ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	RESTORING HISTORIC CHINATOWNS
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Historic Chinatowns across the United States are facing unprecedented pressure from gentrification, large-scale redevelopment, and demographic displacement. As housing costs rise and land values surge, long-standing residents, family-owned businesses, and cultural institutions are pushed out. They are often replaced by luxury developments or tourist-oriented enterprises that commodify, rather than sustaining, cultural identity. This erosion of community threatens the social fabric that generations of Chinese immigrants built in response to exclusion, discrimination, and segregation. For many Chinese Americans, Chinatowns have served not only as physical places of safety and opportunity but also as living archives of resilience, cultural continuity, and collective belonging.

Guided by the question *"How can historic Chinatowns preserve their cultural identity in the midst of displacement within their communities?"* this research examines how architectural and spatial strategies can counteract the cultural and social fragmentation caused by gentrification. Displacement does more than remove people; it disrupts intergenerational networks, weakens language and cultural retention, and risks the loss of intangible heritage that cannot be rebuilt once gone. As redevelopment accelerates, Chinese American culture faces a quiet erasure in the very neighborhoods that once protected it. In this context, the preservation of Chinese immigrant history becomes not only important but urgent, especially amid a political climate. With the rise of xenophobia, renewed debates around immigration, and racialized narratives that continue to impact Asian American communities. Safeguarding this history is essential for resisting cultural amnesia and ensuring that the struggles, contributions, and lived experiences of Chinese immigrants remain visible.

This research proposes reimagining community hubs as centers of resilience, connection, and heritage continuity. Within these hubs, community museums would function as spaces that document and interpret the challenges, labor, and perseverance of Chinese immigrants, strengthening intergenerational identity and promoting public understanding. Through adaptive reuse and culturally grounded planning, these spaces can anchor residents, support local businesses, and reinforce cultural practices at risk of displacement. By drawing on theories of cultural sustainability and spatial justice, this work argues that community hubs, supported by memory-centered spaces, can help historic Chinatowns maintain their role as both cultural landmarks and living, evolving communities.

RESTORING HISTORIC CHINATOWNS

by

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Chapter 1: Struggle for Cultural Continuity in Historic Chinatowns

Section 1

Gentrification and Structural Displacement in Historic Chinatowns

Historic Chinatowns across the United States were once formed as vital enclaves of safety, resilience, and cultural belonging for early Chinese immigrants, but are now face unprecedented threats from gentrification, displacement, and cultural erasure as urban redevelopment accelerates. Scholars widely agree that gentrification is not simply an organic shift in neighborhood demographics but a capital-driven restructuring of urban space that disproportionately harms marginalized communities.[1] In Chinatowns, these forces are intensified by historic patterns of racial exclusion, immigration policy barriers, and longstanding economic vulnerabilities.[2] As rising real estate values invite speculative investment and luxury redevelopment, low-income immigrant residents and family-owned businesses are increasingly pushed out, transforming these neighborhoods from culturally rich, community-anchored districts into commodified urban landscapes designed for outsiders. This transformation affects

[1] Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People," Journal of the American Planning Association 45, no. 4 (1979): 538–548; Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, Gentrification, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

[2] Jackelyn Hwang, "Pioneers of Gentrification: Transformation in Global Neighborhoods in Urban America in the Late Twentieth Century," *Demography* 53, no. 1 (2016): 189–213; Poverty & Race Research Action Council, *Gentrification Literature Review* (Washington, DC: PRRAC, 2013).

not only the physical environment but also the social and cultural fabric that has sustained Chinese American communities for generations.



Figure 1: Looking north, with a view of the Pui Tak Center building (far right) on Wentworth Avenue in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood, ca 1940s. Source: Chicago History Museum

Section 2

Cultural, Commercial, and Symbolic Erosion

The impacts of gentrification in Chinatowns operate on multiple, interconnected levels. Residential displacement forces elders, immigrants, and working-class families out of neighborhoods they have called home for decades. Commercial displacement undermines the

economic backbone of Chinatowns by replacing culturally specific small businesses with high-end restaurants or shops that cater to wealthier, non-immigrant consumers, thereby weakening the local cultural economy.[3] In addition, symbolic displacement occurs when Chinatowns are reduced to aesthetic markers. Lanterns, bilingual signage, and ornamental gateways gave meaning to the urban fabric of the community.[4] However, the meaning has been eroded or erased as the original community that the markers were intended for have been displaced from the area. As scholars like Zukin (1989) and De Cesari (2019) argue, this symbolic flattening turns heritage into a commodity, further distancing Chinatowns from their historical and cultural authenticity.

Section 3

Cultural Continuity, Memory, and Identity Loss

For Chinese Americans, the erosion of Chinatowns is more than a loss of geography; rather it is a profound rupture in cultural continuity, collective memory, and intergenerational identity. These neighborhoods have long served as hubs of social support, mutual aid, language preservation,

[3] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown (New York: AALDEF, 2013); Asian American Arts Alliance, Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown (New York: Asian American Arts Alliance, 2019).

[4] Sharon Zukin, Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation: Remaking Urban Memory," International Journal of Heritage Studies 25, no. 9 (2019): 889–903.

and cultural life for immigrants who arrived under conditions of exclusion and hardship.[5] When Chinatowns shrink, their histories risk fading along with the communities that sustained them. This includes histories of resilience against systemic discrimination, the legacy of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the creation of family associations, and the central role of Chinatowns in shaping Asian American identity. The disappearance of these stories is especially urgent today, given rising anti-Asian sentiment, ongoing debates about immigration, and a political climate that often seeks to erase or rewrite the contributions of immigrant communities.[6]

[5] University of Washington, College of Built Environments, Chinatown–International District CARE Project Report (Seattle: University of Washington, 2015); Dear Chinatown, DC, Chinatown Connects (Washington, DC, 2022).

[6] National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Seattle's Chinatown–International District," America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places (Washington, DC, 2022); Nathalie Alonso, "5 Chinatowns and the Communities Working to Preserve Them," Saving Places, 2023.

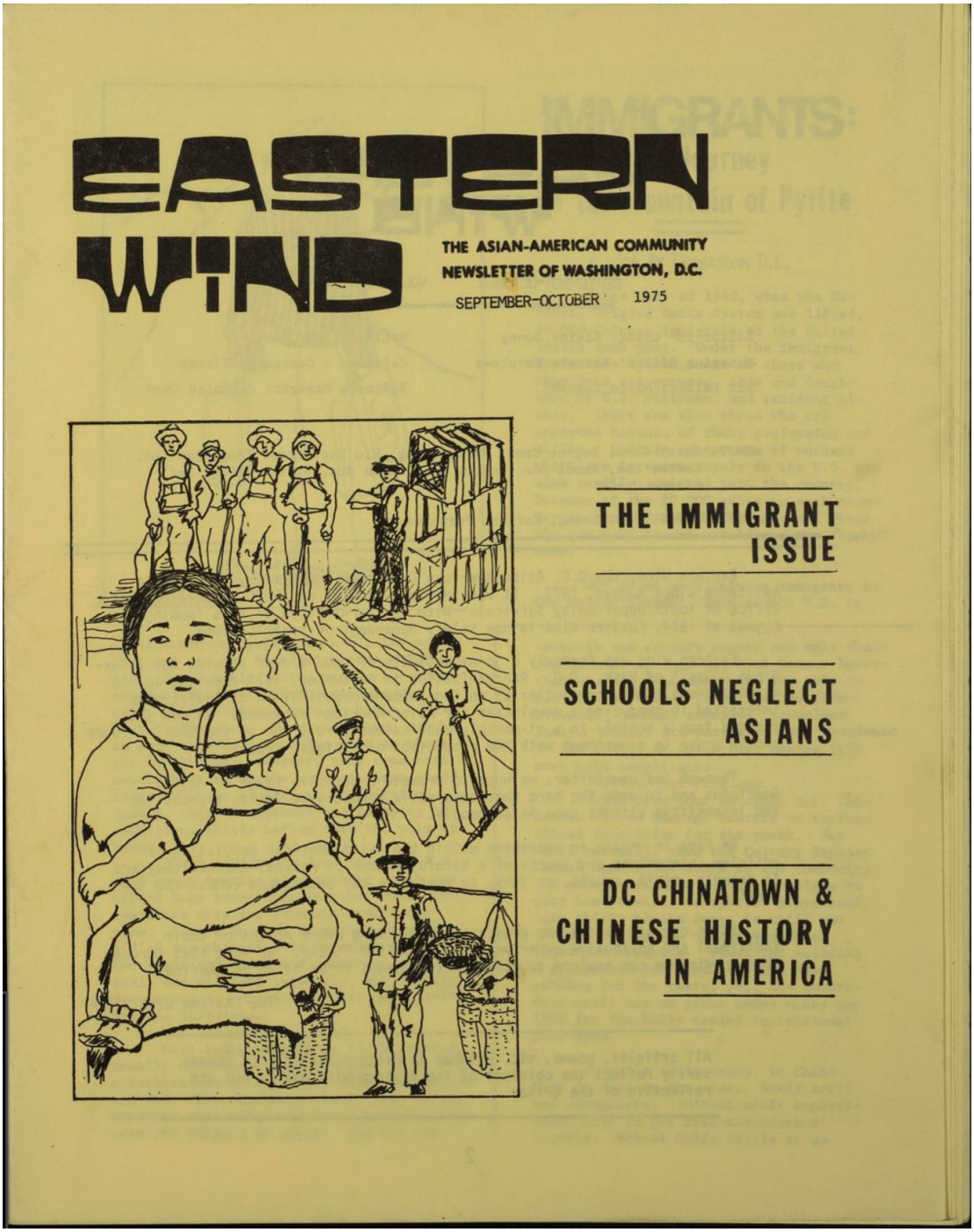

Figure 2: Cover of the September/October 1975 issue of Eastern Wind, titled the Immigrant Issue. Source: Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution

Section 4

Rethinking Preservation Beyond the Built Environment

These realities give rise to the core research question: How can historic Chinatowns preserve their cultural identity in the midst of displacement within their communities? While traditional preservation efforts focus on protecting buildings, Chinatown research shows that safeguarding architecture alone is insufficient and can even accelerate gentrification when heritage designations increase land values.[7] What is required is an approach that preserves not only the built fabric but also the social, cultural, and economic systems that allow Chinatowns to remain living, evolving communities.

Section 5

Community Hubs and Memory Houses as Spatial Strategies for Cultural Sustainability

To address this question, this research proposes reimagining architectural and spatial interventions. Specifically, community hubs with integrated community museums that serve as tools for cultural preservation and displacement resistance. Drawing from adaptive reuse research and community-led heritage projects in Asian cities such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore, these interventions demonstrate how built environments can support cultural

[7] Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock, "Heritage-Fueled Gentrification: A Cautionary Tale from Chicago," Cities 85 (2019): 73–83; Filippo De Pieri, "Conservation in the Age of Gentrification: Historic Cities from the 1960s," Contemporary European History 19, no. 3 (2010): 309–328.

sustainability, economic inclusivity, and social cohesion.[8] Community hubs would serve as multifunctional spaces that house small businesses, community organizations, social services, cultural programming, and intergenerational learning opportunities. By doing so, they would strengthen the cultural and social infrastructure that allows Chinatowns to persist even as external pressures intensify. Within these hubs, memory houses, would document and honor the experiences of Chinese immigrants, highlighting their struggles, contributions, and resilience in the face of discrimination, violence, and exclusion.[9] These museums would anchor community identity by preserving oral histories, artifacts, photographs, and stories that counter mainstream erasure and deepen public understanding of Chinese American heritage. In a time when immigrant histories are increasingly contested, these memory spaces serve as vital cultural repositories that reinforce community pride and strengthen intergenerational connections.

