

Vancouver's Chinatown 2011, Quo Vadis? Hayne Y. Wai, August 2011

“The status quo is not sustainable”

This was declared at a recent large forum by a consultant from San Francisco hired by the City of Vancouver to prepare an Economic Revitalization Action Plan for Chinatown. The meeting was called by the City Planning Department and held June 29th at FLOATA restaurant. This followed upon the planning department's Chinatown Historical Area Height Review (HAHR) held earlier in the spring which had been preceded by many other planning sessions and reports on Chinatown in recent years. According to the City planning director, City Council had “as a priority directs staff to report back on a Chinatown Economic Revitalization Plan with a focus on near term action strategies, building upon existing revitalization initiatives.”

This forum was to be the first phase of a draft action plan which would be available for further input said the planning director. The mood was upbeat, the tone positive, as he thanked the 250 attendees for their concerns for Chinatown's current problematic situation. Their input, suggestions, and participation were welcomed to revitalize a better future for Chinatown.

I couldn't help but reflect on words attributed to New York Yankee legend Yogi Berra, “it's like *déjà vu* all over again”. I thought the meeting echoed previous ones on Chinatown's future as the topic had been discussed numerous times in recent years. Would the results of this process be any different? The challenges are substantial but so are the opportunities.

According to the City website the recent Chinatown Revitalization Program had commenced in 2001 with the creation of a Chinatown Revitalization Committee “where everyone can come together to participate in problem-solving, policy discussions, developing partnerships with various community groups, governments and private funders, building local leadership and many more initiatives that contribute towards the revitalization of Chinatown.” Through numerous meetings with community organizations, merchants, businesses and community leaders a Chinatown Vision was created and adopted by Council in July 2002. This detailed Vision declared that “the future Chinatown should be a place that tells the area's history with its physical environment, serves the needs of residents, youth and visitors and acts as a hub of commercial, social and cultural activities.” In 2003 the City established a five-year Heritage Incentive Program for Chinatown, Gastown, the Hastings Corridor and Victory Square, “to encourage the conservation and rehabilitation of heritage buildings”, including those owned by Chinatown societies and associations.

In March 2004 Council directed staff to develop a Chinatown Community Plan and in February 2005 a three year action plan was adopted. In 2006 a Progress Report was submitted to Council with five key areas of work, Residential Intensification and Land Use, Public Realm and Transportation, Cultural Development, Economic Development, and Community and Social Development. In the spring of 2009 as the Chinatown Plan was being further prepared the City injected proposals for high rise developments in and adjacent to historic Chinatown, including a 30 storey tower on the Chinese Cultural Centre site overlooking the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden. Again, more public meetings and consultations took place over the next several months as many groups in Chinatown and the downtown eastside strongly opposed the huge towers.

In spring 2010 City Council adopted revised proposals by the Planning Department which rescinded the scheme for a 30 story tower but did commence another series of discussions on a height review for Chinatown (HAHR). This led to, yes, more consultations and meetings in the following months. This time there was concurrence from most Chinatown businesses, organizations and merchants to support a City plan which called for an increase of up to one storey in the historic Pender street area while permitting developments of up to 12-15 stories in Chinatown South. They had been through years of reports and delays and wanted to get moving on issues. After four lengthy public sessions including opposition from downtown eastside groups who wanted a local planning process for the larger area before confirmation of increased height and density, Council adopted the new height recommendations.

It was unusual that major planning decisions would be framed on height without adequate discussion of critical issues such as the kinds of development, housing and business mix, community facilities, and transportation access. Regardless, the City confirmed HAHR recommendations and now would commence work on an economic plan for Chinatown with input from the community, a.k.a. more meetings and consultations. Chinatown had been facing a growing crisis for many years and as the consultant from San Francisco clearly learned from his eighty interviews with merchants and business leaders, “the status quo is not sustainable”.

No arguments here. Strategic and decisive short and long term actions must be taken but what would this look like? What kind of Chinatown could be sustainable in Metro Vancouver for the next decade? Would it be a viable community which could include seniors and lower-income? What about all the numerous recommendations and reports from previous years?

