

MOLDING THE UNSHAPELY STRUCTURE: REBUILDING BOSTON CHINATOWN

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to interpret and comprehend the development pattern of urban form in an ethnic community, in this case Boston Chinatown. The study does not propose a detailed urban design framework but calls for a sensitivity in future design interventions for strengthening the cohesive character of the district.

Contrary to conventional planning approaches which aim to regularize and integrate ethnic districts such as Chinatown into the 'city fabric', this thesis suggests a more cautious strategy in which the peculiarities of the 'unshapely' structure of the area are seen as opportunities to enhance and maintain its identity. The thesis acknowledges an organic wholeness of Chinatown where the physical structure is subservient to and a result of a complex network of vital socio-cultural processes.

An increased awareness of these factors is essential in formulating future urban design guidelines for the remodeling and upgradation of the Chinatown district.

Thesis Supervisor: Michael Dennis
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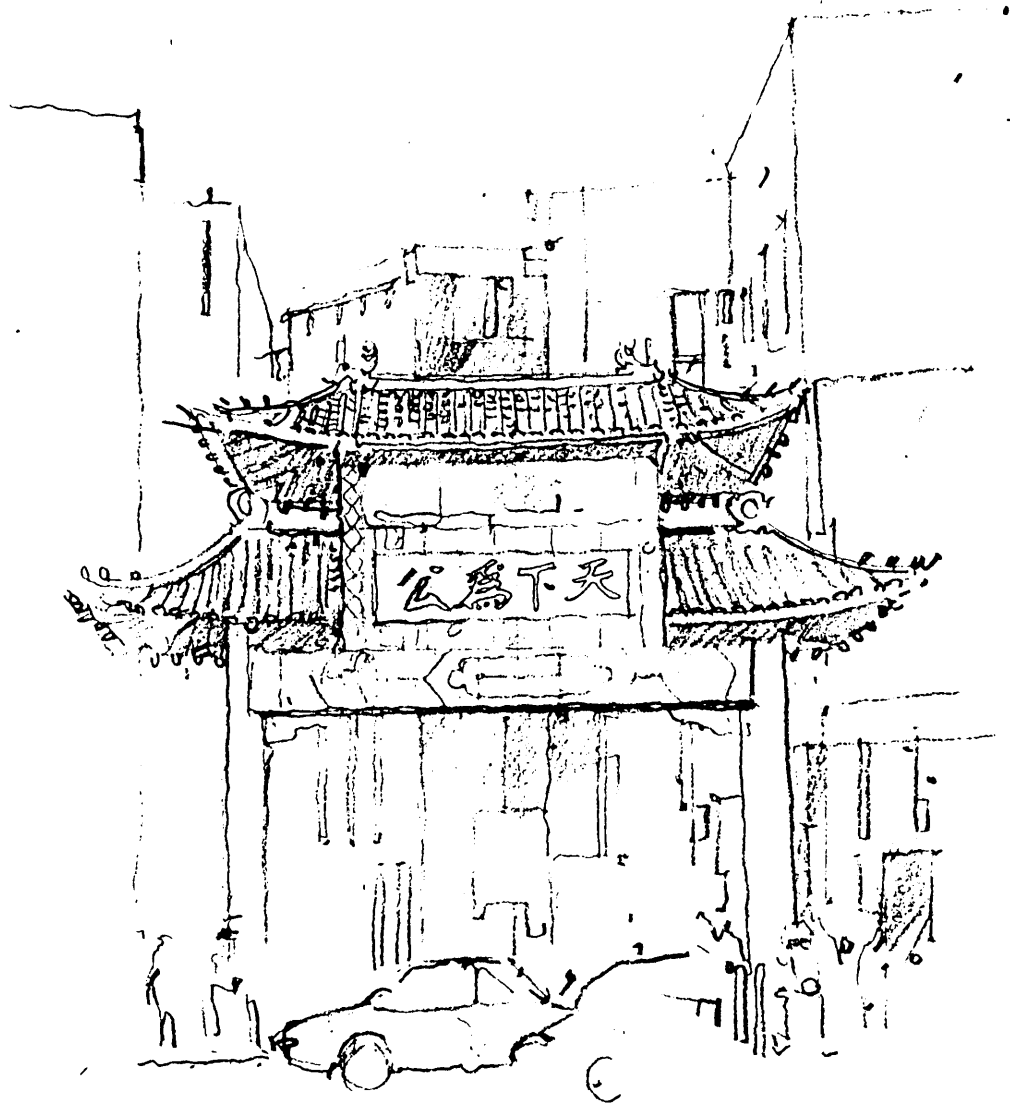
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Objective

This study is an attempt to understand the interaction between the physical form and socio-cultural processes within Boston Chinatown. The objective is to enhance awareness in the development process by focusing attention on the importance of small scale interventions in order to maintain the unique character of the district.

1.2 The Boston Chinatown

Entering a towering gateway (Figure 1.1) is a colorful Chinese quarter of ornamental facades and fixtures and Chinese-character signboards; of crowded restaurants and hanging roast ducks and piglets at the storefront; of touristy gift shops with squarely writings on the window and quaint herbal shops; of X-rated ads sticking on tightly shut theater doors and the video cases displaying *blondies'* porns; of exotic mixes of smells, ethnic tongues, and un-American sights of slant-eyed peoples and dark-skinned prostitutes and chain-smoking johns at some street corner.

