into power. This was most forcibly and vocally represented by Lawrence Locke, head of the CCBA and considered, as the head of the CCBA, the unofficial mayor of Chinatown. Locke was quoted in *The Washington Post* of July 1984 as saying, “We oppose the erection of a communist Archway in Chinatown....we have been counting on our own archway for more than a year and we don't want the communist Chinese butting in.”<sup>104</sup> Locke's letter to the editor on a later article continued in this vein, although attempting to speak for the entire community, refuting the claim that it is purely Taiwanese supporters who are against the idea:

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p11

<sup>103</sup> Quoting Mayor Barry, in Eric Pianin's “Barry's Diplomacy Abroad Leads to Insensitivity in District,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1985.

<sup>104</sup> Quoting Lawrence Locke, in Carlyle Murphy's “Arch Plan Widens D.C.-Chinatown Rift,” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1984

“the headline [of 2 Chinas] was misleading because one party to the dispute over the archway(s) is the Chinese communist government and the other party is the Chinese community in Washington, represented by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and supported by other Chinese communities in America. The latter group consists mostly of American citizens of Chinese parentage who are not necessarily supporters of Taiwan. Therefore, there are not ‘two Chinas’ involved in this case but Chinese communists and Chinese Americans....the D.C. city government dragged its feet when the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association asked for help in early 1984 to construct its archway. On the other hand, the D.C. government agreed to let the Chinese communists build an archway in Chinatown without prior consultation with the local Chinese community. Isn’t it ridiculous for the D.C. government to discriminate against its own citizens and constituents in favor of a foreign government?... I can only wonder why the city government keeps on humiliating the local Chinese community.”

However, not made public in his letter to the mainstream media was the support that some in the community did feel about the proposed D.C. Archway with Beijing. In an anonymous, threatening letter to the Washington China Post a handwritten letter in English and Chinese reprimanded the CCBA for refusing the offer of assistance from Peking:

“Today, the Washington China Post, set up by people from Taiwan, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association set up by some Chinese American societies in the District of Columbia both voiced their opposition [to the proposed Beijing-sponsored Arch]. Is this not an attempt to ‘bury Chinatown in D.C.’? Yet we, a group of Chinese Americans, decisively oppose the action and absurd idea of both the Washington China Post and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. If the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association dared to object, their President had better be careful, and be prepared to engage several FBI agents for his bodyguards. We, the group of people who love Chinatown, are forwarding a warning to the Association. The Association will be responsible for all future consequences. Please take note. Today, we also want to pose a question: If it were Taiwan who offered assistance, then what?”<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> HLP, Box 14, Folder 10: Chinatown Gate (Friendship Arch): Letter opposing People's Republic Arch, June 1984.

Their rhetorical question was not wholly unfounded, since Locke had been quoted as saying that part of the funds they had raised for their second arch was through overseas Chinese communities in Panama, Peru and Jamaica and through fundraising pleas throughout the United States against an arch partly financed by the communist government in China. However, despite claims by the media that the government did not widely consult the local community, Alfred Liu, a member of the Chinatown Steering Committee had accompanied Mayor Barry upon his trip to China and was later appointed the architect to design the Archway. Liu, in defense of the Arch, responded that the archway “does not bear any political statement. It is an artwork.”<sup>106</sup>

The D.C. Archway proposal thus revealed and exacerbated the tension felt between the relatively new Chinatown Steering Committee and the more established CCBA. Lawrence Locke of CCBA claimed that he had only attended two meetings of the Steering Committee and has “repeatedly demanded that it be dissolved, saying only the Benevolent Association can speak for Chinatown.” John Fondersmith, chief of the downtown section of the Office of Planning who helped to establish the Chinatown Steering Committee, responded that “the steering committee was formed after attempts to work with the association [CCBA] failed. The association “wasn’t effective” because “it has a wide range of interests whereas [the steering committee] is focused more narrowly on economic planning and development.”<sup>107</sup> The CCBA had in fact met with and had substantial discussion with the Chinatown Steering

---

<sup>106</sup> Quoting Alfred Liu, in Kenneth Bredemeier’s “Opponents Protest Plan to Erect ‘Communist Arch’ in Chinatown,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 1985.

