

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

Meeting Notes

Location: 26 Bowery, 3rd Floor

Time: 5:30pm to 7:00pm

In Attendance: Jay Caseley (ABS Partners); Amy Chin (CREATE in Chinatown), Rocky Chin (Asian American Arts Alliance/CB3); Frank Gee (American Legion Kim Lau Post), Mitchell Grubler (Bowery Alliance of Neighbors) , Rob Hollander (LESRRD), Charles Lai (Museum of Chinese in America), Robert Lee (Asian American Arts Centre), Victor Pei (Elite HK Corp), Jim Solomon (CB3)

Media: Jacky Wong (Sing Tao Daily)

Amy Chin opened meeting by distributing copies of the ‘Historic Chinatown’ and ‘Arts and Architecture’ chapters from the 2004 Rebuild Chinatown Initiative’s report ‘America’s Chinatown’ for review and use as a starting point for discussion.

Team members agreed that cultural life and historic character are vitally important to Chinatown’s well-being. Instead of immediately trying to define guiding principles, the team engaged in a general discussion to inventory basic concerns and issues:

- Culture and historic preservation must be integrated into all planning discussions on Chinatown including parks/open spaces, commerce, and housing. It is a glue that holds the community together and must be fully connected to all levels of the local economy.
- Chinatown as a vibrant cultural/historic district has many layers to draw upon – from immigration to America’s history as a nation. Many diverse immigrant groups have come through and still reside here. It is the site of the original “5 Points”. It is/has been home to wealthy and poor classes alike. It is a community where ALL can be different, ALL have roots and ALL can belong.
- Every sector of the community should be made aware of the neighborhood’s cultural and historic wealth.
- Chinatown’s historic artifacts/elements if destroyed or discarded are irretrievable
- A general scan or survey of Chinatown’s many cultural and historic assets is needed.
- To preserve the unique character of Chinatown’s streets, a process for architectural landmarking should be put in place to determine which elements are architecturally significant and what mechanisms can be used to safeguard them.
- Twin Bridges Neighborhood Council’s effort to get national landmark designation for Little Italy and Chinatown is to be applauded and supported (though it should be noted that national landmark status will not protect the areas from demolition or destruction)
- Varying degrees of landmark protection should also be considered for other adjacent neighborhoods (e.g. Lower East Side)

- Historic preservation and landmarking are not necessarily incompatible with economic and real estate development interests. Numerous neighborhoods and cities with extensive preservation and landmarking (e.g. Soho; Greenwich Village; Tribeca; Charleston, SC; Pittsburgh, PA; Venice, Italy; etc.) benefit from increased commerce, improved property values, greater safety, better quality of life and enhanced public image which also translate into advantages for surrounding areas.
- A proposed Chinatown Arch discussed for many years has received both public and private funding commitments, but it has not been built. No active management of the project and community disagreements over location, style (modern or traditional), maintenance, control, and even whether an Arch is needed has impeded its realization.
- An arts center/facility (and/or cultural district) will do immeasurable good for Chinatown. Squeezed by physical space constraints and financial limitations, cultural activities frequently operate 'under the radar' and consequently suffer from low visibility.
- Utilization of arts and culture to further enliven the community would be positive for residents, businesses, and tourists alike. Culture will bring back people who have left Chinatown and improve the quality of life for existing residents and workers.
- The over-use of Columbus Park as a staging ground for events can overwhelm other recreation/sports uses, increase damage to the park, limit full community access, and cause disharmony between groups.
- More space is needed for cultural activity.
- Exercising eminent domain to reclaim open space, museum/art space should be considered. The community has been put upon by courts, the tombs and other properties that have encroached on its space and should be compensated for some of that.
- The art and cultural community must be stabilized and supported. Many Chinatown cultural groups are in crisis due to lack of space, financial support, and community awareness.
- The interests of small and large arts organizations and culturally based businesses must be included in any community plan.
- A solid collaborative community process is needed to make some of these projects a reality. Greater collaboration between Chinatown 'factions' is important.

The team is proud to have diverse sectors active in this dialogue. It is not often that business, social service, cultural and civic sectors come together to affirm the importance of the arts the community. It was acknowledged that greater participation in the working team is desired and the present team members will reach out to others to increase attendance at future meetings.

Amy Chin and Mitchell Grubler were elected co-chairs of the Culture and Historic Preservation Working Team.

The regular meeting date for the Culture and Historic Preservation Working Team will be the third Thursday of every month from 5:30-7pm at the Asian American Arts Centre, 26 Bowery, 3rd Flr. Next meeting will be March 19, 2009.