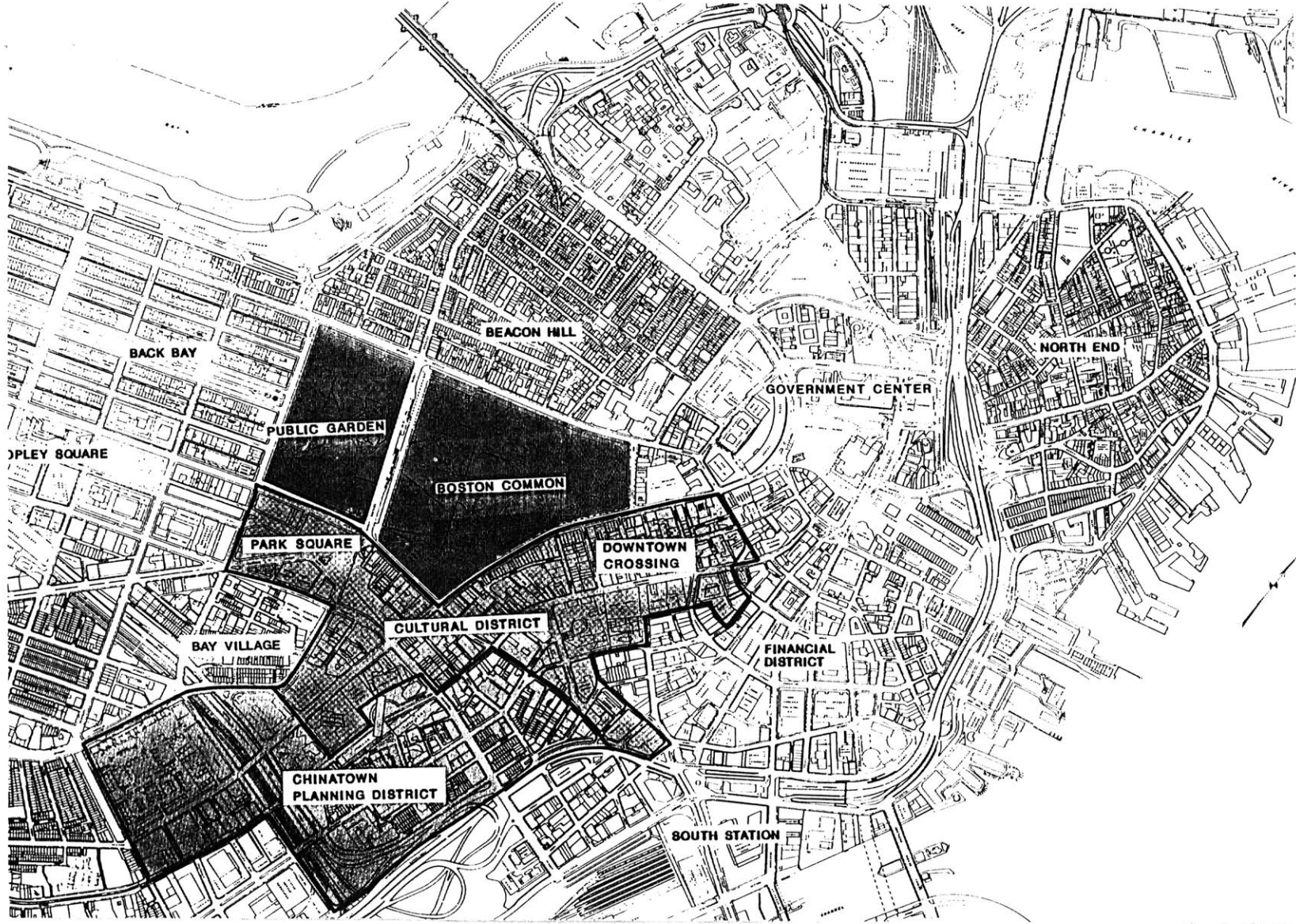
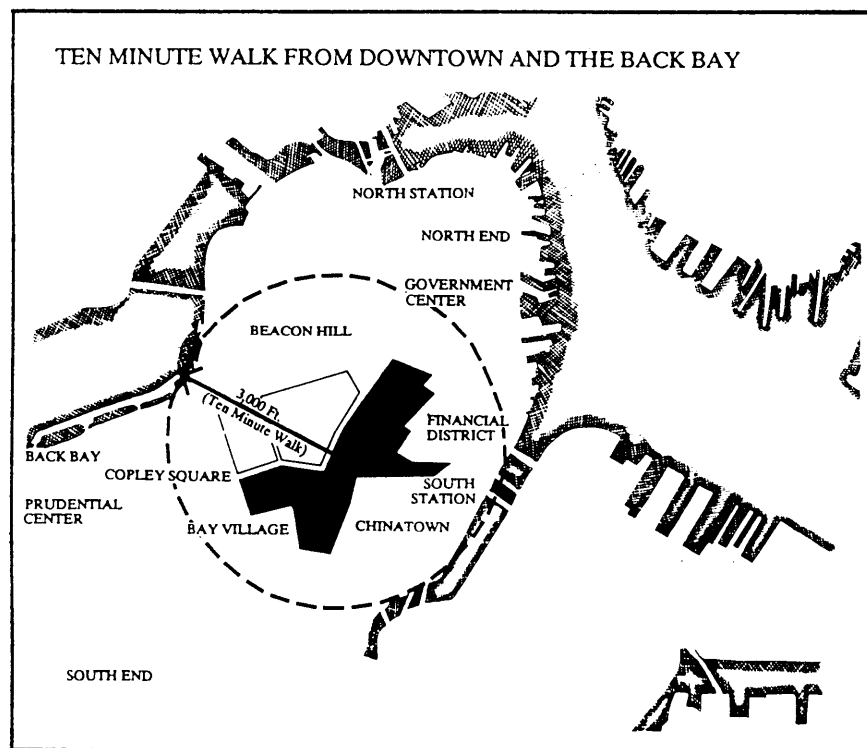


Figure 1.2 General Context, plan of Boston (Source: Midtown Cultural District Plan, p1).

Although Boston Chinatown (Figure 1.2) consists of a variety of design styles, its bustling atmosphere somehow allows all the different elements to come together to create a coherent community. Unlike other neighborhoods in the Boston area — for example, houses in the Back Bay with their distinctly uniform architectural style — Chinatown has no one predominant design character. Because of the visual cacophony, some urban designers have called the structures in this ethnic ghetto "unshapely."

Chinatown's unplanned and uncoordinated nature speaks of its rich and often turbulent history. Racial exclusion, local politics, European-American cultural hegemony and territorial invasion have all served to fashion these so-called unshapely structures and messy urban development. Modern Boston Chinatown is as much a creation of people and forces outside of it, as it is the product of active struggles and resistance to territorial colonization carried on by its residents against the mainstream forces. Because of this complex interaction of people and politics inside and outside of Chinatown, I propose that urban designers must not treat it, or any ethnic enclaves for that matter, as merely unplanned communities in need of comprehensive planning and development. Hence, in this thesis I suggest an approach that looks at the comprehensive picture of different cultural, economic, historical, political and social forces inside and outside a community as dynamics shaping its spatial character. In arguing my point of treating a community like a living organism in which all aspects are interconnected, I adopt the concept of "organic wholeness" from molecular biology which was popularized by Nobel-prize winning biologist Francois Jacob.



14 Figure 1.3 Ten minute walk from downtown and the Backbay (Source: Midtown Cultural District Plan, p1.1).

1.3 Approach

In this study, I place a balanced perspective on ethnic neighborhoods by emphasizing their cultural, economic, historical, political, social, and physical and design contexts. The "unshapely" structural quality of Boston Chinatown embodies the exclusionary racial history of this country and the cultural and territorial hegemonies of European-American Bostonians. I use the case studies of Chinatown's dispute on Parcel C with the New England Medical Center, China Trade Center, Oak Terrace Housing Project, Mass Turnpike Air Rights, and the Midtown Cultural District (Figure 1.3) to illustrate how both inside and outside forces interact to generate the existing spatial character of the area. In each of these brief case studies, I stress the organic nature of a community in discussing aspects of its physical design. I adopt Alexander's definition of what "organic" means in describing the old towns — "they [old towns] share, with organisms, this self-determined, inward-governed, growing wholeness."¹ In generating the awareness and broadening the understanding of the design and "rebuilding" processes in an ethnic community such as Boston Chinatown, I argue that architects, planners and urban designers must be aware of how Chinatown's incremental development throughout its history contributed to its present "unshapely" wholeness.

¹Alexander, Neis, Anninou and King. *A New Theory in Urban Design*. New York : Oxford University, 1987, pp. 3.

1.4 European-American Re-Colonizing of Chinatown?

In this section, I discuss what I term the "re-colonizing" of a historically ostracized "colony of the East in the West"² by European-American political forces.

