

# Chicago's Chinatown



## Boundary Maintenance and the Built Environment

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### Introduction

This research project utilizes Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood as a case study for analyzing the ways in which the built environment can sustain conflicting and at times contested meanings that create distinctive patterns of community identity formation from the level of street block to building. Original data generated from interviews, ethnographies, and cognitive mapping exercises with research participants indicate that aspects of the built environment more traditionally Eastern or Oriental in appearance reinforce outsider perceptions and stereotypes, marking the space as distinctly "Chinese," as well as create important boundary markers for the Chinatown community itself. Conversely, architectural structures that reflect more contemporary design styles and sensibilities, such as the Chinatown Public Library, allow for more dynamic and flexible constructions of self and community identity. Ultimately, how Chinatown's community negotiates and finds balance in urban spaces that serve both performative and interpersonal ends proves to be an essential element of boundary maintenance across physical, generational, and cultural lines.

At a time when Chinatowns in major cities around the country, namely, New York City, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, are experiencing economic and population decline, Chicago's Chinatown has largely avoided gentrification and disinvestment and continues to grow in size. Over the past several decades, the neighborhood has witnessed a series of urban renewal and development projects, and in the process, the population has expanded into bordering neighborhoods, such as Bridgeport and McKinley Park (Eltagouri 2016). The ways in which this community has formed an understanding of collective identity rooted in this particular built environment may function as a template for the survival of ethnic enclaves and minority communities in other parts of the country for decades to come.

For the purposes of this research, the term community is defined according to McMillan and Chavis's four-part structure, which includes "membership": a feeling of belonging, "influence": a perceived ability to make a difference in a group, "integration and fulfillment of needs," and "shared emotional connection" (1986, p. 9). In the case of Chinatown's community, in what ways do Chinese Americans balance insider versus outsider expectations about Chinese culture? What does boundary maintenance<sup>1</sup> across different scales of the built environment and with respect to the emotional and psychological experiences of community members look like? This research paper explores forms of collective identity as they are negotiated by Chicago Chinatown's Chinese American community. In particular, I analyze boundary maintenance and the tensions between performative versus interpersonal spaces in the built environment as they play out across physical, generational, and cultural lines.

1. "The concept of boundary has been central to the study of ethnic and racial inequality as an alternative to more static cultural or even biological theories of ethnic and racial differences" (Lamont & Virág 2002, p. 174). The term *boundary maintenance* in sociology describes "the ways in which societies (or social systems) maintain distinctions between themselves and others" (Scott & Marshall 2015).

## Ethnic Enclaves and Chinatown as a Case Study

Segregation and the movement of ethnic groups into, out of, and within a city are central components of urban sociology. Particularly in the United States, given the country's complex history of immigration, segregation, and race, the centrality of urban place to ethnic identity (Berry & Henderson 2002) remains increasingly relevant to contemporary studies that investigate sense of place among minority and immigrant groups. With particular respect to Asian American communities in the United States, some researchers point to the effectiveness of ethnic enclaves at simultaneously assimilating and shielding immigrants from mainstream American culture (Kuo & Lin 1977, Portes & Manning 1986, Zhou 1992, Logan, Alba, & Zhang 2002). Others point to the emergence of these urban spaces as hubs of consumer and touristic appeal and socio-economic mobility, rendering them increasingly central to local economies and policymaking (Zhou & Logan 1989, Lin 2011). The tensions that emerge among commercialism, strategic forms of self-Orientalism, and identity politics in Asian American communities, especially in spaces nominally designated as Asian enclaves (e.g., Chinatowns, Koreatowns, or Little Vietnams), remain central to continuing discussions about collective identity for Asian American minority groups and immigrant communities (Feng 1996, Umbach & Wishnoff 2008, Li 2015a & b). How these broader themes interplay with Chinatown's specific built environment and how residents reinforce—or dismantle—these boundaries are the focus of this research paper.

Chicago's Chinatown has a storied past within the city's broader immigration and economic history. The first wave of Chinese immigrants to the United States began in the 1850s during the California gold rushes. With the expansion of railroads in the 1870s, Chinese immigrants facing persecution and anti-Chinese sentiment on the West Coast fled to Chicago, making the city the second oldest settlement of Chinese in the



place-based relationships in cities. To that end, an increased understanding of the linkages between self- and group identities as a “collective accomplishment” underscores the importance of studying individual and communal senses of place in tandem (Brown-Saracino 2015). Lastly, little sociological work has been conducted on the explicit roles of architecture and the built environment in constructing—or deconstructing—identity and sense of place, particularly for minority or marginalized groups. My research merges both traditional and more contemporary approaches to studying sense of place across the fields of sociology and urban planning and design, utilizing qualitative methods to merge theoretical frameworks from both disciplines.

Within Chinatown’s built environment, there remains a tension between the performative role of Oriental façades and structures and a desire to project a distinct and authentic Chinese American identity that reflects the entire community. For the purposes of this analysis, the term *performative* describes aspects of the built environment that outwardly and unmistakably present themselves as Asian or Chinese in appearance, rendering these structures easily identifiable to outsiders. As a result, I pay particular attention to the specific impacts of physical, built space on the Chinatown community’s understanding of sense of place and identity. I found that the community acknowledged and approved the symbolic and performative features of the built environment as a means of simultaneously appealing and catering to outsiders in addition to sending a clear message about the neighborhood’s enduring cultural legacy. This research provides a case study for the ways in which the built environment can sustain conflicting and at times contested meanings that create distinctive patterns of consumption and identity formation at the level of street block or building.