Section 6

Architecture as an Active Tool for Cultural Resistance

By combining adaptive reuse, participatory design, and culturally grounded planning, the built environment can become a powerful tool for resisting displacement and maintaining the cultural

[8] "Community-Initiated Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings and Sustainable Development in the Inner City of Shanghai," Journal of Urban Planning and Development 140, no. 3 (2014); "A Dual Strategy in the Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Heritage Buildings," Buildings 13, no. 7 (2023).

[9] Wing Luke Museum, Community-Based Exhibition Model (Seattle, 2019); Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation," 2019.

vitality of historic Chinatowns. Rather than treating preservation as a static act focused solely on protecting historic facades, this approach positions architecture as an active strategy for sustaining identity, memory, and belonging.[10] Through community hubs and memory houses, Chinatowns can remain not only places of historic significance but also vibrant, living urban communities capable of withstanding the pressures of gentrification and cultural erasure.

[10] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016); Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Chapter 2: Gentrification, Heritage, and Community Resilience in Historic Chinatowns

Section 1

Gentrification as a Global and Racialized Urban Process

Gentrification, viewed as a symptom of urban revival, has evolved into a global phenomenon reshaping cities and communities.[11] The process is not merely economic, it restructures cultural landscapes, displaces long-standing residents, and transforms how heritage is valued. Within Asian American historic enclaves such as Chinatowns and Koreatowns, gentrification carries layered consequences. These neighborhoods, often formed through racial exclusion and labor segregation, now face threats from speculative investment, cultural commodification, and policy neglect. Understanding the dynamics of gentrification in these spaces requires integrating urban theory with ethnic studies and heritage scholarship.

Neil Smith's rent-gap theory remains foundational in understanding gentrification.[12] Smith argues that reinvestment flows not from aesthetic preference or demographic trends but from the capitalist pursuit of undervalued land. When the potential ground rent exceeds current value, capital floods back into previously disinvested areas. Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living* expands this by

[11] Loretta Lees, "The Geography of Gentrification: Thinking Through Comparative Urbanism," Progress in Human Geography 36, no. 2 (2012): 155–171; Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, Gentrification, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

[12] Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People," Journal of the American Planning Association 45, no. 4 (1979): 538–548.

examining how culture and consumption result in urban change. Artists and professionals occupied once-industrial spaces, setting the stage for higher-income investors.[13] Together, these theories frame gentrification as both an economic and cultural process, one that transforms value systems around space.[14] Loretta Lees et al. extend these ideas, framing gentrification as a multi-scalar process shaped by global capital, local governance, and policy tools. Their synthesis helps situate Chinatowns and Koreatowns not as anomalies but as nodes in global urban restructuring. These frameworks are essential for understanding why even heritage-protected neighborhoods, often celebrated as "authentic" cultural districts, become prime sites for redevelopment.

[13] Sharon Zukin, Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); David Ley, "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification," Urban Studies 31, no. 4–5 (1994): 653–678.

[14] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2008).



Figure 3: "SAVE CHINATOWN" banner that hung on 7th and I Street on the Jade Palace restaurant in the 1980s. Image courtesy of Harry Chow to the 1882 Foundation.

Section 2

Heritage, Preservation, and the Commodification of Culture

While preservation is often viewed as an antidote to gentrification, scholars warn it can amplify displacement when heritage becomes commodified.[15] Chiara De Cesari critiques how heritage-making often privileges elite narratives, transforming collective memory into a marketable brand. Similarly, Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock's study of Chicago shows that heritage designation can accelerate rising property values, pricing out the very residents who shaped the neighborhood's identity. For Asian American enclaves, heritage status often rebrands the neighborhood for tourism while eroding affordability.[16] The Asian American Arts Alliance's *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* visualizes this loss, documenting disappearing cultural spaces as symbols of intangible heritage erosion. These studies illustrate how well-intentioned preservation policies may inadvertently reinforce the very forces they aim to resist. In the U.S., Chinatowns have long been both refuges and targets. The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund provide quantitative evidence of demographic inversion in Manhattan's Chinatown: declining working-class immigrant populations and a surge of affluent

[15] Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation: Remaking Urban Memory," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 9 (2019): 889–903; Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock, "Heritage-Fueled Gentrification," *Cities* 85 (2019): 73–83.

[16] Filippo De Pieri, "Conservation in the Age of Gentrification," *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 309–328; Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York, 2019).

newcomers.[17] This pattern echoes *Bloomberg CityLab's* 2019 reporting on Baltimore's Chinatown, where redevelopment erases Chinese identity in favor of generic urban branding.[18] The *AsAmNews* article on Washington, DC, and Philadelphia reveals grassroots resistance, particularly from senior tenants in subsidized housing complexes like Wah Luck House. Here, displacement is not abstract, it uproots communities built through decades of exclusion and resilience.[19]

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[17] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (New York: AALDEF, 2013).

[18] Bloomberg CityLab, "What Gentrification of Baltimore's Chinatown Means," December 4, 2019.

[19] AsAmNews, "Lessons Learned from Washington DC's Chinatown and Philadelphia's Chinatown Redevelopment," February 1, 2023.



Figure 4: Tenant Associations lead a march up Columbia Road NW in protest against threats of eviction at a time when land speculation and residential displacement were growing more common in the Adams Morgan neighborhood and across Washington DC. By: Nancy Shia

Section 3

Racialized and Symbolic Displacement in Asian American Enclaves

These cases emphasize that gentrification in Asian American enclaves is not only about buildings but about the erasure of cultural lifeways. Jackelyn Hwang's research complicates traditional models by introducing immigrant settlement patterns as precursors to gentrification.[20] Her work shows that neighborhoods with early Asian immigrant presence often become

[20] Jackelyn Hwang, "Pioneers of Gentrification," *Demography* 53, no. 1 (2016): 189–213.

desirable for redevelopment due to their globalized character and accessibility. In later work, Hwang explores how immigrant replenishment alters these dynamics, suggesting that continuing inflows of newcomers can buffer displacement. Caroline Xiong deepens this racialized lens, arguing that gentrification in Asian American communities is not reducible to class dynamics.[21] Race, language, and citizenship status mediate vulnerability, while "model minority" myths obscure structural inequalities. Together, these studies call for intersectional frameworks, acknowledging that gentrification is filtered through immigration status, race, and cultural belonging.

In many cases, the most visible form of displacement is symbolic rather than physical.[22] The *Revitalizing Chinatown into a Heterotopia* study notes how Washington, DC's Chinatown has retained Chinese signage and motifs even as Chinese residents vanish. This semiotic preservation masks deeper loss, turning cultural symbols into urban décor. Similarly, the National Trust for Historic Preservation identifies multiple endangered Chinatowns where economic displacement parallels cultural erasure. In such contexts, aesthetic gestures become substitutes for meaningful community preservation. This "facade urbanism" underscores the need to pair visual representation with policy interventions ensuring housing, business, and cultural continuity.

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[21] Caroline Xiong, "The Gentrification of Asian American Communities in New York City: A Race or Class Issue," Pioneer Publisher, 2023.

[22] "Revitalizing Chinatown into a Heterotopia," SAGE Journals, 2007; National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Seattle's Chinatown–International District," *America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places* (2022).

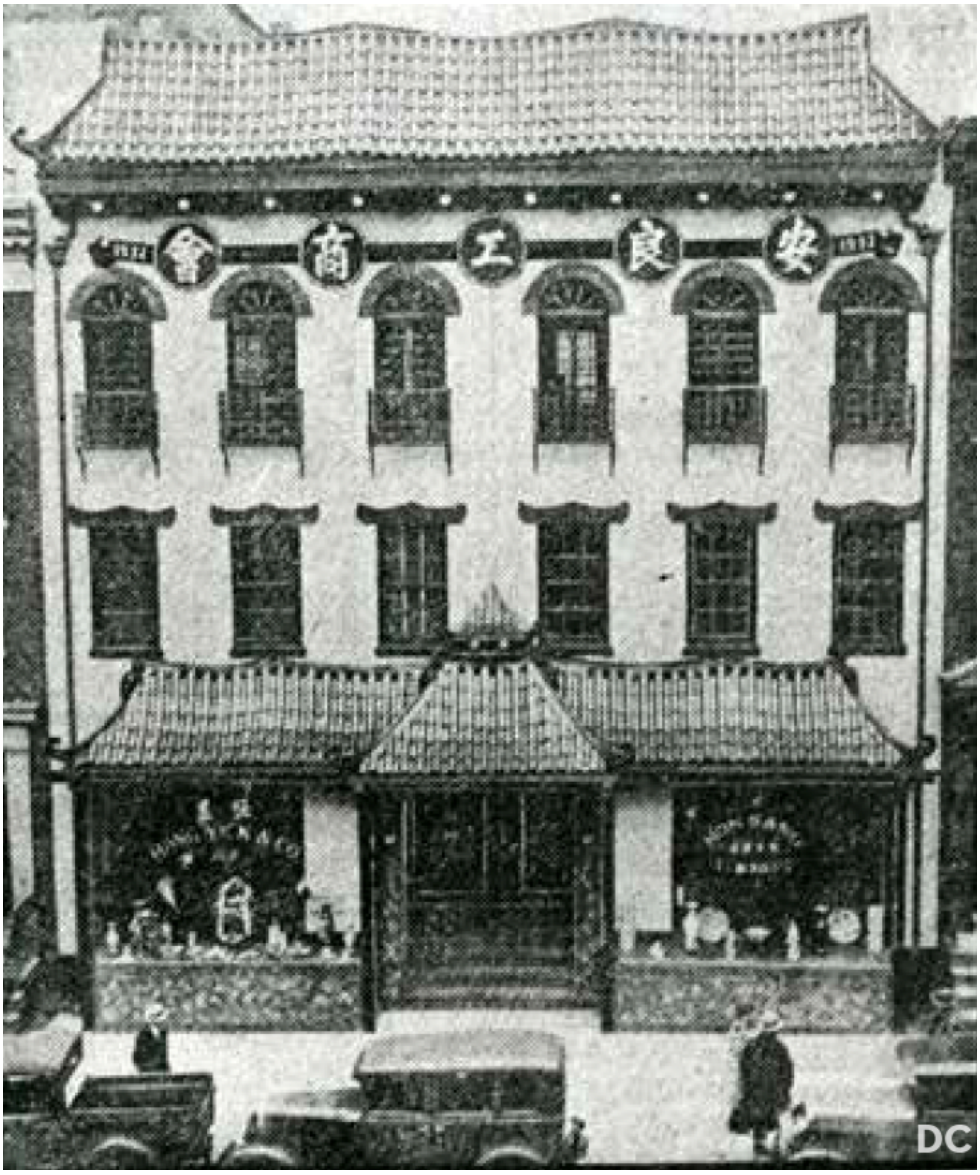

Figure 5: 1981- H Street. Source DC Chinatown Design Guide

Section 4

Adaptive Reuse and Preservation as Double-Edged Tools

Adaptive reuse, often heralded as a sustainable and preservation-minded approach to urban renewal, occupies an ambiguous position within the discourse on gentrification.[23] On one hand, it safeguards material heritage and revitalizes underused spaces; on the other, it frequently accelerates social and economic exclusion. For Asian American historic enclaves such as Chinatowns, adaptive reuse thus presents both opportunity and threat, a dual instrument that can either sustain cultural memory or contribute to erasure, depending on who controls the process and who benefits from the outcomes.