The settlement structure of Chinatown reveals successive stages of self-governing, self-reproducing and self-organizing patterns. Since the beginning of this settlement, the Chinese community has inherited the pre-existing structures (i.e., buildings and other physical establishments) and has been converting them to accommodate a steady flow of immigrants. The nature of this unshapely growth has been destined for continuous adaptation and for permitting expansion wherever conditions allow. This process of expansion is resilient to physical transformation but vulnerable to outside rivalry for urban lands. An example of this re-colonization is the construction of the Southeast Expressway and Massachusetts Turnpike in the 1950s and the 1960s, and the expansion of Tufts University and the New England Medical Center since the 1940s. Boston Chinatown lost half of its community to these three encroachments. I interpret these territorial invasions as efforts of European-American "re-colonization." The Zoning Commission of the City of Boston defined Chinatown district as bordered by the Surface Artery and Southeast Expressway to the east, Massachusetts Turnpike to the south, Tremont Street to the west and Essex Street to the north. In reality, the Chinatown District has no distinct edges but

²Anderson, 1991, pp. 19. Anderson, who authored the book on Vancouver's Chinatown, was referring to the Chinatowns in North America.

gradually blends into other districts. Because of this lack of clear boundaries, Chinatown has been vulnerable to outside encroachments.

I will discuss in greater detail these three case studies in subsequent chapters. These re-colonizing moves and Chinatown residents' struggles to resist them have contributed to the spatial character of the district. In short, the "unshapely" sight of physical development is a result of these three events.

1.5 Renewing the European-American Cultural Hegemony

Another process by which outside forces exert pressures upon the unshapely structure is through the renewal of European-American cultural hegemony. A busy and prosperous Boston Chinatown belies its rich and often turbulent local history, as stated previously. The ethnic space and place in the modern metropolis is vulnerable to forces aiming to lessen its ethnic richness. In exemplifying this trend of renewing cultural hegemony, I use the Midtown Cultural District Plan as a case study.

The Midtown Cultural District Plan is a community-based development which seeks to reconnect Chinatown physically to a large center of mixed-used districts at the heart of Boston. The plan will link Chinatown with other districts and create an interdependent system of complementary districts. A direct result of this effort will make Chinatown less identified as an urban ethnic enclave and become a part of the "multicultural" whole.

My criticism of this plan is that this is an effort which masks cultural domination in terms of multicultural diversity. I argue that the historical European-American hegemony first shaped the physical, social and economic outcomes of Chinatown during the nineteenth century. But as contemporary political, social and cultural climate changed, the European-American hegemony which initially created Chinatown through violent exclusion, now turns around to absorb this ethnic ghetto in the name of cultural diversity and better planning. I use Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to explain what is and has been happening in the Chinatown district. Gramsci argued that in the process of cultural incorporation, the dominant sector — armed with its necessary official means for "rationalizing" and legitimizing its conceptual and instrumental control — aims to neutralize the "foreign" entities. In Gramsci's theorizing, "the political sphere is organically linked with the cultural realm."³ Indeed,

Every city needs its Chinatown, it seems.... Ideological traces [of racism] from the past have surfaced in 'unity through diversity' policies which, in promoting Chinatown, have broken with repressive practices while at the same time signaling the continuity of racial beliefs. There is a benign face to racial ideology.... Despite placing a positive connotation on 'Otherness,' multicultural rhetoric supports popular beliefs about 'differences' between groups of settlers and strengthens the exclusionary concept of a mainstream (Anglo-European) society to which 'others' contribute. ...The iconic hegemony of white identity is

³Anderson, 1991, pp. 25. Anderson also used Gramsci's theory to explain the current situation in Vancouver's Chinatown where the Canadian government officially embraces the Chinatown and its associated cultural diversity.



certainly alive today in a contradictory mix of old and new, blunt and subtle guises.⁴

Hence, I see the Midtown Cultural District as an effort to exert the mainstream hegemony.

Another example, the Combat Zone (Figure 1.4), an adult entertainment district designated by the city zoning ordinance in 1974,⁵ locates between Downtown-crossing and the New England Medical Center, along the Washington Street, right next to the Chinatown commercial core. Although the zone has been shrinking in size with the assistance of the licensing authorities, it still has negative impacts on the Chinatown business. Many residents in Boston Chinatown calls it "the Great Wall of China — the barrier of sex shops and peep shows that keeps upscale visitors to the theater district from walking to nearby Chinatown for dinner."⁶ Although there is no official sanction of the "Red Light District," this area with its explicit sex industry represents a mainstream cultural influence. Especially with its close proximity to Chinatown, I see this location as strategically placed to hegemonize the Chinese immigrant culture.

The controversial Parcel C (Figure 1.5) Garage Plan of New England Medical Center (NEMC) in September 1993 has engaged an intense community participation in decision making.⁷ The issue involves internal conflict within the

⁴Anderson 1991, pp. 27.

⁵The original site of adult entertainment district was in Scollay Square, before it was redeveloped as Government Center in the 1960s.

⁶Canellos, Peter, Globe staff. "New Leaders Work with City to Roust Adult Business", Boston Globe. January 10, 1993.

⁷"Parcel C was originally meant to be the site of a Chinatown community center providing space for community agencies and organizations. When no money was found to build the community center, the BRA asked NEMC to devise a plan for 24,000 square-site