## Theoretical Framework

### Sociological Precedent

Within the field of sociology, sense of place is largely understood as “a collection of symbolic meanings, attachment, and satisfaction with a spatial setting” (Stedman 2002, p. 563). Places hold meaning and value that are determined both by individual experience and social interaction within groups (Tuan 1974, 1977). A place is effective if it is imbued with some manner of social, psychological, or emotional meaning. Most writings on sense of place address “physical setting, human activities, and human social and psychological processes rooted in the setting” (Stedman 2002, p. 562) as a means of defining the phenomena and positioning it in relation to other sociological processes (Relph 1976, Brandenburg & Carroll 1995). Existing sense-of-place theory and research falls under the purview of positivistic or phenomenological approaches (Lalli 1992). Positivistic research is characterized by its emphasis on “quantitative methods and traditional hypothesis” (Stedman 2002, p. 562). This approach often fails to engage with theoretical arguments, ignoring the role symbolism or human emotion and behavior might play in defining sense of place. Conversely, the phenomenological approach has more often defined the work of major place theorists and urban sociologists, such as Edward Relph (1976) or Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1977). Their research emphasizes the peculiarities of social, emotional, and psychological experience, such as the amount of time spent in a setting, social mobility, or relationships and social networks.

Other theorists question the validity of place attachment altogether. Cultural geographer Doreen Massey claims “places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts.... Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries[,]... they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations” (1991, p. 29). Similarly, time-space compression—the process by which technological advancements conflate our understanding of spatial and temporal

distance (Harvey 1991)—in contemporary contexts has largely compounded humankind’s “movement and communication across space,” resulting in “the geographical stretching-out of social relations” (Massey 1991, p. 28). In other words, how can one study or seek to define sense of place in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world? How do boundaries, fixity, and the “rootedness” of place influence an individual’s or community’s sense of place and belonging?

Research on sense of place and community identity remains largely shaped by the concepts of collective efficacy and social cohesion (Granovetter 1973, Chaskin 1997, Sampson 2012). Collective efficacy (the success with which members of a group exert social control within their community to construct a structured environment) and social cohesion (the willingness of community members to aid and interact with one another) play an active role in determining the diversity and success of social ties and networks within a given community (Sampson 2012). Especially when considered in a sociological or psychological context, research on sense of place and neighborhood-level identity often considers the role of collective efficacy and social cohesion in defining community dynamics and networks. For the purposes of this study, the constructs of collective efficacy and social cohesion frame questions about individuals’ involvement in or engagement with local community groups and programming as a means of determining the scope and efficacy of these organizations and the extent to which their missions and members overlap.

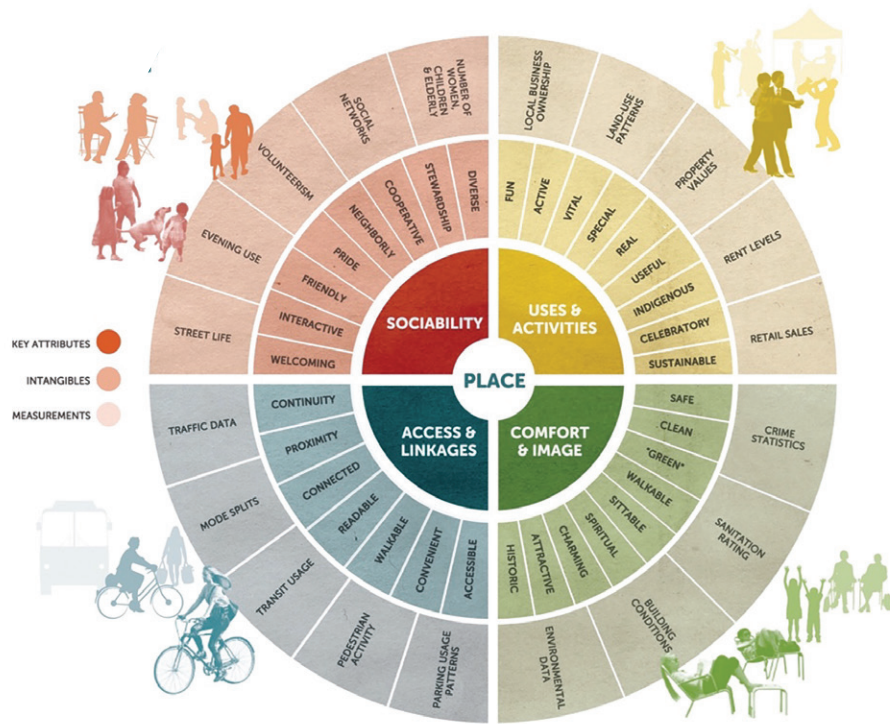
## Urban Design and Planning Precedent

Aesthetics and physical appearance play a large role in urban planning and design literature that seeks to define sense of place and community identity vis-à-vis the built environment. These qualitative and quantitative studies often provide design suggestions and modifications for future design work, rather than the policy-focused conclusions of sociological research. For instance, research by Wilkerson et al. (2012) observes how

the physical environment can have an effect on neighborliness; aspects of the built environment such as “sidewalks, front porches, traffic-calming devices, bars on windows, and the presence of litter or graffiti” (597) had different effects on levels of neighbor social interaction and engagement. The findings of Wilkerson et al. underscore the importance of humanistic urban design, such as sidewalks and accessible front porches, in generating positive senses of community and placemaking. On a broader scale, urban studies scholars also investigate the qualities of urbanity or “cityness,” (Sassen 2005) and the ways in which urban dwellers intrinsically attribute a sense of “spatial DNA” (Burdett 2012, p. 92) to their sense of identity and belonging. Familiarity with and an affinity for a given physical environment constitutes a major role in an individual’s construction of self and ability to relate to other community members.

Recent work in the field often focuses on the effects of New Urbanism design principles on sense of place and community, which emphasize walkable, environmentally friendly neighborhoods through mixed-use and mixed-density planning strategies (Congress for the New Urbanism). Analysis of active frontages and compliance to other New Urbanism design policies often correlates with more positive perceptions of safety, comfort, sociability, and vitality (French et al. 2014, Heffernan, Heffernan, & Wei 2014, Foster et al. 2016). The long-term efficacy and appeal of design principles that advocate for compact, walkable, and diverse communities have been thoroughly studied and, overall, point to positive resident social interactions, improved health, and increased safety (Talen & Koschinsky 2014). Moving forward, researchers in the field often advocate for participatory approaches to urban planning that require cooperation among citizens, planners, and policymakers to ensure more dynamic and authentic forms of future placemaking (Cilliers & Timmermans 2014).

