

Chinatown Working Group
Culture and Historic Preservation Working Team
Thursday, March 19, 2009, 5:30-7:00 p.m.
Asian American Arts Centre
26 Bowery, 3rd Floor

AGENDA

Introductions

Review of minutes/notes of February 19 meeting

Inventory/assessment of previous relevant studies/surveys

Discussion of other Chinatowns' experiences

Identification/refinement of guiding principles/goals

Identification of information/government agencies/entities/individuals needed including consultants to achieve goals

Identification of other working teams to coordinate with

Discussion of timetable

Identification of other organization/individual stakeholders for working team- Outreach

Speakerphone policy at Working Team meetings

**Culture and Historic Preservation Working Team
Chinatown Working Group
March 19, 2009**

Meeting Notes

Location: 26 Bowery, 3rd Floor

Time: 5:30pm to 7:00pm

In Attendance: Amy Chin (CREATE in Chinatown), Mitchell Grubler (Bowery Alliance of Neighbors), Rob Hollander (LESRRD), Robert Lee (Asian American Arts Centre),

Government Representatives: Tammy To (Office of Councilmember Alan J. Gerson)

Media: Jacky Wong (Sing Tao Daily)

I. Review of minutes/notes of February 19 meeting

Clarification of 2/19/09 minutes: Two Bridges Neighborhood Council is working on creating the Chinatown/Little Italy District Historic District as part of the State and National Register of Historic Places.

II. Inventory/assessment of previous relevant studies/surveys

Working team members identified known existing studies/surveys to be collected for CWG use and inclusion in AAARI's analysis (initials in parentheses denote responsible member):

- Bowery Alliance Study (RH)
- CREATE Feasibility Study (AC)
- MoCA Feasibility (RL)
- Light Rail Impact study of LES Historic structures (AC)
- Two Bridges Study for Historic Districting (MG)
- Landmarks Preservation Commission / LES Tenement Museum survey/report filed with National Trust for Historic Preservation (MG)
- Columbia University Study of Bowery (MG)
- Historic survey by Eldridge St Synagogue (RL)

III. Discussion of other Chinatowns' experiences

- Washington DC Chinatown is example of superficial cultural preservation that is NOT desired in New York's Chinatown (e.g. Chinese-styled facades and lettering fronting otherwise non-Chinese chain stores such as Urban Outfitters, Hooters, Fuddruckers, Ann Taylor, etc. and a Chinese population that now consists only of 500 residents in a senior housing unit)
- Los Angeles Chinatown has declined as rents have escalated and Chinese-Americans have merged more and more into the mainstream.
- Portland, Oregon's Chinatown has an elaborate arch and traditionally landscaped Chinese garden, but no Chinese residents. Its streets are empty of pedestrians and, other than a handful of restaurants and gift shops, there are few open businesses.
- Preservation and cultivation of an interconnected, multi-faceted mix of residents, businesses, and non-profit organizations that are culturally-based, reflective of and serving the Chinese-American community is key to NY Chinatown's survival. Chinatown is not merely a tourist destination.
- NY Chinatown should take care to prevent the steady exodus of its native population and avoid the population decline that other Chinatowns and Little Italy have

experienced. Issues are not only of affordability, but of relevance and desirability of the neighborhood as a cultural hub where succeeding generations of Chinese-Americans as well as newcomers wish to reside, work or visit.

- NY Chinatown has many family-owned/operated businesses, but few ‘contemporary’ kinds of businesses, larger Asian retail chains (e.g. Ranch99), overseas Chinese and international trade corporations, major cultural attractions/institutions. The factors and potential effects of this need to be examined.
- Important aspects to be preserved:
 - i. First generations/layers of history and stories from all cultures
 - ii. Unique character and energy of the streets
 - iii. Continuing influx of new immigrants
 - iv. America’s early origins
 - v. Historical architecture/landmarks
 - vi. Street vendors and storefront displays
 - vii. Chinese-American culture & life beyond mainstream
 - viii. Place of opportunity and aid for new struggling immigrants
 - ix. Hospitable open marketplace for all businesses, especially culturally-based ones (e.g. straw animal weaver, fortunetellers, etc.)
 - x. Service center for broad Chinese community (e.g. banquet halls, wedding centers, medical services, job placement, transportation hub/gateway, etc.)

IV. Identification/refinement of guiding principles/goals

DRAFT OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Preserve and enhance the cultural character of Chinatown that makes it a unique Chinese American community
2. Support cultural activities and preservation efforts that will attract and retain Chinatown residents, businesses, and visitors
3. Cultivate a hospitable and affordable environment in Chinatown for cultural entities, culturally-based businesses, and cultural activities from inside and outside the community.
4. Protect Chinatown’s historical buildings/structures, distinctive streetscapes and other characteristic elements of the community
5. Encourage imaginative new architecture and environmental design reflective of contemporary life and aesthetics, but also respects and acts in harmony with older architectural styles in the neighborhood.
6. Ensure that the efforts of other CWG working teams are consonant with the community’s historic/cultural preservation and development goals.
7. Safeguard and disseminate the shared histories and stories that collectively form the basic foundations of this neighborhood and are vitally relevant to its future, successive generations and the general American population.
8. Recognize that decorative elements like Chinese-style facades or ceremonial arches, while worthwhile, are just symbolic measures. Active policies, legislation and efforts are needed to achieve true long term revitalization that results in more than a “Disneyland Chinatown”.

V. Identification of information/government agencies/entities/individuals needed including consultants to achieve goals

Methods for achieving stated guiding principles:

1. Pursue landmarking and/or special district designation for a Chinatown cultural district (examples: Fourth Street Arts block, artist certification as in Soho)
2. Establish adequate affordable space for culturally specific performances, artwork, and activities through tax incentives, culture zones legislation, rent regulations protecting space for non-profit use, restricted covenants, limited equity space arrangements, etc.
3. Legalize the signage, street set-ups, and storefront display practices (e.g. hanging ducks in windows) that are noted characteristics of Chinatown.
4. Selectively impose height restrictions to prevent erosion of skyline and street character.
5. Designate a historic district to prevent destruction of significant historic buildings and facades.
6. Care must be taken to not be a culture police, but to embrace a full range of cultural expressions.
7. Explore alternative methods beyond rent regulation/stabilization for retaining current residents and attracting new immigrants (ex. limited equity housing, housing restoration programs, inclusionary zoning for owner-occupied units, etc.)

VI. Identification of other working teams to coordinate with

Culture/Historic Preservation should work closely with Economic Development, Zoning, Affordable Housing, and Parks/Open Space working teams.

VII. Identification of other organization/individual stakeholders for working team outreach

(list in development)

Tenement museum

Eldridge St. Synagogue

Educational Alliance

University Settlement

Henry Street Settlement

Cultural Equity Group

NYU Asian/Pacific American Studies program

Cantonese Opera (Louisa Leo)

Julie Tay/Mencius Society

Photography Group (Joe Wong)

In addition to individual outreach, Working Team will consider hosting a presentation or special event to attract other stakeholders.

VIII. Speakerphone policy at Working Team meetings

Currently the Asian American Arts Centre does not have technical capacity for speakerphone/call-in to meetings.

IX. Other Business

An important west coast exhibition of art and images from the Chinese-American community dating back to 1850 scheduled for Noguchi Museum was cancelled due to space limitations. If appropriate exhibition/cultural space existed in Chinatown, it could have been mounted here.

NEXT MEETING: Thursday Apr 16, 2009, 5:30-7pm at Asian American Arts Centre, 26 Bowery, 3rd floor (above the McDonald's)