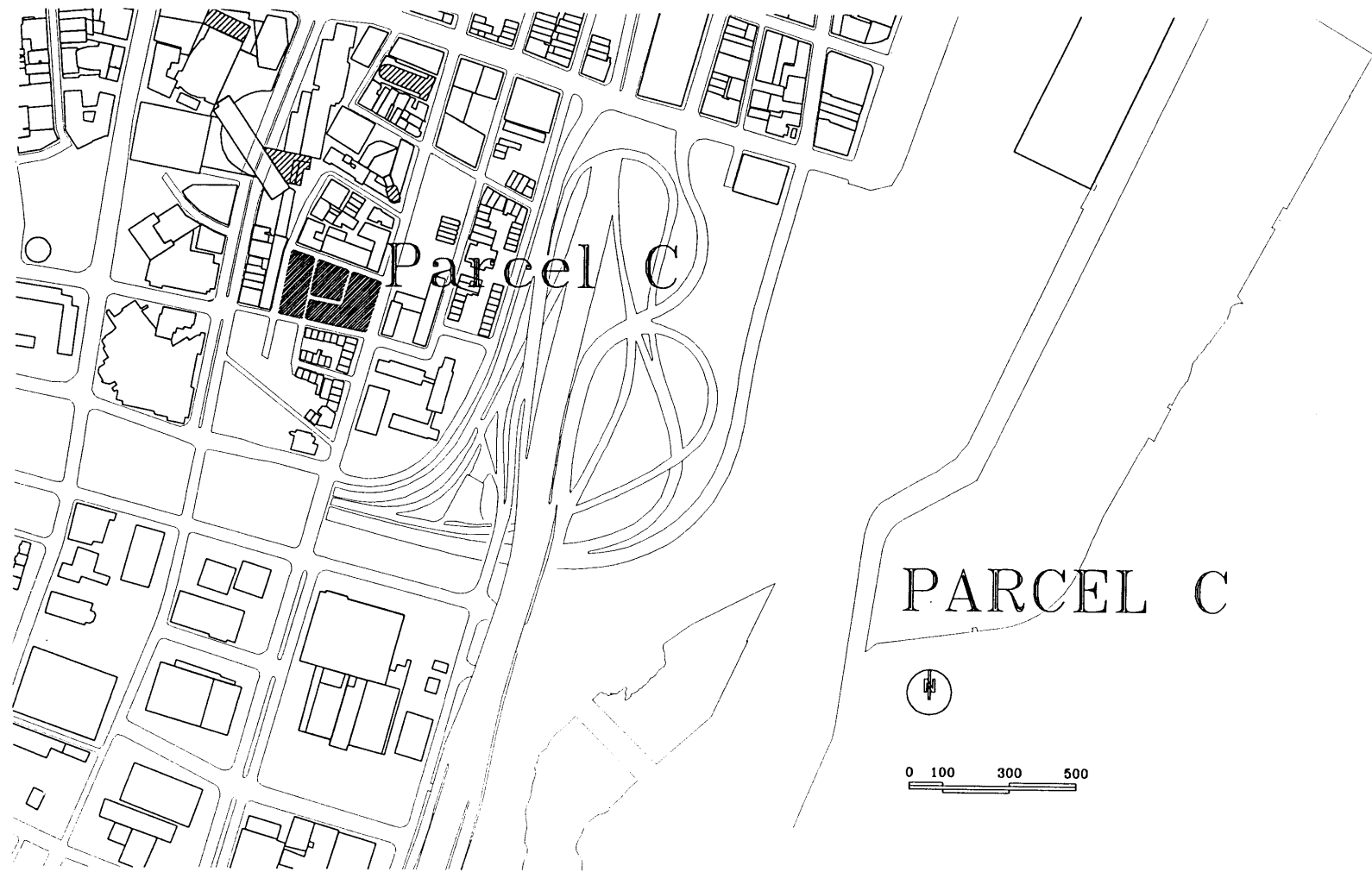


Figure 1.5 Parcel C.

community between the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) and Chinatown Neighborhood Council (CNC), and external conflict between NEMC and both parties of CPA and the Chinatown Community Center, Inc. (CCC). The conflicts reflect different interests in the community and concerns about its environmental changes. As sociologist L. Coser said, "Conflict serves to establish and maintain identity and boundary lines. Conflict with other groups contributes to the establishment and reaffirmation of the identity of the group and maintains its boundaries against the surrounding social world,"⁸ the Chinatown community is catalyzed to preserve and enhance its visibility and environmental quality. Therefore, this case study is an example of how mainstream cultural hegemony efforts can produce counter-effects by affirming the community collective identity of Chinatown. These efforts to invade Chinatown and reduce or eliminate this ethnic neighborhood only serve to strengthen its unity.

1.6 Hypotheses

In approaching the problem of how the traditional urban design establishment regards the "unshapely" structure of Boston Chinatown, I propose that designers must understand the various internal and external forces which

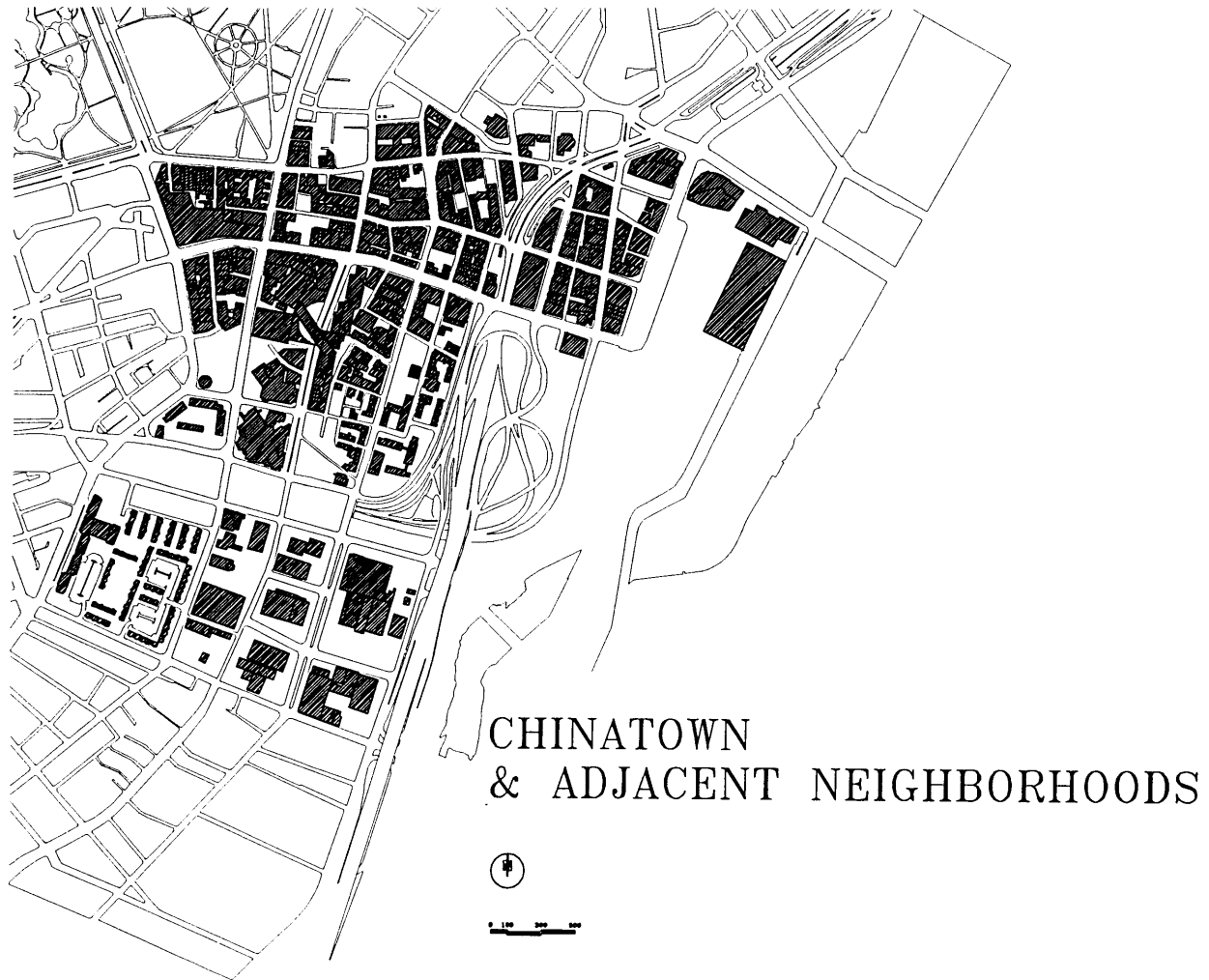
that would satisfy both its own and the community's needs." (Sampan, vol.XXV, Sept. 3, 1993) The negotiation between CCC and NEMC fails when NEMC rejected spending \$3.5 million on the community center as demanded by CCC, instead of just \$1.8 million. CPA rejected the offer while CNC accepted. CPA fought against NEMC eating up the last piece of the primary residential area, whereas CNC argued that more lands will be created by the Central Artery Project and \$1.8 million can be used for a variety of purposes.
8Coser, L. The Functions of Social Conflict. New York : Free Press, 1956, as quoted in Clarke, Susan and Jeffrey Obler. Urban Conflict : A Comparative Perspective. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1976. pp. 121.

affect a community, in order to guide and influence designers in the development process. I believe that:

1. The piecemeal growth of Boston Chinatown is governed by a system that creates a coherent wholeness.
2. The social and cultural structure is a mechanism of organization that does not only put each part within the whole into an order, but also give it a distinct character.
3. Without an understanding of Boston Chinatown's historical development process, any major planned development may disrupt the cohesiveness of the whole, creating disorder and a lifeless and anonymous environment.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of two major parts, following this introductory section. Part one has two chapters that discuss the physical and socio-cultural conditions. The discussion is based upon a literature review and personal observations of the environment. Part two has a chapter that synthesizes the findings of part one, and contributes towards an increased awareness for Boston Chinatown's future development. The conclusion suggests that strengthening the existing spatial structure is crucial for any future upgradation effort in the district.