As previously mentioned, within the fields of urban design and planning, theory and research frequently revolve around the creation of design philosophies and guidelines that inspire more dynamic, diverse, and accessible neighborhoods and define sense of place along a myriad of



**Figure 2:** Place Diagram, Project for Public Spaces

place-specific characteristics. For instance, the Project for Public Spaces' "Place Diagram" (see fig. 2) is a tool for determining whether a space constructs positive or negative senses of belonging according to four variables: sociability, uses and activities, access and linkages, comfort and image. Included under these four variables are a handful of intuitive or qualitative aspects by which to judge a space, such as levels of interaction, perceptions of safety, cleanliness, or walkability. These qualitative variables are further elaborated upon by quantitative aspects that can be measured by statistics or research, such as traffic data, property values, or

crime statistics. For the Place Diagram, a focus on micro-level, everyday lived experiences is key in qualifying sense of place and quality of life.

Less thoroughly addressed in the field of sociology, but a central component to urban studies, are the impacts of architecture and urban planning in creating, reinforcing, and/or threatening place-based identity and community. Baydar (2004) investigates the role of commodification and symbolism in the built environments of minority and immigrant communities. Baydar's research finds that the maintenance and propagation of Western architectural styles help to reinforce colonial legacies and other socioeconomic and political hierarchies, to the detriment of minority and marginalized communities. Other research points to self-commodification as an avenue for commercial and economic success for marginalized communities. For instance, Chinatowns across the United States from New York City to Chicago and even Beijing engage in "self-Orientalization" (Feng 1996, p. 58) as a means of attracting tourism and investment opportunities and "(re)asserting spatial identity" (Li 2015a, p. 1118). This architectural phenomenon is not simply an economic opportunity unique to immigrant communities, but also a fixture of commerce in their countries of origin. Research on the 1950s redevelopment plan for Manhattan's Chinatown encapsulates the tensions that exist between residents' ownership over their Chinese identity and heritage alongside a need to prosper economically in Western contexts. The plans "represented an effort to infuse Chinatown with a sense of exoticism that would attract visitors. It claimed for the ethnic enclave to exhibit distinct architectural characteristics that were uniquely 'Chinese.' Many of the community members disagreed with this plan as it might change Chinatown into a 'Chinese Broadway,' as had happened in San Francisco" (Li 2015a, p. 1123).

Central to this subfield of study are the implications of symbolic boundaries and boundary maintenance on sense-of-place formation (Lamont & Fournier 1992). Symbolic boundaries refer to socially and culturally created and maintained demarcations that may or may not conform to a corresponding physical environment. Symbolic boundaries

play a key role in the construction of in-groups and out-groups and the assignment of meaning. Exclusionary in nature, boundary maintenance aids in the formation and management of group identity across gender, ethnicity, race, age, religion, or nationality, among other social and cultural categories. Due to its extensive conceptual variance in application (Lamont & Fournier 1992), boundary maintenance plays a recurrent role in research on sense of place. This research project combines sociological and urban design theory and methods of analysis to examine the ways in which Chinese American sense of place is informed by a built environment that serves dual functions for community members and outsiders.

## Data and Methodology

This project draws on qualitative data, namely interviews and mental maps. I interviewed individuals currently living and/or working in Chinatown and individuals who had spent more than a year living and/or working in the neighborhood at some point in their life, for a total of fifteen interviews. I chose the Chinatown neighborhood as the site for examining the relationship between the Chinese American community and the built environment because the neighborhood is nearly 90 percent ethnically Chinese and home to more than eight thousand residents according to the most recently published estimates (Lee 2013).

I identified interview candidates I considered to be community leaders through their titles or roles in various Chinatown public and social-service organizations, such as the Chinatown Public Library, Pui Tak Center, CBCAC, or CASL and contacted them directly through publicly available contact information or snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981) from their colleagues. Community resident interviewees were recruited using fliers posted in community centers and in public Facebook groups. I contacted architects for interviews through a firm's online site, from referrals, or through snowball sampling. Both of the architects I interviewed are Chinese American and are currently or were previously

involved in a project for Chinatown. By interviewing both community leaders and members with differing agendas and levels of engagement with Chinatown, I was able to construct a more comprehensive portrait of community life as informed by the built environment. Additionally, interviews with architects provided technical and ideological insight into Chinatown's overall design and the intended purposes of some of its public spaces.

I conducted fifteen in-person, in-depth interviews in October 2018 (see appendix 1). Eight interviews were conducted with community leaders, five with community members, and two with architects. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour and thirty minutes, with the average interview lasting one hour. As the majority of my data relies on in-depth interviews and mental maps that reveal individual rationalizations and narratives, I account for the likelihood that my data may represent more extreme viewpoints and is not generalizable nor fully representative of the entire Chinatown community (Mueller & Abrutyn 2016).

I audio-recorded each interview and used the Temi transcription service for the initial transcription, using the platform's editing features to play back each interview at a slower speed and correct any inconsistencies between the recording and the transcript. I then used qualitative hand-coding to identify common themes and to analyze my data (Saldaña 2016). Before reading the transcripts, I outlined several broader themes I knew had reoccurred throughout all of my interviews, such as immigration, family, or mention of a physical location in Chinatown. I then used abductive reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory 2012) to identify additional or unexpected themes through detailed coding of the transcripts. From this detailed coding process, eighteen specific themes emerged. I then used "focused" coding to analyze three transcripts (one from a community leader, one from a community member, and one from an architect) to determine whether or not these eighteen themes were consistent and relevant across all of my data. The analysis section condenses these themes into three broader categories: physical boundaries, generational

boundaries, and cultural boundaries, as defined by the surrounding built environment. As my research details, these boundaries effectively serve as a lens for observing the ways in which the Chinatown community negotiates insider versus outsider understandings of Chinese identity.