<sup>107</sup> Carlyle Murphy’s “Arch Plan Widens D.C.-Chinatown Rift,” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1984



Committee, attending their meeting in July 1984 to ask for the Chinatown Steering Committee's support in the privately-funded Arch that the CCBA was hoping to construct. According to the minutes of the meeting, "after substantial discussion, it was moved by Mr Alfred Liu and Dr James Pao and carried unanimously that the Chinatown Steering Committee endorses or supports the construction of archways by public and/or private funds providing that they meet a set of approved design guidelines and have no political expression or inference."<sup>108</sup> Less than a year later, in February 1985 as the Archway controversy continued to mount in the mainstream press, then CCBA president Bosco Lee, again presented CCBA's case to the Chinatown Steering Committee, reiterating the reminder of past repression this Arch would represent and that it might adversely affect business in the area. However, the Chinatown Steering Committee continued to hold firm in supporting both Archway proposals, particularly when Deputy Mayor McClinton, who was present at the meeting, re-emphasized that the city-funded Archway met the design guidelines, that the Mayor was committed to the Arch and that they would be happy to consider building an additional arch funded by the CCBA.<sup>109</sup>

A seemingly innocuous proposal for a static architectural monument in Washington D.C. Chinatown thus resulted in calls of community treason, death threats and multiple salacious *Washington Post* articles – further proof that visual, architectural symbols, particularly as they seem to represent particular cultural and national ideologies, can be flashpoints and anchors for a community's identity, no

---

<sup>108</sup> HLP, Box 5, Folder 10: Chinatown Steering Committee: Request for meeting venue, meeting notice, minutes, presentation of "The Chinatown Program-Part of a Living Downtown" 07/25/1984.

<sup>109</sup> HLP, Box 5, Folder 19: Chinatown Steering Committee: Minutes 02/04/1985.

matter how irrelevant they seem to the actual byplay of trade and living in everyday life. Chinatown archways might be, as some critics note:

“reshaped images of Chinese ethnicity...and a mnemonic for Chinatown [as a] unified, sterilized identity for the Chinese community reconstructed from an imaginary past...[and that] acceptance of this simplistic, reconstructed identity by visitors, overlooks the fact that Chinatown failed to represent anything but a sterile, pre-digested version of a culture which omitted diversity and complexity. It refers neither to China, nor to the Chinese people living within a multicultural society, and has become a simulacrum – a copy without an original.”<sup>110</sup>

But what these critics of the archways do not take in account, and as this chapter has shown, is how the community itself can be complicit in their own marketing of their ethnic identity and image because of the particular international forces that drive the need for such large, public symbols of connection to particular cultural communities, as well as physical and economic networks.

---

<sup>110</sup> Anna-Lisa Mak, 96.

## Chapter 4: Selling Chinatown, 1990s

### **Sports Center Chinatown Redux**

The development debates surrounding D.C. Chinatown from the 1970s came full circle in twenty years. The sports arena debates that sparked such controversy in the 1970s, and led to protests from the Chinese community and their African American and furniture store owning neighbors, reared its head again in the 1990s. But, this time, the players and the arguments have changed, tellingly and significantly. Instead of the progress versus the people debates, the 1980s design strategies for Chinatown, the increasingly muscular Chinatown Steering Committee and their growing interest in commercial economic development plans, have had their impact and changed the 1990s debate to one of developers versus other commercial developers. Instead of historic preservation of 19<sup>th</sup> century facades or low-income residential units, glitzy proposals are discussed which are best suited to harness the area's economic potential and ability to bring more tourists into the quickly growing area. What has changed, as we have seen in the previous chapters, is a growing sense within the Chinese community to rehabilitate Chinatown through large-scale economic projects and commercial development with ethnic veneers that can attract street traffic and main stream clientele. The undercurrent of broader shifts in redevelopment politics also informed these changing local attitudes and the efforts of the D.C. city government and the local Chinese business elite to utilize the tools of visual symbols and architectural branding to enhance the image of the city in the context of the economic and social times. Sharon Zukin, the cultural critic describes

how, in the late twentieth century: “culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, *tourism*) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city’s symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and space.”<sup>111</sup> The construction of the D.C. Archway and the attempt to regulate a holistic branding experience through the Chinatown Design Standards was thus a method of revival via the symbolic economy, which the D.C. government and local community had seen attempted in other cities during their time.

Thus, when Abe Pollin submitted his MCI Center proposal in 1995, for a regional entertainment complex that included shops, restaurants, a sports museum, pedestrian terraces and a five-level arena for basketball, hockey and for concerts, the plan was “blessed by every panel considering it.”<sup>112</sup> This plan had fewer opponents, since Pollin was planning to use a mostly vacant lot on the 600 block of G Street NW, thus not razing any part of existing Chinatown or historic buildings. In addition, in a move probably designed to fulfill the Chinatown Design Guidelines, the plan included a curved, dragon wall style canopy (see Illustration 3) on the sidewalks closest to Chinatown, to mimic and blend in with the canopies of nearby Chinese restaurants and businesses.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 2.