Chapter 2

Investigations of the Physical Form

2.1 Location

Boston Chinatown is located south of downtown, bounded by Mid-Town Cultural Districts, Adult Entertainment Zone, Financial and Leather Districts, South Station, South End, and Bay Village. Mid-Town Cultural District extends to the north and west of Chinatown. The Adult Entertainment Zone shares three blocks with the Chinatown commercial districts to the west. The Surface Road to the east separates the Chinatown district from the Financial and Leather Districts, and South Station. Chinatown's residential area extends beyond the Mass Turnpike to the south and blends into the South End neighborhood; to the west it connects to the Bay Village (Figure 2.1).

2.2 The Chinatown District as a Living Organism

Boston Chinatown district began as a narrow linear urban space between two blocks. Its pattern of expansion is street-by-street, rather than the traditional, block-by-block development typical of many planned urban settlements in the United States. From a street, Chinatown gradually spread to another, permeating into buildings on either side (Figure 2.2).

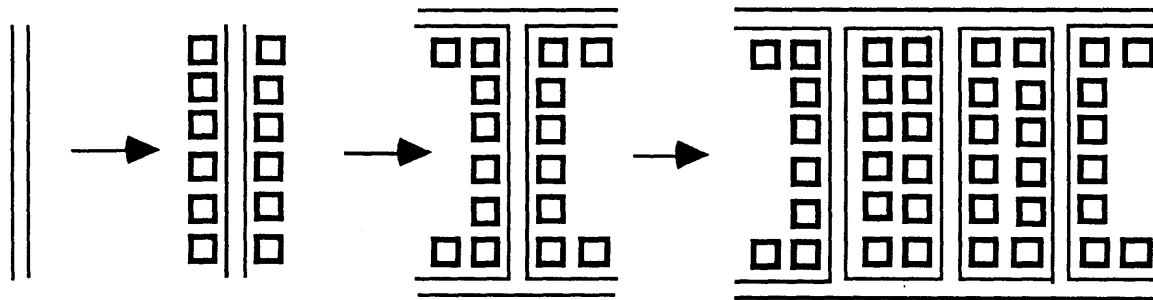


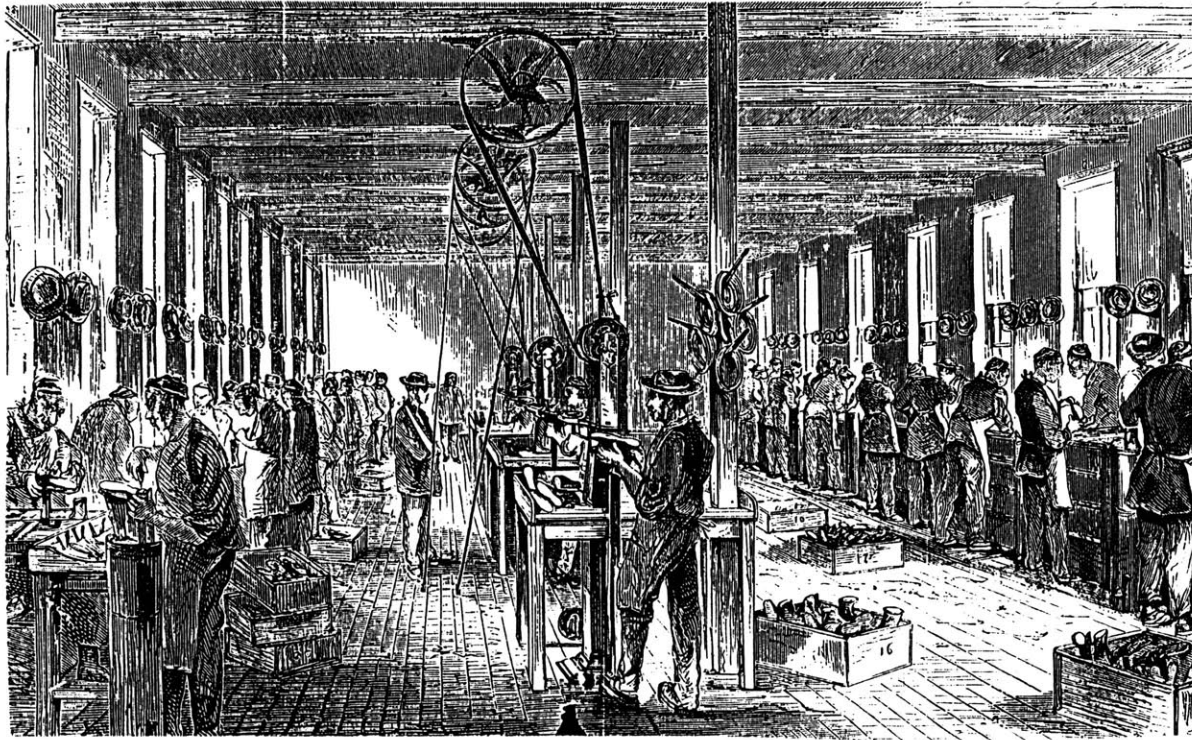
Figure 2.2 Street by Street Expansion

Today, the streets are still an integral part of the daily life of the people in the district. They are crucial in forming an important public urban space where people can make face-to-face contact. In other words, the streets in the district provide an essential network of variables of urban activities for the inhabitants.

The network becomes the regulatory circuit by which the urban fabric of Chinatown is integrated. This integration coordinates a system, maintaining the entity in good repair while managing exchanges with its surroundings. No urban entity can survive with a closed system, as without continuous exchanges between inside and outside, it dies.

An ethnic neighborhood like Chinatown cannot be disassociated from other urban communities and districts, even though at the earlier stages of development, it was perceived as an isolated 'ethnic island'. The urban form of Boston Chinatown is a product of an ongoing process of an uninterrupted series of changing urban conditions. Indeed, geneticist and biologist Francis Jacob also contended that, like a living organism, urban spaces support themselves and their vitality through active exchanges with the outside:

An organism preserves a certain stability only through continually borrowing from outside. Despite changes in surroundings, it succeeds in oscillating around its own characteristic equilibrium. It manages to maintain homeostasis because numerous regulatory mechanisms



enable it to define the most favorable conditions for its existence.¹

Hence, to understand the complexity of urban form of the Chinatown district, people must first understand the “organicness”² of its structural quality.

In this chapter, I analyze the development of the physical environment, as the growth of a living organism, to provide a basis for an increased awareness of its character in future rebuilding efforts.

2.3 Historic Development

The Chinatown district began as a working-class settlement, and remains till today a working-class neighborhood. When the first transcontinental railroad was finished in 1869, many jobless Chinese laborers started to scatter to other types of work, and migrated from the West Coast to the East Coast. In 1870, many of the “coolies” were recruited as cheap laborers to work at a shoe factory in North Adams to break a strike of the local workers (Figure 2.3). When the strike was over, some of these Chinese workers moved to Boston to work on the construction of Pearl Street Telephone Exchange.