Kevin Lynch (1960) developed mental maps, also referred to as cognitive mapping, in 1960 as a tool for representing how individuals distinguish “relationships between space, place, and social and physical features of the physical and built environment” (Powell 2010). I interpret the cognitive maps generated by my interview participants according to well-established and existing methodologies that outline specific procedures for using and interpreting this visual information (Pacione 1978, Richardson 1981, Montazemi & Conrath 1986). These methods underscore the behavioral, psychological, and social implications nested in cognitive maps. In particular, cognitive maps often identify contextual factors that affect decision-making and provide individualistic constructions of an interviewee’s environment, contributing to my understanding of how space is perceived on an individual level (Montazemi & Conrath 1986).

Mental maps function as important analytical and organizational representations of space and place, and many researchers have used them to study placemaking and representational forms of space qualitatively (Pacione 1978; Richardson 1981, Montazemi & Conrath 1986, Mendoza 2006, Mendoza & Ortiz 2006). As Mendoza explains, “These spatial representations may be composed of organizing elements which are central to people’s lives (or may lack any element that defines a place)... [They] are an amalgam of information and interpretation which reflects not only what an individual knows about the places but also how he/she feels about them” (2006, p. 544). An individual’s objective place-based knowledge and his or her subjective, emotional responses to place provide important insights into the layered meanings that built environments can acquire physically, cognitively, and psychologically. Furthermore, I believe these methods of qualitative coding and interpreting cognitive maps are effective for the purposes of my research

as preexisting research on the construction, maintenance, or erasure of Chinese American ethnic and cultural identity in the United States has utilized similar or equivalent forms of data collection and interpretation (Kuo & Lin 1977, Wong 2002, Li 2015b). Included here are two examples of mental maps generated by respondents (see fig. 3), as well as a map indicating places of communal interest that research participants identified most frequently in the speaking and/or mapping portion of the interview (see fig. 4).

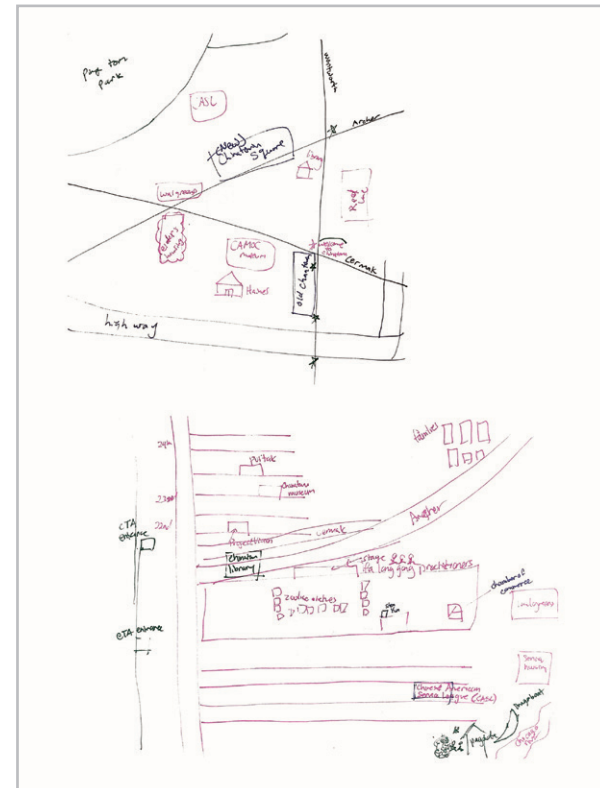


Figure 3: Chinatown mental maps created by research participants.