In Los Angeles, the 1999 Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO) serves as an instructive case.[24] Designed to promote downtown revitalization through the conversion of vacant commercial buildings into residential units, the ARO spurred thousands of new apartments and lofts. Scholars such as Julie Kim (2018) and city data reveal, however, that this influx catered primarily to middle- and upper-income professionals, displacing nearby low-income residents, including those in adjacent ethnic enclaves like Little Tokyo. While the ordinance succeeded in reactivating the built environment, it largely failed to integrate affordability measures or community participation. The Los Angeles example demonstrates how adaptive reuse can

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[23] Filippo De Pieri, "Conservation in the Age of Gentrification," 2010; Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation," 2019.

[24] City of Los Angeles, *Adaptive Reuse Ordinance (ARO)*, Ordinance No. 174315 (1999); Julie Kim, "The Adaptive Reuse Ordinance and Residential Shifts in Downtown Los Angeles," UCLA, 2018.

repackage preservation as a mechanism of gentrification, aligning with Chiara De Cesari's (2019) critique that heritage-making often privileges marketable narratives over collective memory.



Figure 6: Vintage postcard view of the towers, pagodas and storefronts along Gin Ling Way in Los Angeles Chinatown. Source: Curt Teich Postcard Archieves

Section 5

Community-Led Reuse, Design Ethics, and Cultural Equity

International contexts offer parallel insights. Studies from Shanghai's Tianzifang district illustrate how community-initiated adaptive reuse can yield contrasting outcomes.[25] There, residents transformed historic lilong housing into mixed-use spaces that combine art, commerce, and daily life, demonstrating reuse as a tool for social sustainability and cultural continuity. Similarly, the West Bund Waterfront project (2023) in Shanghai introduced a "dual strategy" balancing art-led reuse with inclusive public access, showing that the democratization of heritage space can resist exclusionary gentrification.[26] These cases reveal that adaptive reuse's ethical impact depends on governance structure: top-down preservation tends to commodify, while bottom-up reuse tends to sustain.

This pattern of heritage-fueled gentrification reappears in Chinatowns across the United States. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (2022) identifies Seattle's Chinatown–International District as one of America's most endangered historic places, highlighting how infrastructure expansion and commercial redevelopment threaten not only buildings but social networks.[27] Preservation, in such contexts, is rendered incomplete when it does not encompass the lived,

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[25] "Community-Initiated Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings and Sustainable Development in the Inner City of Shanghai," *Journal of Urban Planning and Development* 140, no. 3 (2014).

[26] "A Dual Strategy in the Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Heritage Buildings," *Buildings* 13, no. 7 (2023).

[27] National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Seattle's Chinatown–International District," *America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places* (2022).

intangible heritage of community memory, language, and ritual. Architecture's role, therefore, cannot stop at material reuse; it must negotiate between form and equity.

Section 6

Community Resilience, Storytelling, and Anti-Gentrification Strategies

Across Chinatowns and other Asian American enclaves, resilience is not merely endurance; it is organized, creative, and adaptive. Through storytelling, policy advocacy, design activism, and intergenerational collaboration, these communities redefine what preservation means in living, evolving neighborhoods. Grassroots storytelling projects, such as *Dear Chinatown, DC*, transform memory into data for advocacy, while community arts initiatives strengthen collective identity and stabilize neighborhoods.[28] Policy-based resilience, demonstrated through community mapping, legal action, and participatory planning, reveals how residents deploy cultural, legal, and spatial strategies to resist displacement.

Ultimately, community resilience in historic Chinatowns is inseparable from the spatial frameworks that sustain it. When storytelling informs planning, when adaptive reuse aligns with equity, and when architecture operates as a medium of collective memory, preservation transforms from static defense into active renewal.[29]

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[28] Dear Chinatown, DC, *Chinatown Connects* (Washington, DC, 2022); Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (2019).

[29] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016); Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (2008).

Chapter 3: Research Methods for Community-Centered Architectural Inquiry

Section 1

Architecture, Research, and Cultural Inquiry

Research methods are essential to architectural inquiry because they shape how designers understand the world before they intervene in it. For a thesis centered on the question of how Chinatowns can preserve their cultural identity in the midst of displacement, a strong methodological framework is necessary not only to document what is at risk but to translate community knowledge, sensory experience, and spatial dynamics into design strategies that support cultural continuity. Raymond Lucas's *Research Methods for Architecture* reinforces that architectural research must move beyond textual analysis and instead engage directly with the lived, sensory, and social realities of the built environment.[30] His work affirms that understanding place requires both rigorous observation and an empathetic awareness of how people perceive, inhabit, and emotionally engage with their surroundings. The methods employed in this design therefore combine environmental psychology, fieldwork, participatory research, drawing-as-investigation, interdisciplinary analysis, and precedent study, creating a multi-layered approach capable of capturing the tangible and intangible aspects of Chinatown life.

[30] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

Section 2

Environmental Psychology and Sensory Experience

Environmental psychology offers a particularly important lens for this research. Lucas's discussion of James Gibson's ecological theory of perception, which emphasizes that perception emerges from active movement through and immersion in space, parallels the way Chinatown's cultural identity is experienced through sensory and embodied interactions.[31] Chinatown is not understood solely through buildings or facades, but through overheard dialects, the sounds of markets, the smell of food stalls, the repetition of familiar signage, and the rhythms of elders occupying public space.[32] These methods capture the elements of cultural life at risk of erasure under gentrification, elements that architectural drawings alone could never fully convey. By documenting the acoustic and sensory landscape of Chinatown, I can better understand which qualities a proposed community hub or memory house must preserve to maintain cultural continuity.

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[31] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

[32] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016); Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York, 2019).

Section 3

Fieldwork and Empirical Observation

Fieldwork forms the second major dimension of this methodology. Lucas's chapter on fieldwork emphasizes that the field is not merely a physical site, but a cultural construct shaped by social norms, community histories, and patterns of interaction. Chinatowns exemplify this idea, as they operate simultaneously as architectural districts, economic systems, cultural symbols, and community enclaves. My fieldwork therefore involves repeated site visits to capture Chinatown in its "messiness," as Lucas describes: the everyday activity, spontaneous interactions, and subtle changes in behavior that reveal deeper patterns of continuity or displacement. Through direct observation, I document how different members of the community navigate the neighborhood. Photography and note-taking help record the changing conditions of storefronts, signage, and gathering spaces.[33] Behavioral mapping will be used to track foot traffic, informal meeting points, and spaces that appear threatened, underused, or culturally significant. This fieldwork is not intended to romanticize Chinatown but to establish an evidence-based understanding of what is being lost and what remains resilient.

[33] University of Washington, College of Built Environments, *Chinatown–International District CARE Project Report* (Seattle, 2015).



Figure 7: High Intensity Intersections diagram. By Caroline Sewell

Section 4

Participatory Research and Community Knowledge

Lucas warns against symbolic participation and emphasizes the importance of genuinely collaborative, co-creative engagement. For this research, participatory methods include semi-structured interviews with residents, business owners, cultural organization leaders, and if possible, local activists involved in anti-displacement efforts. Oral history workshops will help capture personal stories that describe how Chinatown has changed, what spaces hold meaning, and what memories should inform future design interventions.[34] Community-led mapping exercises, where participants identify culturally important spaces or places of loss, will guide the

[34] Wing Luke Museum, *Community-Based Exhibition Model* (Seattle, 2019); Dear Chinatown, DC, *Chinatown Connects* (Washington, DC, 2022).

design and programming of proposed community hubs and memory houses. These methods ensure that architectural proposals do not rely on outsider assumptions but instead emerge from lived experience, community values, and local cultural knowledge.[35]

Section 5

Drawing, Diagramming, and Interdisciplinary Analysis

Drawing and diagramming, as Lucas argues, are not merely tools for presentation but methods of research in themselves. Through drawing, I can analyze relationships, reveal overlooked patterns, and explore design concepts rooted in cultural behavior rather than abstract form-making. Inspired by Lucas's "Getting Lost in Tokyo" case study, which used diagramming to uncover invisible movement patterns, I will create maps illustrating flows of memory, patterns of commercial closure, routes of cultural events, and areas where displacement is most visible. Diagramming historical layers of development will help visualize how Chinatown's morphology has shifted over decades, while network drawings will chart the relationships between family associations, businesses, and cultural institutions. These drawing techniques provide analytical clarity and offer new insights into how intangible cultural forces shape physical space.

[35] Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York, 2019).



Figure 8: Building Facades accross Chinatown Park Drawing. By Caroline Sewell

Interdisciplinary inquiry is another essential part of this methodology. As Lucas's chapter on cross-disciplinary working explains, architecture gains depth when it engages with other fields, particularly when dealing with socially complex issues. Chinatown's challenges straddle architecture, urban planning, heritage studies, environmental psychology, and Asian American history. My research therefore integrates gentrification theory to understand the economic and political drivers of displacement; heritage studies to examine the preservation of intangible cultural practices; migration history to situate Chinatown's formation within broader patterns of racialized exclusion; and urban sociology to assess how communities adapt to redevelopment

pressures.[36] These interdisciplinary perspectives ensure that design proposals respond not only to spatial patterns but also to the structural forces shaping them.

Section 6

Precedent Analysis and Methodological Synthesis

Precedent analysis further strengthens the methodology by offering models of adaptive reuse, cultural preservation, and community resilience that may be applicable to Chinatowns. I will examine adaptive reuse projects in East and Southeast Asia, such as Shanghai's Tianzifang district or Hong Kong's industrial conversions, to understand how historic environments can be revitalized while retaining cultural significance.[37] I will also study community hubs and cultural centers in Boston's Chinatown, Seattle's CID, and other Asian American neighborhoods to identify effective strategies for resisting displacement and fostering cultural memory.[38] Precedents are evaluated for their design strategies, community engagement models, governance

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[36] Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979): 538–548; Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 9 (2019): 889–903; Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[37] "Community-Initiated Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings and Sustainable Development in the Inner City of Shanghai," *Journal of Urban Planning and Development* 140, no. 3 (2014); "A Dual Strategy in the Adaptive Reuse of Industrial Heritage Buildings," *Buildings* 13, no. 7 (2023).

[38] National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Seattle's Chinatown–International District," *America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places* (Washington, DC, 2022); Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Chinatown Then and Now* (New York, 2013).

structures, and success in sustaining local identity. This comparative lens helps position my proposed community hub and memory house not as isolated design ideas but as grounded responses informed by real-world examples.