The site of Boston Chinatown was a low-rent neighborhood originally occupied by the Anglo middle class (Figure 2.4). But with the construction of the

¹Jacob, Francois. *The Logic of Life*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, , 1993. pp.252

²Alexander, Neis, Anninou and King. *A New Theory of Urban Design*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1987. pp.2



Figure 2.4 Essex Street, view from the corner of Edinboro Street, circa 1860 (Source: Bostonian Society).

South Station Terminal so close to this neighborhood, the White middle class began to move out. Subsequently, the reduction of rents in this area attracted new immigrants, and leather and garment industries.³ Discussed below are the six generalized stages in the making of Boston Chinatown.

Stage 1: Tent Settlement

When the Chinese workers arrived in Boston, they did not plan to settle down permanently. In fact, like many other immigrant groups in the past, they had expected to go back to China after making enough money.

The first inhabitants of Boston Chinatown pitched temporary tents along the Oliver Place, an alley perpendicular to Essex Street (Figure 2.5). Because of their desire for creating a protective territorial zone in a foreign environment, they named the street Ping-On Alley, which literally means “peace and safety alley.” Between the existing parallel building walls, the Chinese sojourners have created their territorial space.

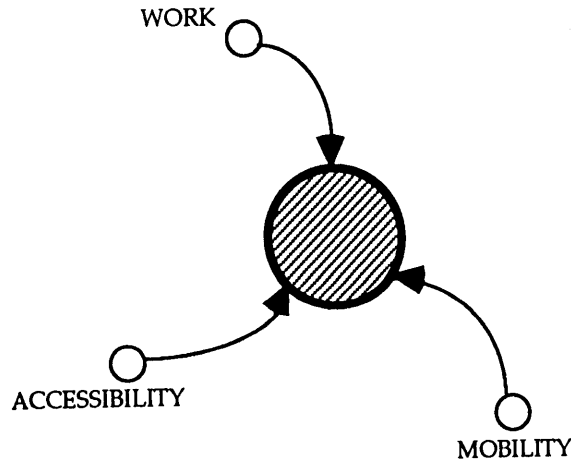


Figure 2.6 Conditions of Settlement

Three major conditions gave birth to this new born settlement (Figure 2.6). The first condition is the accessibility of this neighborhood. Since the 1850s, after the Anglo middle class gradually moved out, this neighborhood was flooded with short successive waves of new Irish, Central European, Iranian and

³Chu, Doris. Chinese in Massachusetts. Chinese Cultural Institute, Boston, 1987. pp.47



Figure 2.5 Essex Street, view from Harrison Avenue, circa 1888 (Source: Bostonian Society).

Syrian immigrants⁴. This loose and open neighborhood body absorbed newcomers as the old inhabitants took a flight. Its nature of nurturing diverse ethnic communities made it a breeding ground for a growing new settlement.

Second, the work opportunity involved in constructing the Pearl Street Telephone Exchange located only a few blocks away gave life to the settlement. A living system between this source of making a living and the settlement began to evolve, sustaining their coexistence.

Third, the mobility provided by the adjacent South Station Terminal contributed to the creation of a transportation network with other cities, which eventually maintained a constantly transversing flow of energy to keep a favorable equilibrium between the inside and outside. Majority of the new Chinese immigrants debarked at the terminal. To them, as sojourners in a foreign land, mobility was extremely important. The Chinese were always drifting to where the job opportunities were plenty. And so it was common for them to travel to other cities to visit their friends and relatives whom they had strong ties with.

Stage 2: Introverted Development

Following the waves of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and anti-Chinese violence in the 1880's and 1890's, discriminations deprived the Chinese

⁴Chu, Doris. Chinese in Massachusetts. Chinese Cultural Institute, Boston, 1987. pp.47

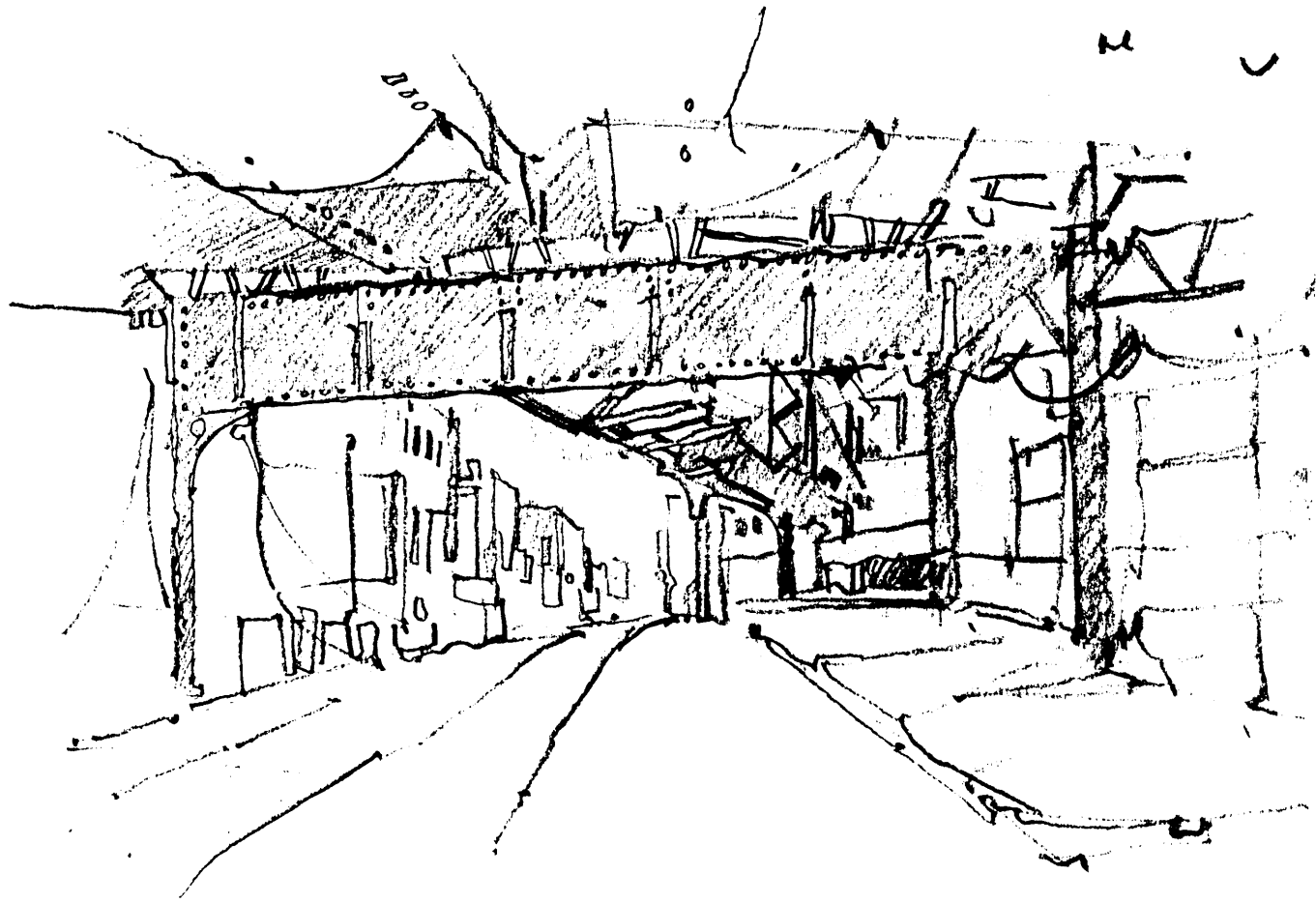


Figure 2.8 Elevated subway tracks above Washington Street, circa 1907 (Source: Bostonian Society).

immigrants from getting jobs outside their community. The Chinese immigrants' primary source of employment became the new restaurants, groceries and laundries within their community. The settlement began to develop introvertedly as a self-sustaining community, serving an estimated number of 250 Chinese in Boston in 1890.