<sup>112</sup> Maryann Haggerty, “Pollins Shows off Plan for Arena that he Insists will be Built,” *The Washington Post*, September 28, 1995.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

***Illustration 3: Dragon-style Wall Canopy on Verizon Center (formerly MCI Center), 2009***



Pollin's new plan also attempted to appease the historic preservationists, with red pavers in a basket weave pattern on the sidewalks to evoke Washington's past, and some facades of the building with the same white limestone color to echo the federal museums nearby.<sup>114</sup> Thus, it is evident that the ensuing outcry that his first plan provoked had encouraged Pollin to consider the unique characteristics of the neighborhood and to follow the recent developments in the climate of its Chinatown residents to propose a plan more appealing to those vocal members of the Chinatown Steering Committee who had promoted the Chinatown Design Guidelines.

There were still critics of the plan, despite Pollin's attempts. Historic preservationists continued to argue that the building will overwhelm everything in its vicinity, given its larger size over the smaller, historic buildings in the area.<sup>115</sup> In

---

<sup>114</sup> Maryann Haggerty, "Pollins Shows off Plan for Arena that he Insists will be Built," *The Washington Post*, September 28, 1995.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

addition, it was also noted that the MCI Center's focus on sports teams and restaurants would have the indirect effect of boosting particular kinds of retail development – more specifically that of restaurants and entertainment, as opposed to the kinds of retail goods that a residential neighborhood might have desired. A *Washington Post* reporter described how about half a dozen eateries had opened up along 7<sup>th</sup> Street in anticipation of the arena's opening and quoted developer Douglas Jemal, owner of several storefronts, as saying: "restaurants are the future of [urban] retail. I'm not saying that it's going to be that way forever, but right now people don't want to go out and buy a pair of shoes and sunglasses (in the city). They want to go out to bars and restaurants."<sup>116</sup> However, as Pyatt, *The Washington Post* reporter noted this implicitly assumed that the people who were going to be walking along 7<sup>th</sup> Street were tourists or visitors from the suburbs, not residents who might have needed to pop out of their apartments, houses or condominiums to buy precisely a pair of shoes or sunglasses.

Although Pyatt highlighted the need to consider the welfare of residents living in the area, the residents themselves saw things a bit differently – they were less concerned about the need to cater to them because there were fewer and fewer residents living in the 7<sup>th</sup> Street area by the mid 1990s. Wah Luck House, the vaunted symbol of Chinatown's anchor in the downtown D.C. area in the early 1980s, hid a more cynical outlook on the prospects for Chinatown. A *Washington Post* reporter, writing a feature article on the 'Last Days of Chinatown,' and the negative impact of the proposed arena, claimed that "no one in the Wah Luck House has dared to admit

---

<sup>116</sup> Rudolph A. Pyatt, Jr. "A City Cannot Live on Food and Drink Alone," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1997

to the others that they were ready, even eager, to speed along the demise of their own place. It [seemed] somehow disrespectful to the elders, to the courageous immigrants who came before them.”<sup>117</sup> This attitude, hidden though it might have been, could be the reason, that no new residential development was made in the area, nor had it made the neighborhood any more attractive to immigrants who “[yearned] to live somewhere safer and greener.”<sup>118</sup>

Although the residents did acknowledge that the proposed arena would likely make the area safer, busier and improve business, the arena would also push up real estate values, possibly raising the rent. But fewer and fewer Chinese in the downtown area were worried about apartment rentals; what was more significant to the increasingly business-oriented Chinese community left in Chinatown, was how this raised the cost of doing business and how they would lose control of the commercial development of Chinatown. Alfred Liu, architect of the Archway, key member of the Chinatown Steering Committee and the Chinatown Design Guidelines, described the impact of what he thought the arena would have on Chinese businesses:

“This is a sports arena, not a concert hall. Concertgoers might want a sit-down dinner after a show, but hockey fans get in their cars and go home. What an arena would do is push up real estate values, and this would destroy Chinatown by inviting big developers to eat up the small flowers. The money you can make from a Chinese restaurant is not enough to make you say ‘No’ to a big developer. The owners will sell, move to Florida and enjoy the rest of their lives.”

Yet, the sense of doom of Chinatown’s potential demise did not spark the same kind of protests as the Center/arena proposal did back in the 1970s. This was partly because the 1990s proposal was more sensitive to the needs of its surroundings and

---

<sup>117</sup> Marc Fisher, “If the Price is Right, We Sell,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 29, 1995

<sup>118</sup> Fisher.

because the arena would only take up one block, as opposed the sprawling, 25-acre proposal back in the 1970s. But the timing was also more propitious. The opposition in the 1990s had been reduced to a few eulogistic pieces in *The Washington Post*, decrying the demise of Chinatown rather than calling for outright protests or alternatives like in the 1970s. The community itself, both its Chinese residents and the larger D.C. society, was ready to see what a brash, glitzy arena, proposing large economic benefits, could bring to a historically-preserved, culturally rich but economically challenged part of the city.