Together, these research methods create a multi-dimensional foundation. Environmental psychology captures the sensory and emotional dimensions of Chinatown; fieldwork provides empirical evidence of change; participatory methods ensure community voices shape the research; drawing reveals spatial patterns and generates new insights; interdisciplinary analysis deepens contextual understanding; and precedents offer transferable strategies. This methodological framework ensures that the proposed design interventions, particularly community hubs with integrated memory houses, are grounded in authentic cultural knowledge and capable of supporting Chinatown's resilience. Ultimately, these methods allow architecture to function not simply as preservation of buildings but as an active, community-centered tool for sustaining identity, memory, and belonging in the face of gentrification and displacement.

Chapter 4: Precedents for Cultural Continuity

Section 1

Precedents as Frameworks for Cultural Sustainability

As many historic Chinatowns confront forces of gentrification and cultural erasure, studying relevant precedents provides a foundation to identify principles that are materially, socially, and politically effective in supporting cultural continuity.[39] These precedents offer more than formal design solutions; they reveal strategies that embed memory, strengthen community networks, foster public life, and resist displacement over time. They also help situate this work within broader architectural and heritage discourses, particularly those concerning cultural sustainability and the preservation of lived, intangible heritage.[40] For these reasons, five precedents were intentionally selected: Portsmouth Square in San Francisco, the James-Simon-Galerie in Berlin, the PILARES Community Centers in Mexico City, the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle's Chinatown–International District, and the Chinatown Community Land Trust in Boston. Together, they provide a geographically and culturally diverse framework for understanding how

[39] Filippo De Pieri, "Conservation in the Age of Gentrification: Historic Cities from the 1960s," *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 309–328.

[40] Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation: Remaking Urban Memory," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 9 (2019): 889–903; Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock, "Heritage-Fueled Gentrification: A Cautionary Tale from Chicago," *Cities* 85 (2019): 73–83.

community anchors, public spaces, memory institutions, and land governance can work in tandem to preserve cultural identity.

Section 2

Portsmouth Square as Cultural Infrastructure

Portsmouth Square in San Francisco's Chinatown exemplifies the cultural importance of public space as a form of community infrastructure. Often described as Chinatown's "living room," the Square has been a center of social life since the nineteenth century, supporting intergenerational practices, from tai chi gatherings to card playing, festivals, and informal childcare, that help define the neighborhood's cultural identity.[41] The Square also embodies layered histories of immigration, exclusion, and resilience, functioning as a site where Chinese Americans established community networks in the face of discriminatory urban policies, racial hostility, and disinvestment. City planning documents for the Square's redesign underscore the need for culturally informed circulation, accessibility for elders, multilingual signage, and protected gathering areas.[42] These documents highlight how public spaces in Chinatowns often serve as extensions of domestic and associative life for populations with limited private space and limited mobility. Portsmouth Square serves as a direct precedent for the idea that preserving cultural

[41] Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York, 2019); Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (New York: AALDEF, 2013).

[42] AALDEF, *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (2013).

identity involves more than conserving physical structures; it requires maintaining the social practices and community rhythms that animate those structures. A future Chinatown community hub or memory house must therefore integrate open, flexible, and culturally resonant public space that supports both daily activity and collective memory.



Figure 9: Portsmouth Square- San Francisco Night Rendering. Source: Portsmouth Square website

Section 3

James-Simon-Galerie and Contextual Architectural Intervention

The James-Simon-Galerie by David Chipperfield Architects provides a valuable example of how contemporary architectural interventions can engage sensitively with historic urban contexts. Located on Berlin's Museum Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site marked by complex histories of monarchy, war, division, and reconstruction, the design mediates between past and

present through carefully calibrated material and spatial strategies.[43] The use of reconstituted stone connects the new structure to its neoclassical surroundings without resorting to imitation, illustrating how continuity can be achieved without pastiche. The design's emphasis on public terraces, open colonnades, and accessible circulation provides semi-public civic space even outside museum hours, reinforcing the idea that cultural institutions should remain embedded in the public realm rather than becoming privatized tourist infrastructure. This is particularly relevant to Chinatowns, where tourism can simultaneously support and threaten local identity.[44] The James-Simon-Galerie offers insights into how new cultural buildings in historically charged neighborhoods can maintain scale sensitivity, respect visual and spatial continuity, and enhance public access. These strategies are essential for designing a Chinatown memory house that is contemporary yet deeply rooted in its cultural and architectural context.

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[43] David Chipperfield, *James-Simon-Galerie* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2019).

[44] Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).



Figure 10: James-Simon-Galerie- Berlin Front Facade. Source: Archdaily

Section 4

PILARES Community Centers and Civic Investment

The PILARES Community Centers in Mexico City, designed by WORKac and Ignacio Urquiza, demonstrate how publicly funded, community-oriented architecture can strengthen cultural identity and social resilience in marginalized neighborhoods.[45] These centers provide free programming in arts, education, technology, and community life, functioning as civic anchors within areas historically underserved by municipal infrastructure. Their flexible interior layouts,

[45] WORKac, *PILARES Community Centers* (Mexico City, 2019).

porous ground-floor connections, and modest footprints show how small public buildings can produce significant cultural value, particularly in dense areas facing displacement and real-estate speculation. The emphasis on youth engagement and intergenerational learning resonates strongly with the needs of historic Chinatowns, where aging populations, linguistic isolation, and economic precarity intersect.[46] The PILARES model reflects the importance of investing in community-driven infrastructure as a countermeasure to gentrification. This precedent informs the programmatic and spatial strategies for a Chinatown community hub by demonstrating how civic architecture can embed itself in local life, offering both stability and empowerment.



Figure 11: PILARES Community Centres- Mexico City. Source Archdaily

[46] AALDEF, *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (2013).

Section 5

The Wing Luke Museum and Participatory Memory Preservation

The Wing Luke Museum in Seattle's Chinatown–International District provides one of the most directly relevant precedents, as it demonstrates how a community-based museum can preserve immigrant histories and strengthen local identity.[47] The museum is the only pan-Asian American cultural institution in the United States that operates through a formalized community-based exhibition (CBE) process, where community advisory groups shape narrative content, exhibit design, and interpretive frameworks. This participatory structure aligns directly with Raymond Lucas's argument that community engagement must be genuinely co-creative rather than symbolic, ensuring that architecture reflects lived experience rather than top-down assumptions. Housed in a rehabilitated immigrant hotel, the Wing Luke Museum preserves both the physical architecture and the social histories embedded within it, documenting narratives of migration, labor, exclusion, activism, and everyday life. Its adaptive reuse approach embodies the concept of "living heritage," in which buildings are preserved not as static artifacts but as vessels of community memory.[48] In the context of Chinatown displacement pressures, the museum also serves as a cultural anchor, strengthening community networks and maintaining visibility for Asian American histories at a time when they are increasingly threatened by erasure. The Wing

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[47] Wing Luke Museum, *Community-Based Exhibition Model* (Seattle, 2019); Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

[48] Filippo De Pieri, "Conservation in the Age of Gentrification," 2010.

Luke Museum serves as a foundational precedent for designing memory houses that honor Chinese immigrant histories through participatory methods and community stewardship.

Section 6

Community Land Trusts and Anti-Displacement Governance

The Chinatown Community Land Trust (CCLT) in Boston represents a different but equally crucial type of precedent: a governance model for resisting displacement through community-controlled land.[49] While not a traditional architectural project, the CCLT demonstrates that cultural identity preservation cannot succeed without stabilizing the residents, businesses, and institutions that sustain community life. The Land Trust model removes land from speculative markets, ensuring permanent affordability for housing, cultural spaces, and local businesses. This directly addresses what scholars such as Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008) describe as the "structural drivers of gentrification," which cannot be mitigated through design alone. CCLT's efforts to preserve legacy businesses, rehabilitate historic buildings, and support immigrant-serving organizations illustrate how cultural continuity is tied to long-term community control, not merely architectural aesthetics.[50] This precedent underscores the need to consider land-tenure strategies and governance structures as integral components of architectural proposals. A

[49] Nathalie Alonso, "5 Chinatowns and the Communities Working to Preserve Them," *Saving Places*, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2023.

[50] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

community hub or memory house situated on land vulnerable to speculation risks reinforcing displacement rather than resisting it.

Taken together, these precedents illustrate that preserving cultural identity in historic Chinatowns requires a multifaceted approach that integrates public space, heritage-sensitive architecture, civic investment, community narrative preservation, and land stewardship.[51] Portsmouth Square demonstrates the indispensability of everyday public life as cultural infrastructure, while the James-Simon-Galerie shows how new architecture can contribute meaningfully to historically layered environments without overpowering them. The PILARES centers reveal the transformative impact of flexible, accessible civic spaces on community resilience. The Wing Luke Museum exemplifies how participatory memory preservation can become a powerful counterforce to cultural erasure. The Chinatown Community Land Trust highlights that architectural strategies must be paired with community governance and land protection in order to be meaningful. These precedents form the conceptual and methodological groundwork for developing a community hub and memory house that sustain identity, preserve history, and reinforce belonging amid ongoing urban change.

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[51] Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock, "Heritage-Fueled Gentrification," 2019; Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation," 2019; Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (2019).

Chapter 5: Architecture as Cultural Infrastructure

Section 1

Cultural Identity as Lived Infrastructure

Across North American Chinatowns, cultural identity has historically been sustained not through isolated monuments but through the layered interaction of public life, community services, intergenerational gathering, economic activity, and shared memory. Cultural displacement often begins long before physical demolition; it begins with the erosion of social infrastructure, the disappearance of elders from public spaces, the loss of affordable commercial units, and the decline of environments where cultural practices can unfold.[52] In response, the architectural program proposed positions itself not as a preservation project in the narrow sense, but, as a multi-zoned community hub designed to sustain cultural identity as a lived, evolving practice. Its components include a public outdoor space that correlates to the Chinese culture of outdoor living, a memory house to remember the importance of Chinese immigrants in the late 1800's and 1900's, social services of Chinese Americans still living in Chinatown, small-businesses, and educational spaces. These spaces are conceived as interdependent zones that work collectively to maintain cultural continuity during displacement pressures as Chinatown in DC is only a skeleton what it once was.

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[52] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008); Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (New York: AALDEF, 2013).

Section 2

Public Space as Cultural Infrastructure

The program begins with the understanding that public space itself constitutes cultural infrastructure in Chinatown. Portsmouth Square in San Francisco demonstrates that plazas function as the everyday "living room" of the neighborhood, a place where cultural memory is enacted through daily embodied practices such as morning tai chi, afternoon card games, informal childcare, and multilingual conversation.[53] The design will center a public plaza not as decorative open space but as a civic stage where ordinary life and cultural ritual coexist. The plaza is conceived as shaded, flexible, and accessible, able to accommodate informal daily uses as well as markets, performances, and festivals. Drawing from environmental psychology, especially Lucas's emphasis on sensory mapping and embodied perception, the plaza becomes a space where sound, movement, rhythm, and communal presence express cultural identity.[54] Rather than treating the plaza and interior program as separate, the design ties them together so that the public realm becomes the connection to the main themes of the design.

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[53] Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York: Asian American Arts Alliance, 2019).