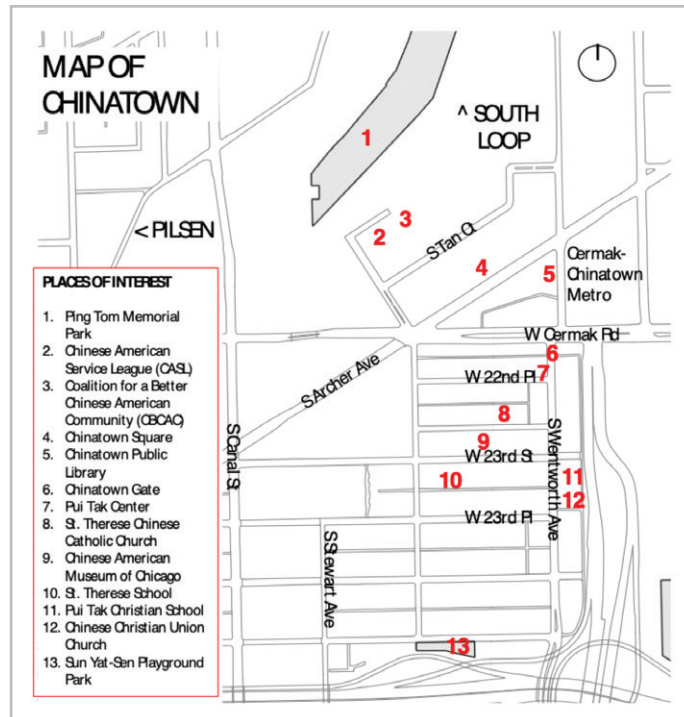


Figure 4: Chinatown Places of Interest

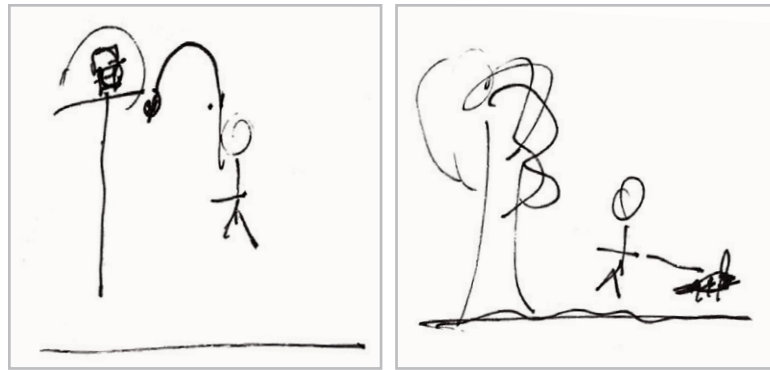
## Analysis

On the whole, research participants had fairly positive views about the Chinatown community and were hopeful about the future growth and potential of the Chinese American community beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood. Residents and nonresidents alike cited the predominance of community organizations and family associations as crucial resources, as well as the Chinese American community's heightened political voice through the election of State Representative Theresa Mah—the first Asian American to serve in the Illinois House of Representatives—as indicative of Chinatown's increasing vitality and visibility.

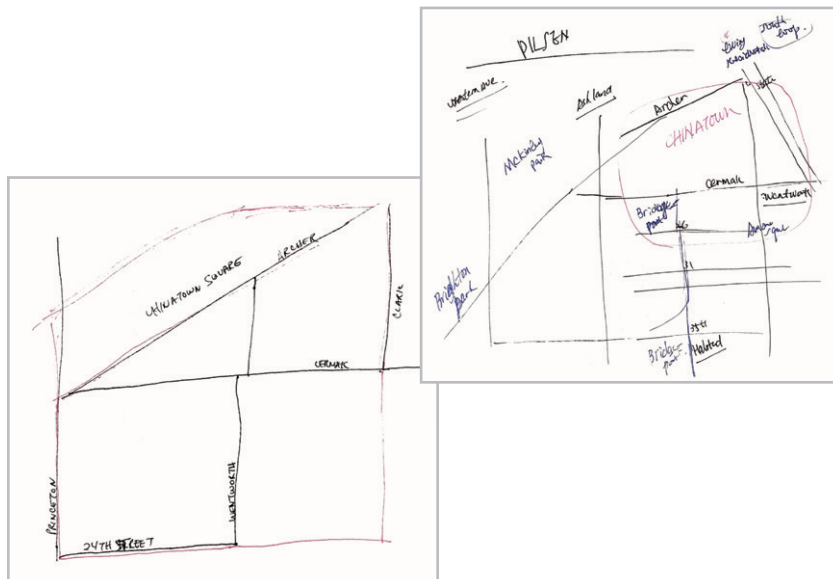
A treasured and well-preserved cultural heritage, general walkability throughout the neighborhood, and resistance to gentrification also contribute to a strong sense of place and belonging. In fact, many research participants pointed out that Chicago's Chinatown is the only Chinatown in the United States currently expanding in size, especially into neighboring Bridgeport, South Loop, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park. In contrast, most other Chinatowns in the country are experiencing economic and population decline (Eltagouri 2016). While research participants had few criticisms about the state of their community, there was an overwhelming consensus over safety concerns, particularly involving homelessness and theft, and a perceived lack of space in Chinatown that inhibits large scale development and investment opportunities.

## Physical Boundaries

Overall, most research participants identified Chinatown as very walkable and easily navigable—likely due to its small physical size and high density, as one can walk from its northernmost tip in Ping Tom Memorial Park to its southernmost point in Sun Yat-Sen Park in approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. Even “greater Chinatown,” an area that loosely incorporates neighboring Bridgeport, South Loop, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park, and more distant areas with high concentrations of Chinese American residents are easily accessible via local bus routes (the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line runs parallel to the neighborhood) and nearby Interstates 55 and 90. Despite the diversity of transportation offerings, Jeanne, who has a public health background, noted that the community “really need[s] to put more emphasis on community access and having walkable streets rather than driving cars.... You don't have to be rich or poor to have access to these things. It helps with having a healthier lifestyle.” Recent planning projects in the neighborhood also point to the community's heightened focus on walkability and accessibility within Chinatown. Arthur, whose architecture firm is currently involved in redesigning and straightening the streetscape along



**Figure 5:** Tim's aspirational images of Chinatown, with basketball courts (L) and dog parks (R).



**Figure 6:** Mental maps of different scale, but with the same official boundaries outlined in pink.

Wentworth Avenue and its intersection with West Cermak Road, believes the project will transform a parking lot under the Red Line that runs adjacent to Wentworth Avenue into a lively commercial strip that will activate the streetscape and increase Chinatown's mixed-use density.

The largest complaint regarding accessibility in Chinatown centered around green spaces. Participants deemed both Sun-Yat Sen and Ping Tom Parks as relatively inaccessible or even unpleasant due to their proximity to busy streets or highways. One participant noted that Ping Tom Park feels "hidden" because you have to cross railroad tracks behind a series of recently developed high-density housing complexes in order to access the park. Within the park itself, oversights in urban and landscape planning hamper some community members' ability to enjoy the space. When asked about the appeal, or lack of appeal, of certain public spaces, John explained: "I wouldn't say people would like to stay in [Ping Tom] park for a long time.... There are not many places to sit." However, plans to expand the Chicago Riverwalk along Ping Tom Park has Chinatown hopeful about future tourism opportunities, as well as the expansion of green space and increased walkability in the neighborhood. For instance, Tim, who grew up in Chinatown, created an aspirational mental map of Chinatown, detailing recreational spaces where he could play sports with friends or walk his dog—amenities he finds lacking in Chinatown's current urban landscape (see fig. 5).

Due to the predominance of natural and physical barriers, such as the Chicago River to the north and west, the Red Line to the east, and the highway to the south, historic Chinatown has clear geographical borders that were almost always observed in the cognitive maps that featured community boundaries for the neighborhood (see fig. 6). While a sense of place and belonging can vary immensely according to scale (Rose 1995), most of the cognitive maps generated by my research participants depicted Chinatown at a scale that mirrored its official, city-designated neighborhood boundaries. I believe this reflects a widespread understanding of the community's physical boundaries shared by insiders (community members) as well as outsiders (policymakers, tourists, and other Chicagoans).