### **Guarded Optimism**

Thus, despite the reservations expressed by some, such as Alfred Liu, who were worried about the potential disintegration of an overtly Chinese character to the 7<sup>th</sup> Street area, others in the community welcomed the economic prospects of the arena with a sense of guarded optimism and a fading need to preserve the Chinese history of the place. Yeni Wong, who moved to Washington D.C. in 1980, owned eight of the storefronts in Chinatown. Wong lived in Potomac, Maryland but felt “an obligation to Chinatown,” when she first invested in one of the Chinese restaurants downtown. Wong was told, “don’t sell food, buy land. Then you can play golf,” by one of her associates who taught her about the food-importing business. Wong proceeded to do so and became one of Chinatown’s largest landowners. Wong’s “obligation” to Chinatown and initial desire to cater to the Chinese design dreams of the mid 1980s was prevalent when she initially began plans for a development strip in Chinatown. Wong’s first plan for the development strip was to create a Chinese



market center, with Chinese food, furniture and art stores.<sup>119</sup> However, by 1995 when she was interviewed by *The Washington Post*, Wong had changed her plans for this development strip to be specifically or solely Chinese-oriented. Wong indicated that it was instead, likely to be held by fast-food franchises and or upscale restaurants, reflecting the changing attitude of many Chinatown business owners by the 1990s: “This is a free market system. You cannot demand that there will be a Chinese gift shop if nobody will visit it. We shouldn’t emphasize distinguishing ourselves from other places. America is a melting pot. If I’m so concerned about preserving Chinese culture, I should stay in China.”<sup>120</sup>

Linda Lee, owner of Hunan Chinatown, located in downtown Chinatown which she opened in 1984, was one of the most vocal supporters of the new arena. Lee declared that the changes in Chinatown were for the better:

“Assimilation in the mainstream of America is every immigrant’s dream. It is not avoidable. In a community where even first-generation immigrants take American first names, no one wants to live in a Chinese ghetto. If small Asian-owned businesses have to close, so be it, this is the economic system, I don’t think anybody should expect subsidized rent.”<sup>121</sup>

Linda Lee’s support of the MCI Center was not just lip service; Lee operated a restaurant concession stand inside the Center and helped promote its construction to other Chinese business owners. Her support was so strong that Abe Pollin presented her with a silver shovel and white hard hat, as mementoes of the groundbreaking on October 18, 1995 and the opening on December 2, 1997 of the MCI Center.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Marc Fisher, “If the Price is Right, We Sell,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 29, 1995.

<sup>120</sup> Marc Fisher, “If the Price is Right, We Sell,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 29, 1995.

<sup>121</sup> Rebecca Charry, “Can Chinatown Survive?” *Common Denominator* 1, no. 15, July 20, 1998.

<sup>122</sup> Sari Horowitz, “Ward 2 in Profile: City’s Heart Gets Stronger,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1998.

Linda Lee's dream was realized when the MCI Center opened with resounding success in December 1997. The sell-out crowds at the MCI Center's opening National Basketball Association (NBA) game came not just to cheer on their home team, the Washington Wizards, but also to experience "this moment in history" which was going to "bring morale back to the city, bring money back to city."<sup>123</sup> One ticket-holder arrived two hours before the start of the Wizards game just so he could walk around the area: "this is event is at least as important as opening the Kennedy Center in reversing the decay of the city."<sup>124</sup> An added incentive that attracted the crowds to the MCI Center and encouraged pedestrian traffic along 7<sup>th</sup> Street was the renovations done to the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metro station. The entrance that used to be on 7<sup>th</sup> and G was moved to 7<sup>th</sup> and F Streets, three escalators and two elevators were added and the number of fare gates increased from four to 17. The old exit could handle about 14,000 people a day, but the new exits were designed to handle up to 10,000 in half an hour. These renovations cost up to \$19 million but was paid for with Metro funds and with federal money, a significant indicator of the city as well as federal government's belief in what the arena could do to help improve the economy of downtown D.C.<sup>125</sup>

The ease of access, new restaurants and pubs, such as Fado, an Irish pub, a Starbucks and the large Discovery Channel store all seemed to live up to these hopes to attract tourists and other visitors seeking entertainment back to downtown, as indicated in the euphoric quotes from several visitors: John Schroeder of Alexandria

---

<sup>123</sup> David Montgomery, "An Opener to Behold; In a Smashing Debut, new MCI Center is a Winner," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1997.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> David Montgomery, "MCI Center, Metro Station Stage Debut for Two," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1997.

said, “This is a great addition to downtown, I’m looking forward to staying downtown after work for a game.” Joseph James of Woodbridge, who noted that his family did not come down to the city very much, was quoted as saying: “I know we’re going to be coming downtown a lot more.”<sup>126</sup>