Before further discussion of Chinatown’s future, one has to look at its past. What were the forces which formed its origins, forged its development, shaped its growth, and now challenged its survival? Also, any discussion of Chinatown’s future has to be viewed within the context of neighbouring communities, the larger Metro Vancouver area, and the rapidly evolving Chinese-Canadian community.

When Vancouver was incorporated in April 1886 around the Gastown area there already was a Chinese settlement at Shanghai Alley, just south of the current Millennium Gate. This “Chinatown” was enhanced with the completion of the railroad to the City and in the ensuing decades grew and persisted in spite of legalized racism. The central institution of early Chinatown was the locality and fraternal associations which attended to the needs of the early community, the large majority of whom were men.

In February 1887 an angry mob of local white citizens chased a camp of Chinese from their Stanley Park location and burnt their belongings. A large anti-Chinese riot took place on September 7, 1907 when a mob of thousands rampaged through Chinatown breaking windows and damaging buildings. The mob then turned its attention to adjacent Japantown. The riot had been preceded by a 15,000 Anti-Asian protest parade which concluded at City Hall then at the corner of Main and Hastings.

The Government of Canada with the strong urging from British Columbians imposed head taxes on Chinese immigrants commencing in 1885, conveniently after over 15,000 Chinese labourers

had helped complete the railroad. They worked on the treacherous part of the Fraser Canyon when not enough local labour could be found. It was this railroad completed by the Chinese which enabled immigrants from Britain and Europe to come to BC to settle and probably participate in the 1907 Anti-Asian riot.

The \$50 head tax in 1885 only temporarily reduced Chinese migration and was raised to \$100 in 1900 and then again raised three years later to \$500, about two years wages. In total some 80,000 Chinese paid the head taxes from 1885 to 1923 for a total sum of \$21 million or the equivalent of \$1.2 billion in current terms. These head taxes, along with discriminatory laws, disenfranchisement and denial of citizenship, reinforced early Chinatown as a racial enclave.

The head taxes contributed to a predominantly male population in early Chinatown as only the wealthier merchants could afford to bring over wives. As a result the emergence of a Canadian-born Chinese generation was delayed. In 1923 Canada imposed the *Chinese Exclusion Act* which virtually stopped all Chinese coming to Canada until its repeal in 1947. Vancouver's Chinatown and Chinese community, then synonymous persisted through these discriminatory years but its total numbers declined as some returned to their home villages against the advancing Japanese aggression in China.

During World War II over 600 Chinese Canadians enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces to fight for their country even though they did not have the vote or citizenship. After the war these veterans along with support from other Canadians lobbied for these basic human rights. In 1947 the federal government introduced its first *Canadian Citizenship Act* which extended rights to all those born in Canada regardless of ethnicity. Voting rights were also extended to Chinese-Canadians and along with the vote came the right to finally practice as lawyers, accountants, doctors and pharmacists. The *Chinese Exclusion Act* was rescinded and community members could finally sponsor family members to join them. However, unfair restrictions based on ethnicity remained in Canadian immigration law until 1967.

The post-war immigration rejuvenated Chinatown and Vancouver's Chinese-Canadian community. In the 1950's the adjacent neighbourhood of Strathcona became increasingly Chinese with the arrival of more migrants. The neighbourhood which was Vancouver's oldest residential community had been a mixture of Italian, Ukrainian, Swedish, Portuguese, Jewish, Black/African, Russian and Yugoslavian. By 1960 Strathcona had become about 50% Chinese.