While these barriers give residents and visitors to historic Chinatown a very firm and mutual understanding of the neighborhood's physical extent, many locals feel limited by the lack of space, as reflected by the expansion of the Chinese American community into neighboring South Loop, Bridgeport, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park, or even as distant as Chicago's suburbs. As one participant noted "[Chinatown is] close [to meeting a threshold for density]. It's getting close. So, I do see more and more families moving down what I call the Archer corridor, down to Bridgeport [and] McKinley Park." As a result, many of the participants I interviewed had a very fluid understanding of the population boundaries of the broader Chinese American community, and did not associate Chicago's Chinese population strictly with Chinatown proper. As Margaret, who works in local politics, observes:

Growing up, I've always thought most of the Chinese people live within [historic] Chinatown. But then through working in my current capacity... [I know] Bridgeport has ... more of a Chinese constituency, so that was interesting because I've always felt that [Chinatown] had a higher density [of Chinese residents], but if you count how many families live in Bridgeport, I would say that's where most of the Chinese community live, but then they come to Chinatown for grocery shopping and restaurants.

In other words, Chinatown functions as an important hub for commercial and cultural activity for many Chinese Americans in the Chicago area, but due to its geographic constraints, only houses a limited number of Chinese residents, who are predominately older and seek out Chinatown due to its physical and linguistic navigability. As a result, many community members and leaders feel there is little room for continued development in Chinatown and that it has met its threshold in terms of growth opportunities. Some participants expressed concern that new infrastructure, construction, or increased density might come at the cost of destroying older, historical structures. At the same time, some

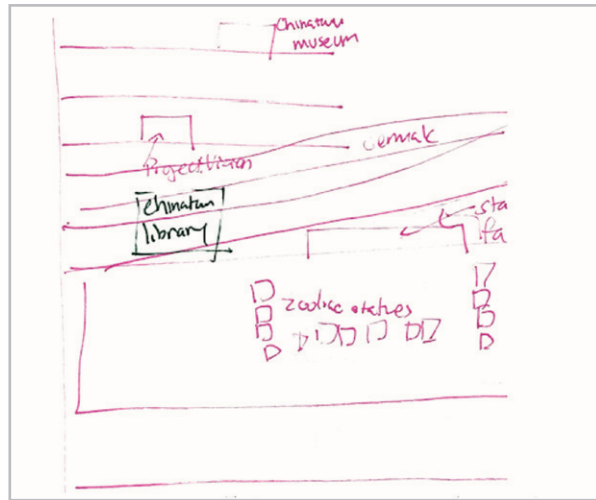
residents fear that geographic restraints may hurt Chinatown's appeal for future development or investment opportunities and detract from the neighborhood's ability to market itself as an attractive destination with modern amenities.

## Generational Boundaries

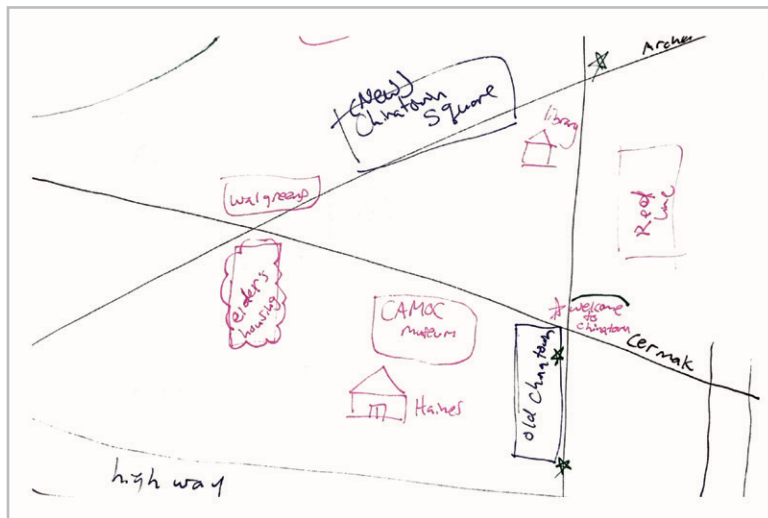
Community organizations and family associations function as essential third places—a neutral social gathering space separate from work or home (Oldenburg 2001)—in the Chinatown community. Residents and non-residents of all ages frequent spaces such as the Chinatown Library, Pui Tak Center, Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC), or Chinese American Service League (CASL) for employment opportunities, child care, health care, help with the immigration process, voter registration, and even English lessons. These third places also provide important spaces for socialization and gathering in the neighborhood, especially for schoolchildren and the elderly. In particular, residents commented on the welcoming atmosphere of the public library, which opened in 2015:

I remember talking to the head librarian [of the Chinatown Chicago Public Library] and like the first day they were open, they were averaging one thousand two hundred people a day, which probably for libraries is pretty unheard of... So I think the librarians just decided, okay, let's just make the community feel welcome in the library. And so if you go on Saturdays, they have Chinese opera playing in their community room... I think the librarians have given up on hushing people and just make it more of a lively place than probably any other library would be.