But was this just opening day excitement and the novelty of a new arena and finally having a stadium in the District? How long did the euphoria last? Did the arena truly live up to the weight of expectations on its steel shoulders and help to revitalize the city in the way that Chinese restaurateurs, long-time District residents and federal and city officials dreamed? In February 1998, restaurants and coffee shops in Chinatown reported increases of 30 to 50 percent in their business since the arena opened.<sup>127</sup> Smaller business entrepreneurs in fields where image is crucial, were also attracted by the new street traffic and glimmering streetscape and opened up shop in the years after the arena opened. Studio-Spark, a graphic design firm moved their offices to one of Chinatown’s old rowhouses, where the large windows of the historic structure allowed plenty of sunlight.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Jeff Lee and Peter Liu, of Lee and Liu Associates, a pair of young landscape architects with a small, eight-person firm, wanted to move to the area because they were looking for an urban neighborhood but also for “a high-ceilinged, older building, a dramatic building that would create light.”<sup>129</sup> They managed to find the perfect location above the Riggs Bank (now Commerce Bank) located at 7th and I Street, where the building, built at

---

<sup>126</sup> David Montgomery, “An Opener to Behold; In a Smashing Debut, new MCI Center is a Winner,” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1997.

<sup>127</sup> Justin Gillis, “Hear it Roar: Chinatown Springs Back to Life,” *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1998.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Maryann Haggerty, “Lee and Liu, Ready to Go to Work in Chinatown,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 1998.

the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was described by historic preservationists as “excellent examples of Romanesque revival style...of heavy rusticated ornamentation...and arcaded fenestration [providing] a means for organizing and articulating the numerous windows of the tall facades.”<sup>130</sup>

The MCI Center thus seemed to be having the expected and hoped-for effect of drawing crowds of hungry, hockey-obsessed tourists and suburbanites to the downtown area. But the MCI Center also seemed to have an indirect effect of subliminal advertising for an urban neighborhood that has all the amenities of a modern, commercial downtown but also the charm and exoticism of 19<sup>th</sup> century rowhouses and Chinatown. If the games and concerts attracted street traffic, the street traffic is what captured the attention of pedestrians who might have looked at Chinatown not just as a place to visit, but to work and develop. As Del Monte, the young designer running Studio-Spark, the graphic-design firm, noted, it was important for him to be “on the cutting edge” in his field of graphic design and Chinatown, was where “I think people are just now realizing what kind of place this is going to be.”<sup>131</sup>

On a less glamorous, albeit equally important note, the MCI Center had the direct effect of increasing more mundane forms of employment in the downtown area. A 1999 study done on the economic impact of the MCI Center, based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Center of Business and Economic Statistics’ Department of Employment Services and the MCI Center Human Resources Division. According to the study, since 1997, the MCI Center had created 1,926

---

<sup>130</sup> Don’t Tear it Down, Downtown Building Survey, Volume 1, p14.

<sup>131</sup> Justin Gillis, “Hear it Roar: Chinatown Springs Back to Life,” *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1998.

(1,526 new jobs plus 400 relocated jobs) for the District of Columbia. 25 percent of these jobs were professional (and the remaining were low-paying jobs that included ticket sellers, cashiers, bartenders, cleaners, retailers, etc) and 60 per cent of these newly created jobs were held by D.C. residents.<sup>132</sup> Although the study was specific with regard to the increased job opportunities that the creation of the MCI Center brought about, it was more guarded, vague and less convincing about whether the MCI Center really expanded the District's existing business base. According to the study's statement of the problem, in order to analyze whether the MCI Center has expanded the existing business base, data had to be found to support the assertion that the MCI Center creates new business linkages with existing economic activities in the neighborhood and/or supplement existing businesses. The study declared that the 1,926 jobs created, confirmed that fact.<sup>133</sup> However, the study did not provide any additional data for proving these linkages or supplements to the existing businesses in the neighborhood. Although this might have been beyond the scope of the study and its sources, the faint disappointment in the multiplier effects people had hoped to gain from the arena's construction were voiced in a *Washington Post* article in May 1999. Velocity Grill, a restaurant in the MCI Center closed in May 1999. Joe Englert, owner of The Rock, a bar near the arena also noted that business was slower to pick up than in other cities such as San Antonio or Cleveland, where new stadiums had opened as well.<sup>134</sup> However, some such as Linda Lee, the Chinese restaurant owner who supported the arena from the start, continued to voice staunch support and optimism:

---

<sup>132</sup> Ernestina Mashadi Manong, "The Economic Impact of the MCI Center," Howard University Masters' Thesis, 1999, p27.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Eric Lipton, "Arena Renaissance Hasn't Happened; Despite Disappointments, Downtown Merchants Hope for Turnaround," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1999.