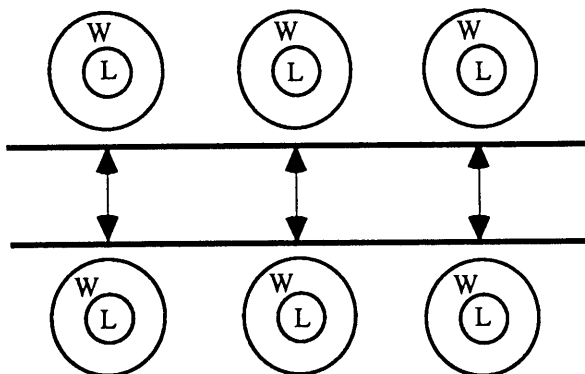


Figure 2.7 Basic Components of Wholeness

The establishment of these shops incrementally permeated into the existing buildings while the streets remained as the central space of commercial and community activities.

The growth pattern was a spontaneous assembly of the components of the settlement, in which the streets served as its regulatory circuits that gave the living system a unity and cohesion. The basic component consisted of two elements, work and live spaces (Figure 2.7).

The construction of the Elevated Railway (Figure 2.8) in 1899 devalued the lands in the neighborhood, making them undesirable for other communities. Thus, without competition for urban lands, the development was stable, and the settlement was preserved even as it was facing tremendous political and social challenges.

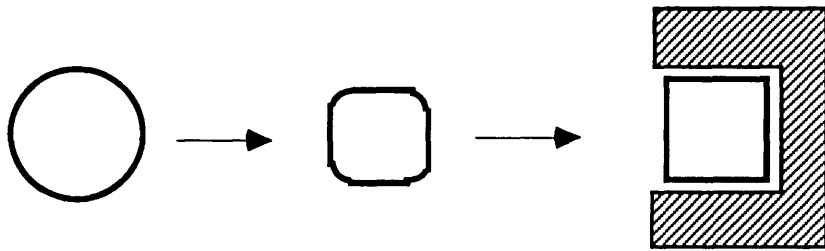


Figure 2.9 Individual entities adapting to its surrounding.

Stage 3: Self-Determined Development

As estimated, the number of residents in the Chinatown increased from 500 in 1900, 900 in 1910,⁵ to 1000 in 1920.⁶ The settlement grew under the severe restrictions because it fulfilled the function as a self-determined whole (Figure 2.9), regulated by a self-governing system.

The system was formed by four major types of organizations — family and district associations, secret societies, and official organization, handling social events, conflicts, commercial development, and making arrangements for newcomers.⁷ These organizations controlled the development of Boston Chinatown, setting rules to enhance its liveliness. For example, to prevent competitions between two merchants, one typical rule was to prohibit opening of the same type of business on the same street, unless they were separated by a certain distance.⁸ This development process fulfilled the notion of structuring the wholeness, making each part functions efficiently within a cohesive organization.

'Each being', said Goethe, 'contains the reason for its existence within itself; all the parts react on one another,'the parts have to produce each other, because they have to associate to form the whole....⁹

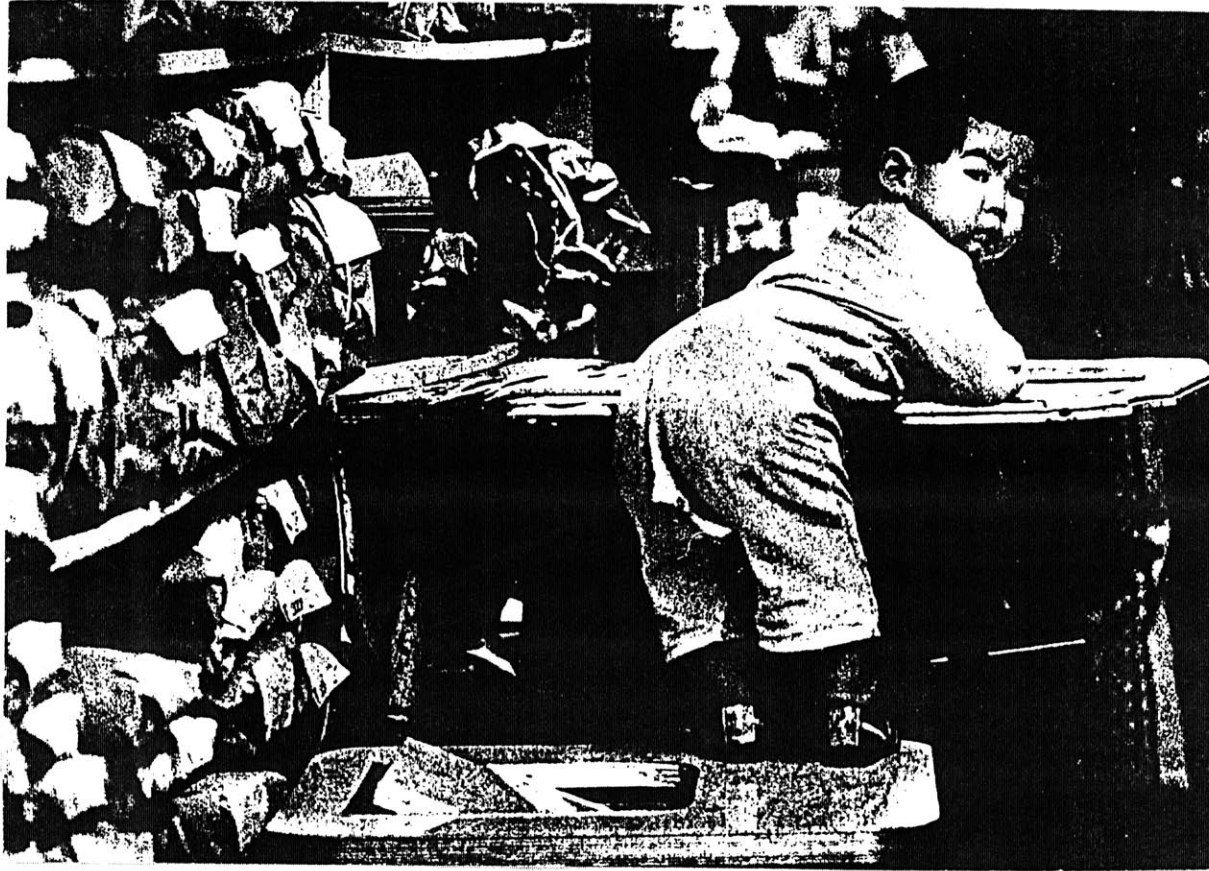
⁵Chu, Doris. Chinese in Massachusetts. Chinese Cultural Institute, Boston, 1987. pp.56