[54] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

Section 3

The Memory House as Living Archive

Directly adjacent to this plaza is the program's central component: the Memory House. Its purpose is to counteract cultural erasure by preserving and amplifying the narratives, histories, and sensory experiences of Chinese American immigrant communities. Inspired by the Wing Luke Museum's community-based exhibition development process, a formal methodology that situates narrative authority with the community rather than external curators, the Memory House is structured as a living, participatory museum that evolves with community input.[55] It includes community-curated galleries, oral-history recording studios, workshop rooms, archival labs, and transparent exhibition vitrines visible from the plaza. This design strategy echoes Lucas's argument that architecture must attend to lived experience and that research should capture sensory, emotional, and narrative layers of place.[56] By integrating the Memory House directly with the public realm, the architecture ensures that cultural remembrance is not abstracted or frozen but connected to the rhythms of everyday life.

[55] Wing Luke Museum, *Community-Based Exhibition Model* (Seattle: Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, 2019).

[56] Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016).

Section 4

Economic Stability and Cultural Commerce

While memory preservation is essential, it must be paired with social stability. Economic displacement is one of the most visible forms of cultural loss in Chinatowns. Many legacy businesses such as bakeries, herbal shops, grocers, and calligraphers have been displaced or replaced by tourist-driven establishments or main commercial businesses, undermining the everyday spaces that shape cultural identity.[57] In response, the program incorporates a small-business incubator and cultural marketplace designed to stabilize and uplift local entrepreneurs. Drawing from economic displacement findings in AALDEF's Chinatown Then and Now report (2013), this marketplace features modular stalls, affordable micro-retail units, and shared kitchen facilities to support food vendors and legacy businesses.[58] Its adjacency to the plaza ensures continuity between commerce and public life, reflecting historic Chinatown patterns where markets and street life are intertwined. This kind of economic infrastructure directly counters the rent-gap dynamic identified by Smith and expanded upon by Lees et al., where undervalued urban land is redeveloped for profit at the expense of culturally rooted commerce.[59]

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[57] Asian American Arts Alliance, *Mapping Cultural Displacement in Chinatown* (New York, 2019).

[58] Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), *Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Chinatown* (New York: AALDEF, 2013).

[59] Neil Smith, "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, Not People," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979): 538–548; Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Section 5

Cultural Production, Education, and Social Services

Cultural sustainability also requires supporting spaces where traditions can be practiced, taught, and transformed. Influenced by Mexico City's PILARES Centers; publicly funded community hubs that anchor vulnerable neighborhoods through free cultural and educational programming.[60] The program includes studios for cultural production, rehearsal rooms for dance and performance, maker workshops, and a small black box theater. These spaces ensure that community members can engage in cultural production rather than be limited to cultural consumption. This aligns with De Cesari's argument that cultural heritage must remain dynamic and socially embedded, not fossilized for external audiences.[61] To ensure the longevity and operational stability of the entire project, the program includes necessary backstage functions such as storage, conservation space, and logistics.

Section 6

Integrated Program Logic and Precedent Translation

Reverse-engineering the Wing Luke Museum provided the most actionable spatial guidance for this program, because it uniquely integrates memory work, adaptive reuse, community

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[60] WORKac, *PILARES Community Centers* (Mexico City, 2019).

[61] Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation: Remaking Urban Memory," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 9 (2019): 889–903.

participation, and neighborhood advocacy within an Asian American context. Unlike precedents situated in European heritage districts or Latin American civic initiatives, the Wing Luke Museum reflects the specific challenges of cultural survival in racially marginalized immigrant neighborhoods. Its community-based exhibition development model, collaborative governance, and adaptive reuse approach present a direct template for how a Chinatown Memory House can function as both a cultural institution and a community anchor.[62] This precedent allowed me to extract adjacency patterns, such as the relationship between exhibit spaces and oral-history labs, while aligning them with the participatory research methodologies.

Across these program zones, a pattern emerges: each space addresses a specific dimension of cultural resilience. The plaza reinforces everyday social life; the Memory House preserves and co-creates narrative identity; the social service wing stabilizes residents; the business incubator protects economic livelihood; and the studios support cultural production. Taken together, these zones form an interlocking system grounded in the evidence gathered from gentrification studies, participatory design literature, environmental psychology, and precedent analysis. Physical preservation alone cannot protect cultural identity as it must be paired with economic stability, community governance, and social infrastructure.[63] The program presented here reflects that understanding by creating a comprehensive architectural response to cultural displacement. The

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[62] Wing Luke Museum, *Community-Based Exhibition Model* (Seattle, 2019).

[63] Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2008); Chiara De Cesari, "Heritage, Gentrification, Participation," 2019; Theresa Grevstad-Nordbrock, "Heritage-Fueled Gentrification: A Cautionary Tale from Chicago," *Cities* 85 (2019): 73–83.

proposed program translates the design's central argument into spatial, social, and architectural terms: preserving the cultural identity of historic Chinatowns requires multi-zonal, community-controlled infrastructure that supports memory, public life, economic resilience, and intergenerational continuity. The zones described in this chapter work collectively to counter displacement, nurture cultural practices, and provide the architectural foundation for a Chinatown that continues to thrive despite ongoing pressures of urban redevelopment. The program offers a framework for sustaining cultural vitality in Chinatowns facing profound change.

Chapter 6: Site Selection and Analysis

Section 1

Site as Cultural Ground in DC Chinatown

In historic Chinatowns, site is never neutral. It holds layers of memory, migration, displacement, commerce, social gathering, and symbolic identity. A site in Chinatown must therefore be understood as more than a parcel of land. It is a cultural ground where the physical city and the social life of the community overlap.

The selected sites are located within Washington, DC's Chinatown and focus on two related conditions: Chinatown Park and the alleyway condition at 624 I Street NW. Chinatown Park operates as an existing civic and public space within the neighborhood, while the alleyway at 624 I Street NW offers a more intimate urban condition capable of supporting small-scale commerce. Downtown DC identifies Chinatown Park as an entertainment and recreation space along I Street NW, which reinforces its importance as one of the neighborhood's few public open-space anchors. Together, these two sites allow to explore both the symbolic and everyday dimensions of Chinatown preservation. Chinatown Park represents memory, visibility, and public gathering. The alleyway represents activity, commerce, informality, and the possibility of rebuilding cultural life through daily use.[64]

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[64] DowntownDC Business Improvement District, "Chinatown Park," https://www.downtowndc.org/explore/places/chinatown-park/.

This dual-site approach responds directly to the central question: how can historic Chinatowns preserve their cultural identity in the midst of displacement within their communities? The answer cannot rely only on preserving facades, signage, or isolated historic buildings. Instead, preservation must also address the spaces where culture is practiced: parks, streets, alleys, storefronts, thresholds, and gathering spaces. In DC Chinatown, where many visual cultural markers remain but the resident Chinese American population and legacy businesses have diminished, architecture must work between memory and use. It must create spaces where history can be interpreted, but also where cultural activity can continue.

The District of Columbia Office of Planning's historic context study on Chinese Americans in Washington, DC, shows that the city's Chinese American history is not confined to one building or one moment, but is instead distributed across associations, churches, businesses, family networks, and sites of migration and relocation. It uses two sites within Chinatown to build a network of remembrance and regrowth. The museum in Chinatown Park becomes the commemorative and interpretive anchor, while the community center in the alleyway becomes the active social and economic anchor.[65]

The importance of site is also connected to legibility. DC Chinatown has a recognizable gate and scattered bilingual signage, but the boundaries and identity of Chinatown can feel unclear within the larger downtown entertainment and commercial district. The Chinatown Design Guide Study

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[65] District of Columbia Office of Planning, Chinese Americans in Washington, D.C.: A Historic Context Study (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Office of Planning, 2024), https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Chinese%20context%20COMPLETE_optimized_0.pdf.

recognizes the importance of integrating Chinese cultural elements and signage into new construction and public-facing projects within Chinatown. However, the boundaries of the Chinatown Historic District, does not correlate with the same intentions, thus making the boundaries of Chinatown DC even more abstract and confusing. The real question throughout this lies in how architecture, landscape, and the ground plane can make Chinatown more spatially legible while also supporting community life? [66]

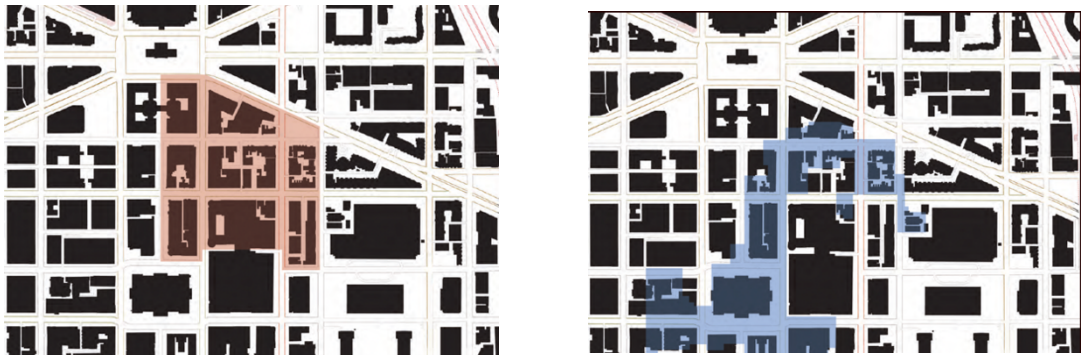

Figure 12: Left is the Chinatown Design Review. Right is Chinatown Historic District. By Caroline Sewell

The park is treated as a civic room for remembrance, where a museum can mark the presence of Chinatown and interpret its history without removing the park's usefulness for community events. The alleyway is treated as a cultural path for regrowth, where affordable vendor spaces, a communal kitchen, and gathering areas can support small-scale business and everyday social life.

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[66] District of Columbia Office of Planning, Chinatown Design Guide Study (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Office of Planning, 2018), https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/page_content/attachments/CDG%20FINAL%20REDUCED.pdf.

Together, these sites test how architecture can preserve Chinatown not as a static image, but as a living cultural landscape

Section 2

Site Positioning

The selected sites are positioned within the historic and cultural fabric of Washington, DC's Chinatown. DC Chinatown has long been shaped by relocation, exclusion, commercial adaptation, and redevelopment pressure. Its contemporary identity is marked by contradiction: it remains one of the most visible Chinatowns in the United States because of its gateway, signage, and central downtown location, yet its lived Chinese American community has been significantly reduced. This condition makes DC Chinatown an important site because it reveals the difference between symbolic preservation and lived preservation.

The design is also positioned near active Chinese American memory work. The 1882 Foundation, located nearby on I Street NW, identifies its office as centrally located in Chinatown and uses oral history, education, and public programming to document Chinese American experiences. Its Flashback Chinatown oral history project demonstrates how stories of immigration, family life, displacement, and neighborhood change can become a tool for cultural preservation. This proximity matters because the site is not an empty or generic development

parcel. It sits within a landscape already connected to historical recovery and community storytelling.[67]

The site can therefore be understood through three overlapping positions. First, it is a cultural site, connected to Chinese American history, family associations, food businesses, and memory work. Second, it is an urban site, located within a dense downtown environment shaped by redevelopment, transit, tourism, and changing land values. Third, it is a programmatic site, capable of supporting the proposal's major zones: museum, community center, alley market, small-business incubator, communal kitchen, event space, and administrative support.