The library was one of the most frequently cited spaces when research participants were asked to identify popular public or communal spaces, both in the interview and cognitive map portions of the conversation. The library was a definitive landmark on cognitive maps and often the



**Figure 7:** Mental map with Chinatown's library in black, to underscore its importance.



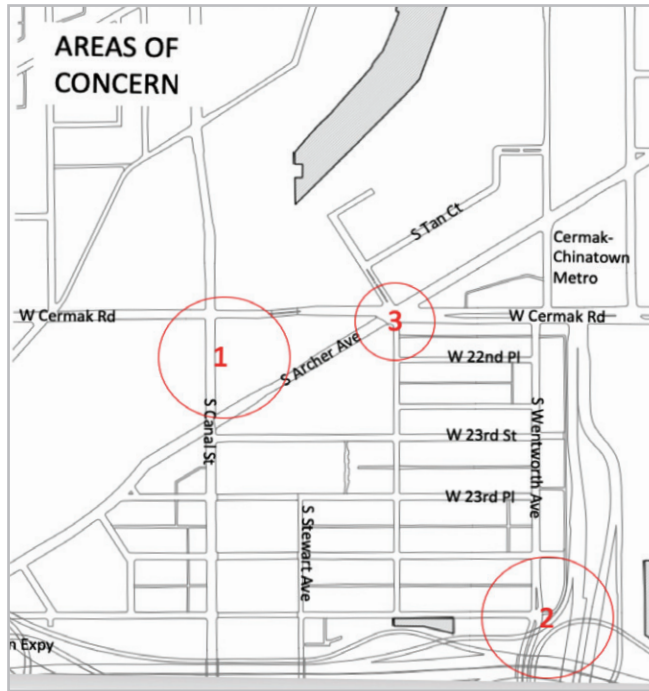
**Figure 8:** Mental Map of “New Chinatown” versus “Old Chinatown”

second or third item drawn when participants were composing their maps (see fig. 7). Notably, the library appears to be one of the most universally beloved public space, whereas community organizations or family associations were at times criticized for their political agendas or lack of programming diversity. The library was cited as an important and versatile public space that served functional needs as a study space or resource for searching and applying for jobs, in addition to providing “lively” opportunities for socialization and engagement in cultural activities and clubs.

The most apparent generational divides in the built environment occurred across spaces of consumption: “New Chinatown” versus “Old Chinatown” (see fig. 8). Almost all of the residents identified the commercial strip along Wentworth Avenue as “Old Chinatown,” a space most often frequented by elderly members of the community and families. Conversely, “New Chinatown” or Chinatown Square, a more recent bi-level commercial development, features trendier restaurants and shops and international chains that cater to teens and young adults. Many participants also noted that Chinatown Square appealed to Chinese international students attending school in the city as well as non-Chinese tourists and other Chicagoans.

## Racial and Cultural Boundaries

In both the interview and cognitive map components of my discussions about safety in Chinatown, individuals were quick to point out three specific areas in which they felt unsafe or which they felt had a reputation for being dangerous (see fig. 9). The first is located under the viaducts that intersect with Cermak Road and Archer Avenue to the west; the second is the portion of Wentworth Avenue that intersects with West 24th Place and the expressways; the third is the intersection at Cermak Road, Archer Avenue, and Princeton Avenue. The first and second locations house homeless encampments or have been the site of recurrent thefts, and many identified the third location as a frequent site for traffic congestion and pedestrian and vehicle accidents.



**Figure 9:** Areas of Concern

Many residents expressed generally welcoming attitudes towards outsiders, who were predominately identified as tourists or other Chicagoans of Caucasian or Asian backgrounds. According to community members, these outsiders are essential to the local economy and do not pose any threat of gentrification or displacement. Several respondents even mentioned methods or strategies the community might enlist in order to further promote Chinatown as a tourist destination, such as more nightlife to attract young adults. This welcoming sentiment excluded Chinatown's predominately Black homeless population; "people's main concern here is around safety and oftentimes it's very anti-Black" noted one interviewee. Despite these fears, however, Chinatown experiences much lower levels of crime and violence than other neighborhoods in Chicago, as pointed out by a participant who frequents community

meetings with the Chicago Police Department. Regardless of these statistics, the local community perceives of safety and crime as significant problems:

I would say safety has always been a really big issue and it continues to be, so it's definitely something I see that needs to be changed. Yeah, there's not really any action towards [fixing] that. I don't know what has to be done, but people are constantly getting injured and hurt and hospitalized.... Chinatown is getting so much more dangerous now. You can't go out at night, you can't be alone, so I want to see that get better.

Many participants cited an inadequate police presence and inconsistent reporting on behalf of residents as reasons for the neighborhood's persistent crime and homelessness problems. In fact, some residents have formed their own neighborhood watch group as a means of overcoming language barriers with the police and encouraging locals to report criminal or suspicious behavior. Notably, the most successful or popular communal spaces identified by participants were indoor spaces. Public outdoor spaces such as the Chinatown Square Plaza or Ping Tom Park had less uniformly positive associations for interviewees and were less frequented throughout the day. Participants' clear preferences for indoor spaces as centers for placemaking and community-building point to some noticeable oversights in the neighborhood's overall planning and design. Future efforts to reimagine Chinatown's built environment might benefit from creating more engaging and accessible outdoor spaces.

While a handful of individuals were critical of the overtly Chinese or Eastern aesthetic of certain structures in Chinatown, most saw the use of traditional symbolism, iconography, or architecture as serving a crucial role in underscoring Chinatown's culturally and historically informed sense of identity. Not only do these structures lend a greater sense of permanence and belonging to the surrounding area, they also serve as important symbolic markers for outsiders. Architectural and aesthetic

markers, such as archways, pagoda-style roof adornments, and Chinese-looking statues and façades dominated by the color red, signify to out-groups a space that is recognizably Asian. The role of aesthetics in defining Chinatown's built environment extends beyond outsider expectations, however. When asked whether it is important for community members to see Eastern or Chinese architectural styles reflected in the built environment, one participant responded, "I think so, because if it's not [there], then what makes it Chinatown?" Another noted, "I think it's important to have some kind of Chinese style expressed through the architectural style. If you want to remodel it, you still need to have some kind of thing that can symbolize Chinese culture."

Regardless of cultural authenticity or accuracy, the persistence of Chinese-styled buildings, gateways, or public art is important for preserving Chinatown's touristic appeal and for promoting a sense of local pride in the community's culture and heritage. One participant noted that these styles help "mark the area as being Asian ... as being Chinese." Moving forward, however, residents appear split as to whether new buildings should continue to incorporate these styles or diverge from them and embrace more contemporary aesthetics that challenge the community to shape its identity into something different. One participant was adamant about new construction incorporating traditional elements into its designs:

For me, I like the [buildings] that are traditional because it's hard to recreate that now. Like we can make everything modern, but that will maybe be out of place. So I'm okay with structures where it combines kind of like the modern take with the traditional. But I think all the modern buildings have to still have a traditional element to it.