“The MCI Center has built a consensus and confidence on the fate of the east end of downtown. I had expected that businesses would build up slowly. It is like any business. When you first start out, you have to build it.”<sup>135</sup> Yet, particularly compelling in these studies of the economic impact of the arena is the lack of interviews or data collected of other businesses in the area, or even the smaller Chinese restaurants. This was perhaps a telling sign of the dwindling Chinese influence of the 7<sup>th</sup> Street area, that *Washington Post* reporters, who in previous years were eager to paint the picture of a dying Chinatown, no longer were willing, or even able, to find those who might have wanted to decry the changes that the arena had wrought.

#### **More Gallery Place, Less China Trade Center**

The Chinatown business elite had changed their attitudes and their vision by the 1990s. The arena was something to be welcomed, as became particularly apparent in an intriguing debate over a proposal by a developer to build a large retail, residential and movie entertainment complex next to the MCI Center, in the hopes of pulling concert and sports traffic into its orbit and staying downtown a little longer. In February 1998, Alfred Liu sued Metro in U.S. District Court on charges of favoritism for selecting Western Development Corporation’s proposal to build a retail, residential and movie complex on the coveted site. Liu charged that Herbert Miller, head of Western Development Corporation, was selected because of his close ties to the city, since Miller was chairman of D.C. Mayor Marion Barry’s taskforce to

---

<sup>135</sup> Eric Lipton, “Arena Renaissance Hasn’t Happened; Despite Disappointments, Downtown Merchants Hope for Turnaround,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1999.

revitalize downtown.<sup>136</sup> Liu further contended that Western Development Corporation's proposal violated the city's zoning guidelines to preserve Chinatown. In contrast, Liu's failed proposal included a bid for a China Trade Center, on H Street NW would help to fulfill those city guidelines, which as we saw in previous chapters, Liu himself had helped to institute. Although we have no records indicating what might have occurred to Liu's lawsuit,<sup>137</sup> Western Development Corporation's plans for the 7<sup>th</sup> and H site expanded to include a soon to be vacated D.C. city building at 614 H St, and Liu clearly refused to surrender the cherished land he wanted to develop to maintain the architectural Chinese character of the neighborhood. In a meeting of the D.C. Council in August 1998, Liu, in opposition to the sale, claimed that "if the heart of Chinatown, 7<sup>th</sup> and H Street becomes a sports world or movie town or other names Miller chooses, we can be sure that Chinatown will be gone forever."<sup>138</sup> The Chinatown Steering Committee, the official voice of the committee to the D.C. government, also swung into action, writing a letter requesting that the District take competitive bids on 614 H Street. Although their letter did not specifically refer to Liu's failed proposal for the China Trade Center, this would probably have been clearly in the minds of both the Chinatown Steering Committee and the D.C. government, since the proposal for an international trade complex featuring Chinese goods and other cultural events had been in the works in the early 1990s before the real estate recession collapsed the plan.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> The *The Washington Post*, "Developer Sues over Chinatown Bid," February 27, 1998.

<sup>137</sup> A search of the archive of legal cases did not pull up any results of a District Court case regarding Alfred H. Liu suing the Metro system. The complaint might not have made it to court.

<sup>138</sup> Maryann Haggerty, "Plan for Expanded Entertainment Complex Hits a Roadblock," *The Washington Post*, August 3, 1998.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

Although Liu and the Chinatown Steering Committee were unable to push the plan for a China Trade Center through, a walk through the giant movie complex at 7<sup>th</sup> and H Street today, with the giant lotus-like pagoda rising above the balcony of the luxury condominiums there, bears clear and towering testimony to the fact that the Chinatown Design Guidelines that Liu and the Chinatown Steering Committee had instituted had to be complied with. But the loss represents the changing fortunes and changing nature of the debate surrounding Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown. No more is it the black-and-white, 'modern progress' versus 'historic cultural community', but competing notions of what it means to develop the Chinatown area. The bonds of nostalgia that Washington-area Chinese had felt towards downtown Chinatown were loosening in the face of greater economic benefits of an arena. Some glimmers of Chinese influence still remained, but tended to be in smaller gestures and cultural events, such as the proposed Chinatown Park at the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and I Street,<sup>140</sup> or the way Adams National Bank hired a practitioner of feng shui to arrange its interiors and furnishings to ward off evil spirits and keep in positive energy when they opened their branch in Chinatown,<sup>141</sup> rather than tied to the large-scale economic projects that Liu and the Chinatown Steering Committee proposed.

The forces of international trade and providing residential amenities that prevailed through the 1980s, when the Chinatown Steering Committee was able to go from strength to strength, instituting design guidelines that all developers had to follow, or constructing a large Archway as a symbol of international friendship and

---

<sup>140</sup> HLP, Box 4 Folder 16: Chinatown Development: Preliminary Concept Development of Chinatown park on 6th and I St 07/1988.