The transition of Strathcona was not without critical challenges as in 1958 the City of Vancouver unilaterally declared that the entire neighbourhood would be demolished as part of "urban renewal" and "slum clearance". This was an "opportunity", claimed the City, to rebuild the area with large public housing projects then the professional planning wisdom for affordable social housing. Despite appeals from Chinatown leaders several blocks of homes were demolished for the construction of Maclean Park and Raymur housing projects and hundreds of residents displaced. In 1968 Strathcona awaited the City's third and final urban renewal scheme which would bulldoze the remaining neighbourhood for housing projects and a freeway. Fortunately, area residents with the support from the federal and provincial governments were able to fend off the destruction of their neighbourhood in favour of an urban rehabilitation project, the first of its kind in Canada. In the mid 1970's national urban rehabilitation programs would be based upon the Strathcona experience.

For Chinatown, 1967 was a notable year. It was the year in which Canada finally removed overt racial restrictions in immigration laws permitting Chinese to enter Canada like other applicants from Europe and the United States. The Chinese Canadian community in Metro Vancouver was to grow, integrate and diversify. Chinatown expanded with new shops and restaurants in the 200 block East Pender, dim-sum arrived at the Jade Palace, New Diamond and Asia Garden restaurants, Ming's opened up a Hong Kong style nightclub, and the Marco Polo theatre restaurant was a popular location for Vancouverites and visitors. There were line-ups to dine at the Chinatown back-alley diners such as the Green, Red and Orange Doors. The new immigration brought prosperity and expansion to Chinatown which was also "discovered" by an appreciative non-Chinese population.

However, 1967 was also the beginning of the five year battle against Chinatown freeways as the City proposed the urban spaghetti as the solution to Vancouver's transportation issues. The "Carrall Street Alignment" was designated through Chinatown, an eight lane nine meter elevated freeway connection to the waterfront and Third Crossing of Burrard Inlet. City planners offered drawings of quaint shops below the freeway as part of Chinatown's revitalization. Not only did the Chinatown/Strathcona communities strongly oppose the freeway but so did many other groups and citizens in Vancouver. There were several freeway proposals in the following years, all were defeated. The final threat was vanquished in 1973 when the reform-minded City Council rejected planning department proposal for a "Quebec -Columbia Connector" to pour traffic into Chinatown.

A significant result of the campaign to save Chinatown from freeways and urban renewal was the development of a vision of what Chinatown could and should be from amongst many community members and leaders. A concept for a Chinese cultural centre and a Chinese style park on the western portion of historic Chinatown was developed as part of this larger renewal plan. It would revitalize the historic area of Chinatown, provide a community focus and also permanently stop any more freeways proposals. One of the initial accomplishments was to have the Chinatown historic area designated under the *Provincial Heritage Act* in 1974 to protect its unique architecture. At about the same time the City established the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee (CHAPAC) composed of businesses, organizations and professionals for on-going liaison on development issues.

The 1980's heralded new important developments in Chinatown, the first phase of the Chinese Cultural Centre opened in 1980 and its David Lam Multi-purpose hall in 1986. That spring the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden, the first ever Chinese garden built outside of China, was opened to welcome EXPO '86 visitors. In 1995 a large 928 stall parkade was completed in Chinatown. The SUCCESS headquarters commenced services in 1998 and its adjoining seniors' home opened in 2001, and the Millennium Gate was dedicated in 2002. Some Chinatown association buildings made use of City funds for preparation for renovations and improvements to their facades.

The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 had a major impact for Chinatown and Metro Vancouver. The accord signed by Britain and China in 1984 resulted in tens of thousands of Hong Kong immigrants arriving in advance of the handover date, the majority of whom settled in Vancouver and Toronto. This coincided with Canada's expanded program for business and investor immigrants. This immigration Asianized these two cities like never before. Large

Chinese malls sprang up in Richmond as this city proved to be a major destination as were other parts of Vancouver. These Hong Kong immigrants had little or no relationship with historic Chinatown and created their own cultural and economic centres elsewhere. More recent immigration during the last decade has been from the People's Republic of China which accounts for a quarter of all immigration to Metro Vancouver. This latter group is cultural, socially and linguistically different from previous groups of Chinese migrants and likewise has few ties, if any, with historic Chinatown.