Recent redevelopment attention around the 608-624 Eye Street NW area makes this site especially relevant. In 2025, the District announced that Monument Realty was redeveloping several small lots at 608-624 Eye Street NW into The Gallery, including plans to transform a public alley into an active retail area and residential entrance. This confirms that the alleyway is already being understood as a valuable urban condition.[68]

This question shaped the design's site positioning. The alleyway is not treated only as a service corridor or redevelopment opportunity. It is treated as a potential cultural corridor where food vending, small business, and gathering can help restore everyday community life. Chinatown

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[67] 1882 Foundation, "Contact Us," accessed May 22, 2026, https://1882foundation.org/contact-us/; 1882 Foundation, "Flashback Chinatown D.C.," https://1882foundation.org/archive/videos/flashback-chinatown/.

[68] Executive Office of the Mayor, District of Columbia, "Mayor Bowser Announces Three New Commercial-Residential Conversion Projects," September 3, 2025,

Park, meanwhile, is not treated as leftover open space. It is treated as a civic anchor that can hold a museum while still remaining usable for public events. Together, the two sites create a strategy that operates at multiple scales: the urban scale of Chinatown's identity, the neighborhood scale of public life, and the architectural scale of interior program and material expression.

Section 3

Site Documentation: Chinatown Park and 624 I Street NW

The site documentation focuses on two primary spatial conditions: Chinatown Park and the alleyway at 624 I Street NW. These conditions are studied together because they represent two different but connected forms of public life. The park is open, civic, and visible. The alley is narrow, embedded, and transitional. The park offers the possibility of gathering and remembrance, while the alley offers the possibility of movement, commerce, and daily cultural activity.

Chinatown Park currently functions as one of the neighborhood's existing public open spaces. Its current condition suggests both value and incompleteness. As a public space, it has the potential to serve residents, workers, visitors, elders, families, and cultural organizations. However, like many urban parks in gentrifying districts, its cultural role depends on programming, edges, accessibility, and the communities it is designed to support. The Chinatown Cultural Development Strategy emphasizes the importance of cultural identity, public realm

improvements, and community-serving strategies within Chinatown, making the park an appropriate place to test how open space can support cultural continuity.[69]

Chinatown Park is documented not only as landscape, but as a potential civic platform. The proposed site can become a place for festivals, outdoor exhibitions, oral history events, performances, markets, seating, and community gatherings. Because the proposed museum is placed within the park, the design must negotiate between architectural presence and landscape openness. The museum cannot consume the park. It must intensify the park's cultural role while preserving its ability to function as a flexible public space.

The alleyway at 624 I Street NW is documented as a contrasting urban condition. Its narrowness, enclosure, and relationship to surrounding buildings create a strong threshold experience. Unlike a broad plaza, an alley produces intimacy and direction. It can guide movement, concentrate activity, and support small vendor modules or flexible storefronts. In the context of Chinatown, this alleyway is significant because it can become a place where the neighborhood's food culture and commercial history are made visible again. The alley does not need to become a decorative themed space; instead, it can become a functioning cultural corridor where Asian American food vendors, small businesses, and community events activate the ground plane.

The importance of alley activation is also supported by Washington, DC's own urban history. The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey explains that alleys became an integral part of the city's

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[69] District of Columbia Office of Planning, Chinatown Cultural Development Strategy (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Office of Planning, 2009), https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Chinatown%20Cultural%20Development%20Small%20Area%20Action%20Plan.pdf.

cultural landscape and notes that activated historic alleys can provide distinctive urban spaces that contribute to a vibrant social realm. This local precedent is important because the alleyway proposal is not simply importing an East Asian market typology into DC. It also builds from the District's own tradition of alley life, adaptation, and reinvention.[70]

The urban morphology around the site is defined by compact blocks, mixed building heights, commercial frontages, and a layered relationship between main streets and secondary passages. The street edges near Chinatown Park and I Street hold important visual and pedestrian relationships. Building heights vary between smaller historic structures and larger contemporary developments, creating a tension between older neighborhood scale and newer downtown density. This tension is important to the design process because the design must mediate between the human scale of Chinatown's historic commercial fabric and the larger scale of downtown redevelopment.

The site's cultural rhythms are equally important. Chinatown is experienced through movement, sound, signage, storefronts, food, gathering, and memory. Even where the Chinese American residential population has diminished, cultural traces remain in the built environment and in the stories attached to specific places. Site documentation must therefore include more than measurements and circulation diagrams. It must also record sensory and social patterns: where people pause, where they move quickly, where signage is visible, where storefronts feel active or

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[70] District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Office of Planning, 2014), 1-2, https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Alley%20Survey%20FINAL.pdf.

inactive, where the alley feels hidden, and where the park feels connected or disconnected from neighborhood life.

Circulation is a central part of the documentation. The site is shaped by pedestrian movement from Gallery Place-Chinatown Metro, surrounding restaurants, nearby cultural organizations, and downtown entertainment uses. The park has the potential to capture pedestrian flow and slow it down into a space of gathering. The alley has the potential to redirect pedestrian movement through the block and create a secondary cultural route. Together, these spaces can create a sequence: arrival, threshold, movement, market, memory, and gathering.

Environmental conditions also shape the site's possibilities. The park's openness allows for light, visibility, planting, and flexible outdoor programming, but also requires attention to shade, seating, seasonal comfort, and noise. The alley's enclosure creates opportunities for overhead lighting, banners, canopies, vendor counters, and framed views.

Section 4

Full Site Analysis

The full site analysis reveals that Chinatown Park and the 624 I Street NW alleyway are valuable because they expose the central conflict of DC Chinatown: the neighborhood remains symbolically visible, but its lived cultural infrastructure has been weakened. Chinatown Park is public and recognizable, yet it requires stronger cultural programming and spatial definition to become a true community anchor. The alleyway is physically modest, yet it holds significant potential to restore the small-scale commercial and social activity that has historically shaped Chinatown life.

At the socio-cultural level, the site benefits from proximity to existing institutions and memory-based organizations. The 1882 Foundation's presence near the site connects the design to Chinese American history, oral histories, and public education. The Chinese American historic context also demonstrates that the broader Chinatown area contains a layered network of associations, businesses, religious spaces, restaurants, and community institutions. This makes the site appropriate for a museum because the design would not impose memory onto an unrelated place. Instead, it would amplify histories already embedded in the neighborhood.[71]

The park's strength lies in its ability to serve as a visible public room. In a neighborhood where cultural identity is often reduced to signage or architectural ornament, a programmed park can support more active forms of preservation. It can host cultural events, outdoor exhibitions, language programs, intergenerational storytelling, performances, and food-based festivals. It can also create a space for rest and informal gathering, which is especially important because cultural continuity is sustained not only through major events, but also through everyday presence.

The alleyway's strength lies in its ability to support small-scale and flexible activity. A successful Chinatown cannot be preserved only through museums or monuments. It also needs places for commerce, food, exchange, and informal social life. The alleyway can support vendor stalls, small-business incubator spaces, a communal kitchen, outdoor counters, seating ledges, lighting, and cultural graphics. These interventions would help restore the kind of ground-level activity that gives Chinatown its identity as a lived neighborhood rather than a themed district.

[71] District of Columbia Office of Planning, Chinese Americans in Washington, D.C.: A Historic Context Study.

The economic pressures surrounding the site are also central to the analysis. The redevelopment proposal for 608-624 Eye Street NW includes residential units, affordable units, and ground-floor retail, while also transforming the public alley into an active retail area and residential entrance. While redevelopment may bring new residents and activity, it also raises the question of whether new investment will support the cultural identity of Chinatown or further dilute it. The tension becomes a design problem. The design asks how new development can include community-serving cultural infrastructure rather than replacing Chinatown's identity with generic retail and residential amenities.[72]

The site's weaknesses include fragmentation, underused spaces, limited cultural programming, and the risk that redevelopment could prioritize market value over community value. Chinatown Park has the potential to be meaningful, but without strong spatial and programmatic connections, it may remain disconnected from the deeper cultural life of the neighborhood. The alleyway has the potential to be vibrant, but without intentional design, it could become either a service corridor or a privatized commercial passage that does not serve Chinatown's community. The opportunities are significant. Chinatown Park can become the outdoor cultural anchor. The alleyway can become the active market spine. The museum can preserve oral histories, artifacts, photographs, and narratives related to Chinese American migration, exclusion, business ownership, family associations, and displacement. The community center can provide social services, educational programs, and flexible gathering spaces. The small-business incubator can support food vendors and entrepreneurs who continue Chinatown's commercial traditions.

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[72] Executive Office of the Mayor, District of Columbia, "Mayor Bowser Announces Three New Commercial-Residential Conversion Projects."

Together, these programs create a site strategy that links memory, commerce, public space, and community support.

The site analysis therefore suggests that the design should not place all meaning inside one building. Instead, the design should distribute cultural activity across the park, alley, building edges, and interior programs. The park should be treated as a civic room. The alley should be treated as a cultural passage. The building should be treated as a mediator between public memory and everyday use. This approach allows preservation to become active rather than static.

Section 5

Methodologies Employed and Lessons Learned from Site Analysis

The site was analyzed through field observation, sensory mapping, drawing, cultural mapping, and precedent-based interpretation. These methods build on the research methodology, particularly the idea that architectural research must engage the lived and sensory experience of place. The goal was not only to document what the site looks like, but to understand how it performs socially, culturally, and spatially.

Fieldwork was used to observe pedestrian movement, public-space use, storefront conditions, signage, thresholds, and patterns of activity. In Chinatown Park, fieldwork focused on how people enter, pause, sit, pass through, or avoid the space. In the alleyway, observation focused on enclosure, width, service access, visibility, safety, material conditions, and potential points of activation. These observations helped identify where architecture could strengthen existing movement patterns rather than interrupt them.

Sensory mapping was used to study how Chinatown is experienced beyond visual form. The neighborhood's identity is not only carried by buildings, but also by sound, food, lighting, signage, language, texture, and density. In the park, sensory analysis focused on openness, noise, shade, and visibility. In the alleyway, it focused on compression, framed views, material surfaces, and the possibility of creating a lively food-market atmosphere. These sensory conditions helped clarify the design intention: the design should make Chinatown feel active, layered, and inhabited, rather than simply symbolically marked.

Cultural mapping was used to identify nearby institutions, historic associations, food histories, and symbolic landmarks. This method revealed that the site should not be understood as an empty development opportunity. It exists within a network of memory. The nearby 1882 Foundation, the history documented in the DC Chinese American historic context study, and the public presence of Chinatown Park all point to a layered cultural landscape. The design must therefore preserve relationships, not just objects.

The analysis also revealed several lessons. First, public space is essential to cultural continuity. A museum alone cannot sustain Chinatown identity if cultural life has nowhere to gather outdoors. Second, small-scale commerce is a form of preservation. Food vendors, small businesses, and market spaces can carry cultural memory through everyday practice. Third, alleys should not be dismissed as secondary spaces. In dense urban neighborhoods, alleys can become powerful connectors between formal and informal life. Fourth, preservation must be designed as a sequence. A visitor or community member should move through layers of memory and activity: from the public park, into the alley market, through the community center, and into the museum.

The most important lesson from the site analysis is that DC Chinatown requires architectural strategies that operate between visibility and use. The Chinatown gate and bilingual signs are visible markers of identity, but they cannot alone sustain a community. The design must therefore create spaces where identity is practiced: where people gather, eat, tell stories, learn, organize, and support one another. Chinatown Park and the 624 I Street NW alleyway are appropriate sites because they allow these practices to occur at multiple scales.