<sup>141</sup> Justin Gillis, "Hear it Roar: Chinatown Springs Back to Life," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1998.



economic ties with Beijing, had slowed down in the 1990s. Instead, the new development trend was about entertainment economics – generating excitement and providing a catalyst for city development, but of offices, restaurants and other entertainment retail, rather than residential services or trade centers focused on the outside world. The moment for a commercialized Chinatown had passed and what was left behind, the Archway, the street lamps and street signs, were, in a way, enduring cultural artifacts of a time period when city development and city revenue was caught up in the whirlwind of the global post-industrial economy, with its dreams of becoming a global hub in turn spurring dreams of making D.C.'s Chinatown the cultural conduit for that economic energy.

## Conclusion: Reading Chinatown Architecture

As this study of D.C. Chinatown has shown, a spatial turn in scholarship on Chinese American histories and Chinatowns, particularly in the 1970s to the 1990s does not mean that there is a one-to-one relationship between the overt reasons behind a building's façade and the local, global, economic and sociopolitical motivations behind its creation. Instead, architectural creations that purport to proclaim one form of identity can be led to reveal ambiguous and complex readings, when their historical, social and ethnic contexts of creation are taken into account.

The story of D.C. Chinatown adds to the recently growing literature of the relationship between race and architecture, of how, as ethnic communities sought to solidify and transform their identities into one which encapsulated both their foreign heritage as well as their lived experience in America, public architecture and visual streetscapes became both conscious and unconscious sites for the creation of community memory and public representation. However, this initial foray into the development history of D.C. Chinatown does engender questions for future research. The remarkable similarity between the rhetoric used in DC, Sydney, Victoria and other small Chinatowns for the uses of architecture during redevelopment throughout nations with Chinese communities naturally begs for there to be a larger, more comprehensive comparative study than this thesis could convey. A comparative study will help us see where there may be shared characteristics, of use to immigrant historians, for how Chinese immigrants shape and make sense of the spaces in which they find themselves in, no matter where they are. The difference between the case

studies could then point to what is unique about a particular regional context or time period in which immigrants settled and dispersed in a location.

In D.C. Chinatown's plans for redevelopment, we can see the yearning to create that 'informal capital city' and 'ethnopolis' on par with New York and San Francisco, to serve as a spatial touchstone for the local Chinese community's identity. However, does this continue to hold true as satellite communities in Rockville and Wheaton in suburban Maryland take off as ethnic centers and begin to develop their own sense of history and place? What will happen when the teenagers who remembered D.C. Chinatown are replaced by teenagers who have fond memories of Rockville Pike, or Viers Mill Road instead? Just as this essay promotes the need to do understand the role of architecture in historic downtowns, we need to delve deeper into exploring the role of architecture in the suburbs. Although there may be less pedestrian streetscape given the sprawl, these visual markers, of shop signs and mall centers, will continue to evoke complex feelings of varied community identity.

Finally, this study has focused predominantly on written, documentary sources to recreate the story of D.C. Chinatown and its redevelopment. On the one hand, the constraints of time has precluded the use of extensive oral history interviews to get the elusive perspective of Chinatown residents and others who are usually silenced in mainstream newspaper accounts or government records. However, this study has also focused on the documentary evidence to draw attention to the severe gap in the historical record and to promote awareness of the need to actively acquire and preserve the written records of Chinatown history. As useful as drawing upon oral memories of current residents are, if the focus on oral surveys then negate

the community's desire to collect and preserve their written records, this will be a dereliction of a historian's duty. Oral histories, as important as they are, can never be wholly free of bias and nostalgic recollection. They need to be considered in conjunction with written records and correspondence, which are created in the heat of the moment and can reflect the motivations and impulses of that moment, no matter how irrelevant or inaccurate they seem in hindsight. In addition, the written record of D.C. Chinatown often refers to the "Chinese community" – as though an entire bloc of people grouped together by their ethnicity, share the same motivations and impulses. As I have sought to demonstrate in this essay, the Chinese community can often be divided in their opinions with regard to historic preservation of the downtown Chinatown space, be it due to personal nostalgia, economic status or time of their arrival in the U.S. Yet, many of the records I consulted and the newspaper articles that describe the community do not always feel the need to distinguish the particular context of individual Chinatown residents. Further research is thus needed to contextualize the tangled voices in the written records. More administrative and organizational history of the CCBA can be done to further unveil how these Chinatown elite saw themselves in relation to the rest of the Chinatown; more documentation and archival outreach done to collect information on Eastern Wind, Asian American Arts and Media and other non-profit Chinatown groups that would help draw a fuller picture of Chinatown life.