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants—typically younger interviewees or architectural professionals—were more willing to incorporate different aesthetics and architectural styles into the built

environment as a means of reassessing and reimagining the community's identity in a contemporary context. Arthur, who is an architect, noted,

I think that the future holds the discovery of a new identity [for Chinese Americans in Chinatown], of who we are. That's why I was really happy about ... the Chinatown Library.... It's a very modern building.... Place-making isn't about place, it's about the people who inhabit that place.... I think there are things that you always want to remind people about [like] who they are and what their history is, but [creating a new architectural or aesthetic identity] can be done.

The tension between envisioning a new architectural or aesthetic identity while at the same time honoring Chinatown's longstanding historical legacy was a latent topic in many of the conversations I had with participants about public space and the future of Chinatown. While components of the built environment that appeared Chinese or Eastern were often cited as important symbolic markers of Chinatown's cultural and ethnic identity (see figs. 10 & 11), the Chinatown Library, which is more contemporary in design (see fig. 12), serves as a focal point for cultural life and social gathering in Chinatown. With regards to the future of Chinatown, new development stands to benefit from residents' assessments about the importance of architectural form versus function. Architects, planners, and developers should seek to merge the symbolic and social potential of design as a means of reinforcing existing notions about Chinatown, in addition to prompting the neighborhood to reevaluate and adapt their understanding of identity and community moving forward.



**Figure 10:**  
Pui Tak Center  
(Red Line Project)



**Figure 11:**  
Chinatown Gate  
(Trover)



**Figure 12:**  
Chinatown's Public  
Library (Chicago  
Public Library)

## Conclusion

Chinatown has prevailed as an anomaly among its peers, expanding not only in population size, but also witnessing a steady growth in economic opportunities, outside investment, and political visibility on a citywide scale. Notably, the community has been successful in leveraging a shared cultural and historical legacy as a means of not only appealing to outsiders, a crucial form of revenue, but also securing its own sense of belonging. This form of split identity is only strengthened by institutional and structural frameworks of support, with community organizations and family associations promoting both assimilation into and protection from mainstream American culture and society. Arguably, Chinatown's ability to find a balance between performance and insularity, particularly as embodied by the built environment, is central to the community's distinctive identity.

The results of this research complement existing work in the field, reinforcing theories of boundary maintenance, segregation, place attachment, collective efficacy, and social cohesion as central components to our understanding of sense of place. More notably, it recommends a thorough integration of mental mapping practices, urban design, and planning principles into future sociological research. The incorporation of this visual data adds an important spatial and sensorial dimension to studies on sense of place and identity, which are largely predicated on the results of interview and ethnographic data. This two-dimensional realization of space allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals conceive of and interact with their physical environments.

If I were to expand this project further, I would add ethnographic data and more qualitative analysis to supplement and strengthen the data and allow for a more nuanced understanding of community and public space. In particular, I would conduct ethnographies in the sites my interview respondents most frequently identified as communal or public spaces in order to provide a clearer picture of how both in-groups and out-groups utilize and interpret different facets of the built environment. The

inclusion of neighboring communities with large Chinese American populations such as Bridgeport and McKinley Park in my interview pool might also shed light on the ways in which a distinctly Chinese American sense of place and community is defined in a built environment that is less overtly Oriental in appearance.

Future research should enlist similar tactics for examining sense of place and community identity in other Chicago neighborhoods with large minority populations, Chinatowns around the country, ethnic enclaves in general, or immigrant communities located in suburban or rural contexts. Due to the small field of study, the results of this project may not be indicative of how all minority or immigrant groups negotiate belonging in the context of American culture and society. However, the dynamic and divergent understandings of sense of place and community for Chinese Americans in Chicago's Chinatown may point to this specific built environment's heightened role as marker and anchor of identity and belonging for minority or marginalized groups.

With regards to future policy and design implications, the results of this research underscore the importance of policymakers, architects, and urban planners making more concerted efforts to integrate themselves into the communities they intend to serve in order to design more effective plans for the future. Despite Chinatown's fairly homogenous ethnic and racial makeup, research participants expressed a variety of concerns and opinions about the state of their community, highlighting subtle conflicts between pressures to conform to outsider expectations about what it means to be Chinese American and a desire to realize an authentic and inclusive sense of community. With regards to the built environment in particular, the undeniable success of the Chinatown Public Library—which is decidedly absent of self-Orientalization—as a multifaceted public resource for all members of the community points to the ways in which more open-ended aesthetic and architectural formal choices can imbue a space with greater functional flexibility and future potential. ○

## Appendix 1: Research Participant Demographics

PSEUDONYM	ROLE	GENDER	LIVES / HAS LIVED IN CHINATOWN	
			WORKS / HAS WORKED IN CHINATOWN	
<b>Jeanne</b>	Community development coordinator	F	○	○
<b>Linda</b>	Museum executive director	F	○	
<b>Margaret</b>	Constituent services coordinator	F		○
<b>Ying</b>	Senior wellness and independence manager	M	○	
<b>Fei</b>	Head librarian	F	○	○
<b>George</b>	Executive director	M	○	○
<b>Nancy</b>	Community organizer	F	○	
<b>John</b>	Employment and financial empowerment manager	M	○	
<b>Zheng</b>	Community member	F	○	
<b>Sophie</b>	Community member	F	○	○
<b>Christine</b>	Community member	F	○	
<b>Tim</b>	Community member	M		○
<b>Lesley</b>	Community member	F	○	○
<b>Ping</b>	Architect	M	○	
<b>Arthur</b>	Architect	M	○	



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