Section 6

Conclusion

The site analysis demonstrates that Chinatown Park and the 624 I Street NW alleyway together provide a strong foundation for a community-centered architectural response to cultural displacement in DC Chinatown. The park offers a visible civic space where memory, gathering, and public programming can occur. The alleyway offers an intimate urban passage where food, commerce, movement, and daily cultural life can be reactivated. Together, they form a dual-site strategy that connects symbolic preservation with lived preservation.

The selected sites are culturally significant, but vulnerable to redevelopment. They are publicly accessible, but under-realized as spaces of community identity. They are surrounded by historic memory but also shaped by contemporary market pressure. These contradictions make the sites ideal.

Chapter 7: Discovery Phase and Conceptual Testing

Section 1

Introduction

The design process did not begin with the intention of making two isolated buildings. Rather, it developed through the search for an architectural response that could address both remembrance and regrowth within Washington, DC's Chinatown. The final design proposal is organized around two interconnected interventions: a museum at Chinatown Park and a community center within the alleyway at 624 I Street NW. Together, these two structures create a spatial framework that responds to the fragmented condition of DC Chinatown. The museum operates as a space of remembrance, visibility, and historical interpretation, while the community center operates as a space of gathering, economic opportunity, and collective renewal. These dual programs reflects the argument that preservation in Chinatown must move beyond symbolic gestures or facade-based identity and instead support both cultural memory and everyday community life.

A major premise of the design is that DC Chinatown currently lacks strong physical markers that clearly establish where Chinatown begins, where it extends, and how it is experienced spatially. Although some symbolic elements remain, such as the Chinatown Gate, bilingual signage, and scattered Chinese-inspired architectural motifs, these features alone are insufficient to maintain a clear and active cultural identity. The Chinatown Design Guide Study provides a framework for considering how cultural elements and signage can be incorporated into projects in Chinatown, but it expands that idea into a broader architectural and urban strategy. The design seeks to create

a more legible Chinatown by inserting architecture, landscape, and ground-plane strategies that serve as both cultural infrastructure and urban markers.[73]

The museum in Chinatown Park acts as a physical stamp of Chinatown's presence within Washington, DC. It is designed as a place of remembrance that interprets the history of DC Chinatown while also strengthening the park's identity as a civic and cultural space. The community center in the alleyway addresses a different but related need. It focuses on gathering, food, business incubation, and regrowth, creating opportunities for Chinatown's community to participate in the neighborhood's future rather than only being remembered through its past.

The discovery phase also involved resolving a tension between monumentality and everyday use. The museum needed to be visible enough to assert Chinatown's presence in the city yet restrained enough to preserve the usability of the park for community events and outdoor gathering. Similarly, the community center needed to serve as a meaningful civic anchor while maintaining the intimate, active, and informal qualities of an alleyway environment. The final concept emerged through this balance: one structure is calm, grounded, and commemorative; the other is lively, porous, and socially activated. Together they establish a dialogue between memory and activity, permanence and change, representation and use.

The design proposes that Chinatown's future depends on making room for both remembrance of Chinese American history and the regrowth of contemporary community life. The museum and community center therefore function not as separate programs, but as complementary parts of a broader spatial strategy for cultural continuity in DC Chinatown.

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[73] District of Columbia Office of Planning, Chinatown Design Guide Study.

Section 2

Massing Studies

The massing studies explored how architecture could be inserted into Chinatown Park and the alleyway at 624 I Street NW in a way that respected the existing urban conditions while introducing a clear cultural identity. From the beginning, the design required two different approaches to massing because the two sites operate in fundamentally different ways. Chinatown Park is an open civic landscape that needed to remain flexible and usable, while the alleyway is a compact urban corridor that needed greater density and activity. These differing conditions led to the development of two distinct yet related architectural forms.

The museum at Chinatown Park was conceived as a minimal intervention within the landscape rather than a dominant object placed in the center of the site. This was an important design decision because the park itself already functions as valuable open space within Chinatown. Rather than filling the park with a large building and reducing its capacity for events and community use, the museum was positioned toward the western edge of the site. This strategy preserves the majority of the park as open and usable ground while allowing the building to establish a strong edge condition. The museum therefore becomes both an architectural marker and a framing device for the park.

Its massing is intentionally restrained above grade. The most visible portion of the museum is a temple-like timber structure that sits lightly within the landscape. This upper form serves as the public face of the museum and as an urban marker that announces Chinatown's presence along Massachusetts Avenue. Its profile draws on traditional Chinese architectural motifs, particularly layered roof compositions and strong horizontal emphasis, while translating them into a more

contemporary and minimal expression. By using a simplified roof form and a restrained material language, the building avoids becoming a literal imitation of historic Chinese architecture. Instead, it communicates cultural reference through proportion, layering, and tectonic clarity.

The museum's largest programmatic volume is located below grade in the basement level, where the main exhibit space is housed. Moving the primary exhibit program underground helped preserve the openness of the park while also creating a more introspective and controlled environment for exhibitions on DC Chinatown history. The ground floor remains relatively open and operates primarily as a lobby and threshold space. Openings in the ground plane and views into the basement establish a visual relationship between the entry level and the exhibition space below, allowing the museum to feel vertically connected rather than spatially separated.

The lightwells distributed across the park emerged as a critical massing and landscape strategy. These lightwells protrude above grade and bring daylight down into the basement exhibit space, but they also become inhabitable objects in the park. Rather than treating them as purely technical elements, the design integrates them as frosted-glass forms that double as seating edges and spatial markers within the landscape. In this way, the park surface itself becomes part of the museum, blurring the distinction between building and site. The museum is therefore not read as a single enclosed object but as a dispersed system of structure, light, seating, and landscape intervention.

In contrast, the community center in the alleyway developed as a more linear and vertically organized mass. Unlike the museum, which prioritizes openness and subtlety, the alleyway building needed to reinforce activity and enclosure. Its massing occupies the edge of the alley and creates a defined urban presence along the passage. This building is conceived as a community anchor that activates the alley through program and visibility. The ground level is

highly porous, opening toward the alley and allowing food vendors and community activity to spill outward. There is also a communal kitchen for group business collaboration. Above this, the mass rises more compactly, containing the double-height event space on the second level with classrooms and the open administrative office on the third level.

The building's vertical organization reflects both program and social intention. The ground floor is the most public and active level, directly engaging the alleyway and its vendor economy. The second-floor double-height event space creates a central communal volume that serves as the social heart of the building. The third-floor open office overlooks this event space through an interior balcony, visually connecting administrative functions with the communal life below. This sectional relationship reinforces the idea that the building is not a stack of isolated floors, but a vertically integrated community structure.



Figure 13: Proposed Site Plan. By Caroline Sewell

Although the museum and community center are different in form and program, the massing studies sought to unify them through recurring principles. Both buildings use layered roof forms derived from traditional Chinese architecture. Both are mass timber structures that emphasize lightness, warmth, and visibility. Both are conceived as civic markers rather than private objects. Most importantly, both are connected by a larger site strategy that organizes movement between the Chinatown Gate, the park, and the alleyway. This pathing system transforms the design from two buildings into one connected cultural landscape.



Figure 14: Proposed Site Axon. By Caroline Sewell

Section 3

Tectonic and Constructional Explorations

Tectonic and constructional studies were central to the design process because the design relies heavily on the expressive role of material and structure. The final proposal uses mass timber as the primary material for both the museum superstructure and the community center, while concrete is used strategically in the museum basement. This contrast between timber and concrete supports both structural logic and conceptual intention.

In the museum, the basement houses the main exhibit space and is constructed in concrete. This decision reflects the spatial and atmospheric requirements of the lower level. The exhibit space needed a sense of permanence, enclosure, and grounding appropriate for a place of remembrance and historical reflection. Concrete provides a stable and weighty material condition that contrasts with the lighter timber structure above. As a result, the museum is conceptually organized as a

dialogue between earth and frame: the concrete basement anchors the building physically and symbolically, while the timber structure above creates a lighter, more open public presence.

The ground floor of the museum operates primarily as a lobby and orientation space. This level is intentionally open, with visual and spatial connections to the basement through floor openings and lightwells. These openings are essential to the experience of the building because they allow daylight to penetrate downward and establish continuity between the public entry and the exhibit level below. Rather than treating the basement as an isolated underground room, the tectonic system makes it part of a vertically interconnected spatial sequence.

The lightwells are among the most important constructional elements in the museum design. Their primary function is to introduce sunlight into the basement exhibit space, but they also serve a larger architectural role. Extending upward into the park, they become visible markers of the museum below. Their frosted-glass construction allows them to diffuse light softly while maintaining a sense of privacy and abstraction. At the same time, their raised edges provide opportunities for seating, transforming them into usable landscape features. In this way, the lightwells are both environmental devices and social infrastructure.

The museum's timber superstructure supports the idea of a light, minimal building that does not overpower the park. Timber was chosen not only for structural efficiency, but also for its visual warmth and human scale. In a project centered on memory and community, timber offers a tactile and welcoming material quality that softens the institutionality often associated with museums. The layered roof composition further reinforces the connection between structure and cultural meaning. Inspired by traditional Chinese roof forms, the roof is reinterpreted through a modern tectonic language rather than direct replication. The result is a roofscape that suggests

continuity with Chinese architectural traditions while remaining contemporary and contextually specific.



Figure 15: Perspective in Chinatown Park facing museum. By Caroline Sewell

The alleyway community center also uses mass timber as its primary structural system. Here, timber supports a different spatial condition: one of openness, community use, and visible activity. The structural logic of the building reinforces its programmatic organization. The

ground floor requires openness and flexibility to accommodate outdoor-facing vendor stalls and a communal kitchen, so the structural system is arranged to support permeability and public access. On the second floor, the double-height event space benefits from the long-span and warm spatial character of timber construction. The third floor continues this tectonic language while creating visual openness through the balcony overlooking the event space.

The constructional development of the community center was shaped by the desire to create an architecture that feels accessible and alive. The building had to support both formal programming and informal appropriation. Vendor spaces on the ground floor needed to be practical and affordable, while the upper floors needed to support gathering, administration, and flexibility. The use of timber helps unify these different uses by creating a clear structural rhythm and a cohesive interior character. It also allows the building to feel more communal and less institutional, which is particularly important for a project centered on neighborhood use.

The material palette for the broader site extends these tectonic ideas into the public realm. The sidewalks are designed with a soft brocade paving pattern, while the roads use an extra slim thin brick material. These surface treatments establish a distinct pathing system that links the museum, community center, and Chinatown Gate. The pathing system functions as an urban-scale tectonic gesture, making the identity of Chinatown legible not only through buildings, but also through the ground plane. This was an important part of the constructional exploration because it demonstrates that cultural marking can occur through infrastructure and movement, not only through architecture alone.

Overall, the tectonic and constructional studies clarified that the design's material language must do more than solve structural problems. It must also communicate meaning. Timber, concrete, frosted glass, and patterned paving were chosen because they support the concept of

remembrance and regrowth. Together, they create an architectural language that is grounded, legible, and culturally expressive without becoming overly literal.