An increase in the scope and depth of the written history of the Chinatown community will also help to enhance the study of the visual element of Chinatown history. As much as I argue in this essay for the importance of architecture and

streetscape, visual aspect of architecture as a source of historical material makes it particularly prone to contemporary rather than historical readings, given that it exists through time and space. Thus the written element of Chinatown history, through plans and letters and reports contextualizing its creation and use, is the source through which we can understand the meanings of the visual.

## Bibliography

### Newspapers and Publications

*The Washington Post*, 1972-1998.

*Eastern Wind*, An Asian American Community Newsletter, 1974. Personal Collection of Jeanette Chow.

Asian American Arts and Media, Inc. *AAMPLITUDE*, Spring 1985. Personal Collection of Wendy Lim.

Knipp, Steven. "Lost in Transformation: Can A Tiny American Chinatown Survive Its Success?" *Pacific News Service*, May 12, 2005.

### Government Publications

D.C. Government Office of the Secretary, District of Columbia Municipal Regulations Chapter 24: Chinatown Design Review Procedures, [http://os.dc.gov/os/lib/os/info/odai/title\\_10\\_part\\_2/title10\\_chapter24.pdf](http://os.dc.gov/os/lib/os/info/odai/title_10_part_2/title10_chapter24.pdf)

D.C. Government, Office of Planning, "Comprehensive Plan," <http://planning.dc.gov>.

AEPA, Architects Engineers. *Chinatown Design Guidelines Study: Chinatown Urban Design Study*. Washington: Government of the District of Columbia, [1988].

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://data.bls.gov>

### Archival Materials and Other Sources

Don't Tear it Down. Historic District Application Form, Downtown Surveys, vol I, Historical Society of Washington, D.C., [1981].

George Washington University Gelman Library Special Collections, Washington, D.C.

Lee (Harrison) Papers (HLP), 1928-1992.

Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, "Accomplishments and Timelines" [http://www.chinatown-pcdc.org/accomplishments\\_timelines.htm](http://www.chinatown-pcdc.org/accomplishments_timelines.htm)

### Secondary Sources

Anderson, Kay J. *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Chinatown, 1875-1980*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Washington: The Making of an American Capital*. New York:

- Amistad Press, 2008.
- Cary, Francine Curro, ed. *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Books, 1996.
- Dutra, Jeremy W. "You Can't Tear it Down: the Origins of the D.C. Historic Preservation Act " (May 1, 2002). *Georgetown Law. Georgetown Law Historic Preservation Papers Series*. Paper 1.  
<http://lsr.nellco.org/georgetown/hpps/papers/1>.
- Friedmann, John. "The World City Hypothesis," in *Development and Change* 17 (1986).
- Halfpenny, William. *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste*. London: 1755, New York: B.Blom, 1968.
- Kwong, Peter. *The New Chinatown*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1987.
- Laguerre, Michel S. *The Global Ethnopolis: Chinatown, Japantown and Manilatown in American Society*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.
- Lai, David Chuenyan. *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, (Victoria, Canada: University of British Columbia Press), 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Visual Character of Chinatowns [Vision, Culture and Landscape]," *Places*: 7, no. 1 (1990),  
<http://repositories.cdlib.org/ced/places/vol7/iss1/DavidChuenyanLai>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Building and Rebuilding Harmony: The Gateway to Victoria's Chinatown*. Victoria, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 1997.
- Lee, Rose Hum. "The Decline of Chinatowns in the United States," *The American Journal of Sociology* 54, no.5 (1949).
- Li, Wei ed. *From Urban Enclave to Ethnic Suburb: New Asian Communities in Pacific Rim Countries*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006.
- Lim, Wendy. *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal*, Washington, D.C: Asian American Arts and Media, Inc., 1991.
- Lin, Jan. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- Lou, Jia. "Revitalizing Chinatown into a Heterotopia: A Geosemiotic Analysis of Shop Signs in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown," *Space and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2007).

- Mak, Anna-Lisa. "Negotiating Identity: Ethnicity, Tourism and Chinatown," *Journal of Australian Studies* 77 (2003),  
[http://apinetwork.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77\\_mak.pdf](http://apinetwork.com/main/pdf/scholars/jas77_mak.pdf).
- Manong, Ernestina Mashadi. "The Economic Impact of the MCI Center," MA Thesis, Howard University, 1999.
- Mark, Diane Mei Lin and Ginger Chih, *A Place Called Chinese America*. Dubuque, Iowa: The Organization of Chinese Americans and Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Cities in a World Economy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000.
- Wong, Marie Rose. *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004.
- Yip, Christopher L. "Association, Residence and Shop: An Appropriation of Commercial Blocks in North American Chinatowns," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 5: Gender, Class and Shelter (1995).
- Zukin, Sharon. *The Cultures of Cities*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).