Summary

Head taxes, exclusion and discriminatory laws dictated the boundaries of early Chinatown and in the post-war years immigration and demographic changes were major factors which contributed to its evolution. At one time "Chinatown" and "Chinese-Canadian community" were synonymous but those days are long gone. In 1971 Vancouver's Chinese population was about 32,000 and by 1991 it grew to 103,000, a three-fold increase in twenty years. Currently, there are as many as 450,000 people of Chinese heritage in Metro Vancouver, including recent immigrants and several generations of Canadian-born. Chinese stores, services and restaurants permeate Metro Vancouver, and cultural and language programs are now located throughout the area in particular in Burnaby and Richmond. Services in Mandarin are now available throughout the Metro region. Several Chinese language newspapers and radio and television stations provide strong support to Chinese speaking community members. The Chinatown-based *Chinese Times* which started in 1914 ceased publication in 1992, overwhelmed by the new Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China media corporations which opened in Vancouver.

This is the evolved demographic economic and cultural reality which has increasingly challenged Chinatown in the last twenty years. In the 1960's and 70's it was misguided City policies for freeways and urban renewal which threatened Chinatown's survival. The issues for 2011 are much different and more complex. More shops along the 100 and 200 block Pender have closed, the line-ups at meat merchants are shorter or non-existent, street parking is available, and very few places open in the evening. The traditional Chinese associations play a much lesser role as before and their buildings are in need of renovation, seismic upgrading, and tenants. In the late afternoon the streets and shops are relatively quiet. Indeed, the status quo is not an option.

Chinatown has also been impacted by social conditions and affordable housing issues in the adjoining downtown eastside. Despite the work of many community agencies including Canada's first and only safe injection site, issues of poverty, mental health and drug trafficking have become more prevalent and visible in recent years, creating safety and security concerns. Gentrification, which had been sparked by EXPO 86, was enhanced with the redevelopment of the mammoth \$400 million Woodward's project of 42 and 36 story towers. Less social housing has been built in the last twenty years because of reduced federal funding. Community advocates voiced critical concerns for the future for long time downtown eastside residents in the face of proposed high density developments and have demanded a long range community plan.

In contrast to these ominous indicators for Chinatown, there have been new developments in recent years outside of traditional Chinatown businesses and organizations. New merchants, coffee houses, restaurants, art galleries, and businesses have moved in. Two major historic buildings - the Chinese Freemasons and the Wing Sang have been fully restored. Ming's, which

had been vacant for several years, is now a lively night spot for young patrons and a new boutique accommodation has opened on Keefer opposite the parkade. The eight story developments in the 200 block Georgia and Unions Streets have provided that area with new resident consumers. The high rise developments in the adjacent Tinseltown area pose thousands of new potential Chinatown users. The Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, has become a proud civic cultural asset for local residents and visitors.

Attendees at the June 29 Chinatown forum provided constructive suggestions, many of which had been expressed over past years. These included recommendations on transportation, parking, public safety, security, development of mixed and affordable housing, economic incentives for new businesses and development, activities to attract a younger generation, tourism promotion, and more street activities. While increase height and density can provide flexibility, new and taller buildings alone will not “save” Chinatown. Higher density development should not end up forcing out long time residents out of their own community. One can save the buildings but lose a community which is a critical concern for meaningful heritage preservation. In 2009 the City of Vancouver with the support of many community organizations submitted an application to Parks Canada for the historic core of Chinatown to be designated as a National Historic Site of Canada. The federal Environment Minister has recently informed that the submission has been approved.

Chinatown’s future lies with acknowledging changed demographic realities, building upon unique assets of history and culture, collaborating with other community organizations to address social issues, and developing mixed housing. Most of all, Chinatown’s prospects depends on involving all who want to contribute to the viable future of this historic area, Chinese and non-Chinese alike. There has been a plethora of meetings, visions, reports, and recommendations. Let’s hope that this new series of city consultations will lead to more concrete collaborative results. Rather than Yogi Berra’s *déjà-vu* quotation, I prefer the BC Egg Producers’ of a few years ago, *let’s get cracking* and Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*.

Suggestions for further reading:

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