Figure 16: Outside Community Center heading east. This shows the different materiality within the proposed site. By Caroline Sewell

Section 4

Influence of Precedent Studies

The precedent studies played an important role in shaping the conceptual and architectural direction of the design. Rather than serving as models to imitate, the precedents offered strategic lessons about cultural infrastructure, public space, memory, and community-centered design. They helped clarify how architecture can operate not only as form, but as a social and cultural framework.

One important influence was the idea of public space as cultural infrastructure, which can be seen in precedents such as Portsmouth Square in San Francisco Chinatown. Portsmouth Square is widely described as Chinatown's "living room" and as a vital community gathering place, demonstrating that a Chinatown is sustained not only through buildings, but through open spaces that support gathering, recreation, intergenerational use, and public life. This precedent reinforced the importance of keeping Chinatown Park open and usable. Rather than replacing the park with a fully enclosed museum building, the design preserves the park as an active civic ground and inserts the museum in a way that strengthens its cultural role.[74]

Another major influence was the role of the museum as a participatory and community-based institution, particularly in relation to the Wing Luke Museum. The Wing Luke Museum describes its exhibits and programs as built upon a community-developed, community-based

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[74] San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, "Portsmouth Square Renovation Hits Major Milestone," March 12, 2025, https://sfrecpark.org/m/newsflash/Home/Detail/2132.

model, with community advisory committees contributing to the museum process. This precedent was especially important for the concept of the Chinatown museum as a space of remembrance. The design is not intended to be a generic exhibit hall, but a place for preserving and interpreting the history of DC Chinatown, including stories of migration, exclusion, resilience, family networks, and cultural continuity. This precedent helped frame the museum as an extension of community memory rather than simply a building for display.[75]

The design was also influenced by precedents that address contextual and contemporary interpretations of historical architectural languages. This influence is evident in the decision to create a temple-like museum structure that references traditional Chinese architectural motifs while remaining contemporary and minimal. Rather than copying historical Chinese architecture literally, the design studies how layering, roof form, material warmth, and spatial procession can be abstracted into a modern expression. This approach allows the building to be culturally legible while remaining appropriate to the contemporary urban context of Washington, DC.

The alleyway community center was shaped by precedents related to small-scale commerce, alley activation, and informal public life. The decision to prioritize outdoor food vendors on the ground floor draws from East Asian urban conditions, especially those in which narrow commercial corridors and informal vendor systems animate daily life. Research on street vending in China shows that vending patterns are closely tied to pedestrian movement and spatial configuration, reinforcing the idea that vendors can activate urban spaces through everyday exchange. These precedents suggest that economic activity and social exchange often happen in

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[75] Wing Luke Museum, "Community Advisory Committee," accessed May 22, 2026, https://www.wingluke.org/cac; Wing Luke Museum, "Exhibits," accessed May 22, 2026, https://www.wingluke.org/exhibits.

compressed, highly active spaces rather than only within formal storefronts. They also show that food is a powerful cultural medium through which identity, memory, and community can be sustained.[76]

At the same time, the design recognizes that alley activation also has local precedents within Washington, DC. The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey argues that activated alleys can contribute to the city's social realm, while examples such as Blagden Alley demonstrate how interior alley networks can become active cultural and commercial spaces. This dual precedent condition, East Asian vendor corridors and activated DC alleyways, helped support the idea that the alley at 624 I Street NW could become a viable and culturally resonant space for community commerce and gathering. The design therefore merges lessons from transnational Chinatown traditions with local urban typologies.[77]

Precedents related to community centers and civic flexibility also influenced the upper floors of the alleyway building. The PILARES community centers in Mexico City, for example, are described by WORKac as public buildings located in vulnerable areas that provide spaces for

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[76] Ziwen Sun, Iain Scott, Simon Bell, Yufeng Yang, and Zichu Yang, "Exploring Dynamic Street Vendors and Pedestrians through the Lens of Static Spatial Configuration in Yuncheng, China," Remote Sensing 14, no. 9 (2022): 2065, https://doi.org/10.3390/rs14092065.

[77] District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, The DC Historic Alley Buildings Survey, 2; National Trust for Historic Preservation, "The Hidden History Inside Washington, DC's Blagden Alley," Saving Places, June 20, 2016, https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-hidden-history-inside-washington-dc-blagden-alley.

study, learning, arts, recreation, entrepreneurship, and skills development. This precedent helped shape the community center as a flexible building that supports multiple forms of public life rather than a single fixed function. The second-floor double-height event space was developed in response to the need for a flexible communal interior that could host neighborhood gatherings, celebrations, meetings, performances, or simply provide seating and dining space for customers of the food vendors below. The open office on the third floor reflects a practical understanding of administration, one that remains visually connected to the public life of the building.[78]

Ultimately, the precedent studies reinforced the idea that the design should not rely on one singular typology. The final design is not simply a museum, nor simply a community center, nor simply a market. Instead, it is a hybrid cultural infrastructure made up of multiple building and landscape types. The precedents helped establish this hybridity as a strength. They showed that preservation in Chinatown must be spatially diverse: part memory institution, part public park, part market corridor, part community hub. This insight was critical in shaping the final architectural proposal.

Section 5

Influence of Site Analysis

The site analysis strongly influenced the final design direction by revealing both the opportunities and limitations of the chosen locations. The two primary sites, Chinatown Park and

[78] WORKac, "Pilares Azcapotzalco," accessed May 22, 2026, https://work.ac/work/pilares/.

the alleyway at 624 I Street NW, offered distinctly different urban conditions, and the architecture emerged through a direct response to these differences. The design process therefore did not begin by imposing a fixed formal idea onto the sites. Instead, it evolved through studying the physical, cultural, and spatial characteristics of the park and alleyway and allowing those conditions to guide program and form.

Chinatown Park was understood as a site of visibility, public presence, and symbolic opportunity. Because the broader thesis argues that DC Chinatown lacks sufficient physical markers and spatial indications of its identity, the park became a logical place for a commemorative and civic intervention. Its openness and public accessibility suggested that it could support a building with strong cultural visibility. At the same time, the site analysis also made clear that the park's openness was one of its key values. It functions as one of the few available spaces for community events and gathering, and this quality needed to be preserved. This realization directly shaped the massing of the museum. By keeping the above-ground structure minimal and locating the primary exhibit space below grade, the design allows the park to remain usable while still creating a meaningful architectural presence.

The placement of the museum on the western side of the park also emerged from the site analysis. This location allows the building to define an edge condition without occupying the center of the park. It maintains openness across the site and supports the park's continued use for festivals, performances, and informal gathering. The dispersed lightwells further extend the museum across the landscape without blocking the openness of the site. These strategies reflect a direct response to the need for both architectural presence and landscape continuity.

The alleyway at 624 I Street NW was understood through a very different lens. Rather than openness, the site offered enclosure, intimacy, and the potential for active linear movement. The

alleyway's narrowness made it an ideal location for a more socially dense program. The site analysis suggested that this condition could be transformed into a culturally active corridor through food vendors, market-like activity, and shared gathering space. This interpretation was closely aligned with the interest in rebuilding the lived, everyday dimensions of Chinatown. The alleyway therefore became the site of regrowth rather than remembrance alone.



Figure 17: Community Center outdoor vender space. By Caroline Sewell

The ground floor of the community center is a direct response to the alleyway's public potential. Because the alley is best experienced through movement and edge activation, the most public and accessible program, the outdoor vendor spaces and communal kitchen, was placed on this level. This allows the building to engage the alley physically and economically. The vendor system is especially important because the site analysis revealed that Chinatown's cultural life has been weakened not only by loss of residents, but also by the shrinking presence of small, affordable, culturally specific businesses. By dedicating the ground floor to food vendors and

low-barrier business opportunities, the design responds to this condition in practical and spatial terms.

The upper levels of the community center also emerged from the site analysis. The neighborhood lacks accessible indoor gathering space that is clearly tied to Chinatown's community life. The second-floor double-height event space addresses this need by creating a flexible communal room that can support events, dining, and cultural programming. The third-floor office provides organizational support and administration, ensuring that the building can function as a sustained community resource rather than only an architectural gesture. The balcony overlooking the event space strengthens the visual continuity between these levels and reinforces the communal nature of the building.



Figure 18: Indoor Community Center in the Event Space. By Caroline Sewell

Perhaps the most important insight from the site analysis was the need to connect the two buildings not just conceptually, but physically and spatially. Because the museum and

community center occupy different sites, the site risked becoming more fragmented. The pathing system emerged as the primary response to this issue. By using a distinct paving strategy across roads and sidewalks, the design creates a legible route that links the Chinatown Gate, museum, park, and alleyway building. This pathing system transforms separate interventions into one coherent site strategy. It also extends the design beyond building footprints and into the public realm, making Chinatown's presence more visible in everyday movement through the neighborhood.



Figure 19: Entering the alleyway through the side with Chinatown Gate. By Caroline Sewell

In this way, the site analysis did more than inform placement. It helped define the conceptual split between remembrance and regrowth, the relationship between open park and active alley, and the need for a connective urban language across the site. The final design is therefore deeply rooted in the specific conditions of DC Chinatown and cannot be separated from them.

Section 6

Design Direction

The final direction brings together the major themes developed throughout the research and design process: cultural continuity, memory, community gathering, economic opportunity, and architectural legibility. The design proposes that preservation in DC Chinatown must operate through a network of spaces rather than through a single gesture. It must make room for both history and everyday life, for remembrance and regrowth, for public symbolism and practical community support. The museum at Chinatown Park and the community center at 624 I Street NW together form this network.

The museum represents the commitment to remembrance. It preserves and interprets the history of DC Chinatown while also physically marking the presence of Chinatown within the city. Its minimal but symbolically resonant architecture establishes a cultural landmark without sacrificing the park's role as a public gathering space. The basement exhibit hall, the lightwells, the timber structure, and the layered roof all work together to create a space that is reflective, visible, and grounded in both memory and landscape.



Figure 20: Exhibit Space in Museum. By Caroline Sewell

The community center represents the commitment to regrowth. It provides spaces where cultural life can continue through food, gathering, events, and small-scale economic activity. The vendor-based ground floor, communal kitchen, double-height event space, and open office structure all support a model of community infrastructure that is active, flexible, and accessible. This building recognizes that Chinatown cannot survive through memory alone. It must also create opportunities for people to participate in cultural life in the present.

The connection between the two buildings is equally. The distinct pathing system, expressed through patterned sidewalks and brick road surfaces, makes Chinatown more legible as a cultural landscape. Rather than relying only on signage or isolated landmarks, the design marks Chinatown through movement, material, and spatial sequence. This strategy helps establish a stronger urban identity while also connecting major cultural nodes within the site.

The direction of the research ultimately suggests that architecture can contribute to the preservation of Chinatown not by freezing it in the past, but by creating new conditions for cultural continuity. The design does not attempt to reconstruct a lost Chinatown exactly as it once was. Instead, it proposes a contemporary architectural response that honors historical memory while supporting present and future community life. In this sense, the design is both commemorative and forward-looking.

The design proposal stands as a spatial argument: DC Chinatown needs spaces that tell its history, support its people, and make its presence felt within the city. The museum and community center together offer one possible framework for achieving this. Through these interventions, this thesis argues that architecture can help Chinatown remain not only a remembered place, but a lived one.

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