⁶Chinatown. The Boston 200 Corporation. Boston, 1976. pp.4

⁷Chu, Doris. Chinese in Massachusetts. Boston : Chinese Cultural Institute, 1987. pp.52

⁸Chinatown. The Boston 200 Corporation. Boston, 1976. pp.8

⁹Jacob, Francois. The Logic of Life. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1993. pp.89



The self-determined development was a process of compensating its insufficiency, creating balance amid imbalance, in satisfying the increased local demand of employment. The community business began to extend its services to other communities, particularly laundry business. Laundry work was laborious and underpaid, unwanted by most Americans. Cheap source of hard labor became a major underlying force sustaining the vitality of this community in the urban context. Another feature of service was restaurants; many innovations had been made, for example creating dishes like Chop Suey and Chow Mein to cater to the taste of other communities.¹⁰

Stage 4: Towards a Permanent Settlement

After the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, the growth pattern began to change form to adapt a social structure change and accommodate increased numbers of immigrants.

Prior to the repeal, the community basically was a bachelor's society, due to the restriction of admitting new Chinese immigrants, the wives and family members whom the residents here left back home. The space hierarchy now shifted, placing its importance on the living space as most residents began to live with their family members. The authorization of civil rights and establishment of

¹⁰Chu, Doris. Chinese in Massachusetts. Boston : Chinese Cultural Institute, 1987. pp.51



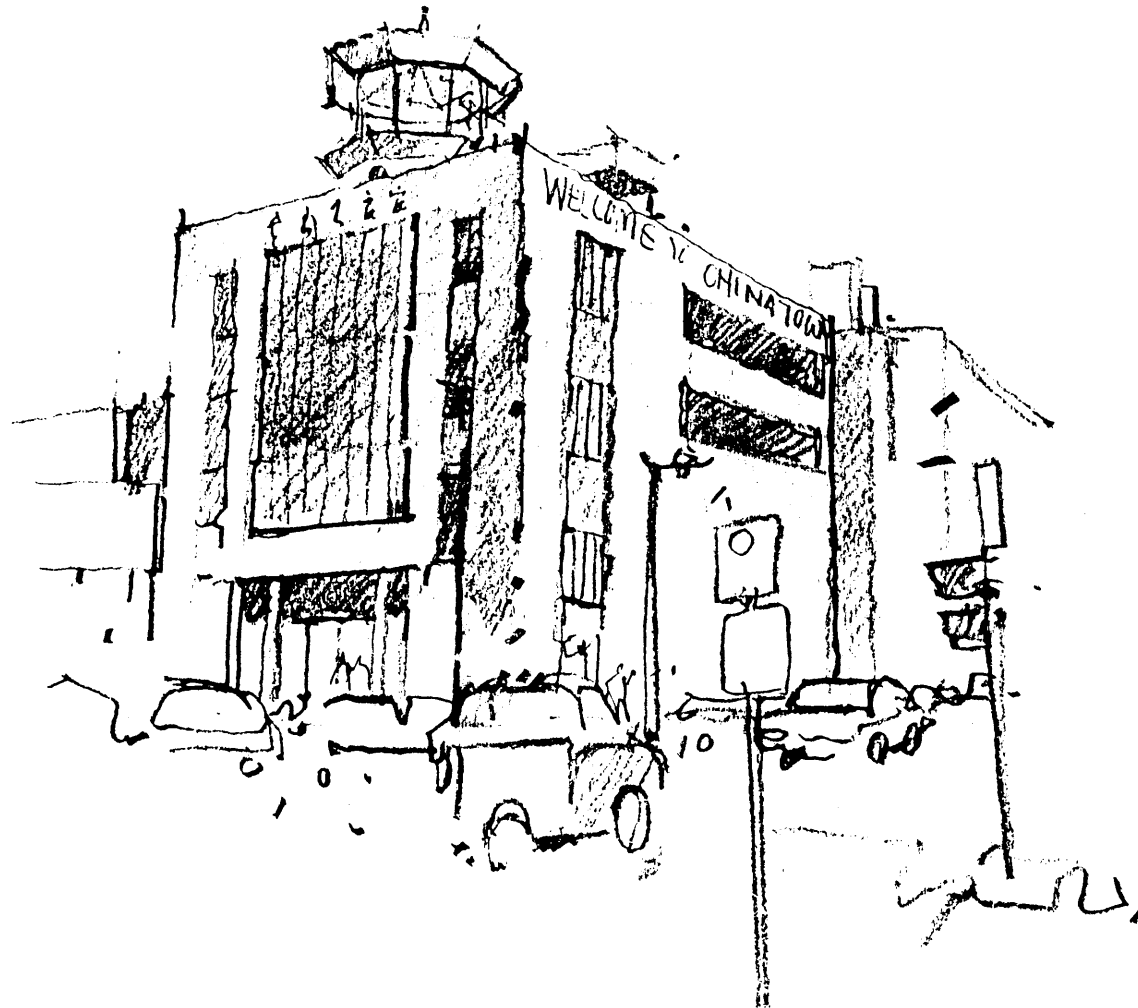
family changed their attitude, from being sojourners to becoming permanent residents. They began to see the place as their home.

Their conception of home was not limited to their own personal dwelling space, but extended to the whole community. The wholeness of the place consisted integrated spaces of living, working, socializing, entertaining and so on. There was no clear lines drawn between work and home. A mother would take her kid to where she worked, and made the work space as her kid's playground (Figure 2.10). Outside a residence, the steps meeting the street could become an extension of a living room (Figure 2.11).

Stage 5: Competition for Urban Lands

After the Elevated Railway was torn down in 1941, the land value of this neighborhood began to rise. Chinatown lost about half of its community to the expansion of institutions and construction of highways.

The development of Tufts University and New England Medical Center since 1945 has replaced many units of housing and reduced the physical area. The central artery constructed in 1954 wiped up some residences and cut off a part of the On Leong Merchants Building (Figure 2.12), a landmark of the community. The extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike in 1963 demolished many housing units, dispersed a part of the community to other neighborhoods like South End, Allston and Brighton.



These massive changes have generated "antibody" inside the body of the community. The theory of antibody, as explained by Fred Sulvucci, a major figure involved in the ongoing Central Artery Project/Third Harbor Tunnel Project, manifests the effect of a cause, in responding towards the massive change imposed upon a body. If a body survives, recovering after suffering a major disease, the antibody generated will create an immune system preventing the attack of the same disease again. The community was catalyzed to take action, participating in preservation and development plans.

In 1962, when the community realized that the South Cove Urban Renewal Project benefited only the Tufts University, they met with Mayor John Collins to reach a memorandum, defining the district of Chinatown to prevent further land-taking. For the first time they were granted veto power over any outside developers, and the area of the Chinatown was officially defined, stretching from the Essex Street to the site of Tai Tung Village (Figure 2.13).

Stage 6: Preservation and Development

Beginning from 1969, BRA started to conduct some studies on Chinatown. A liaison between Chinatown and the government was formed, called Little City Hall.

The focus of the development of this stage is placed on housing as responding to the increasing shortage of housing resulting from the immigrant influx since the government abolished the quota system in 1965.

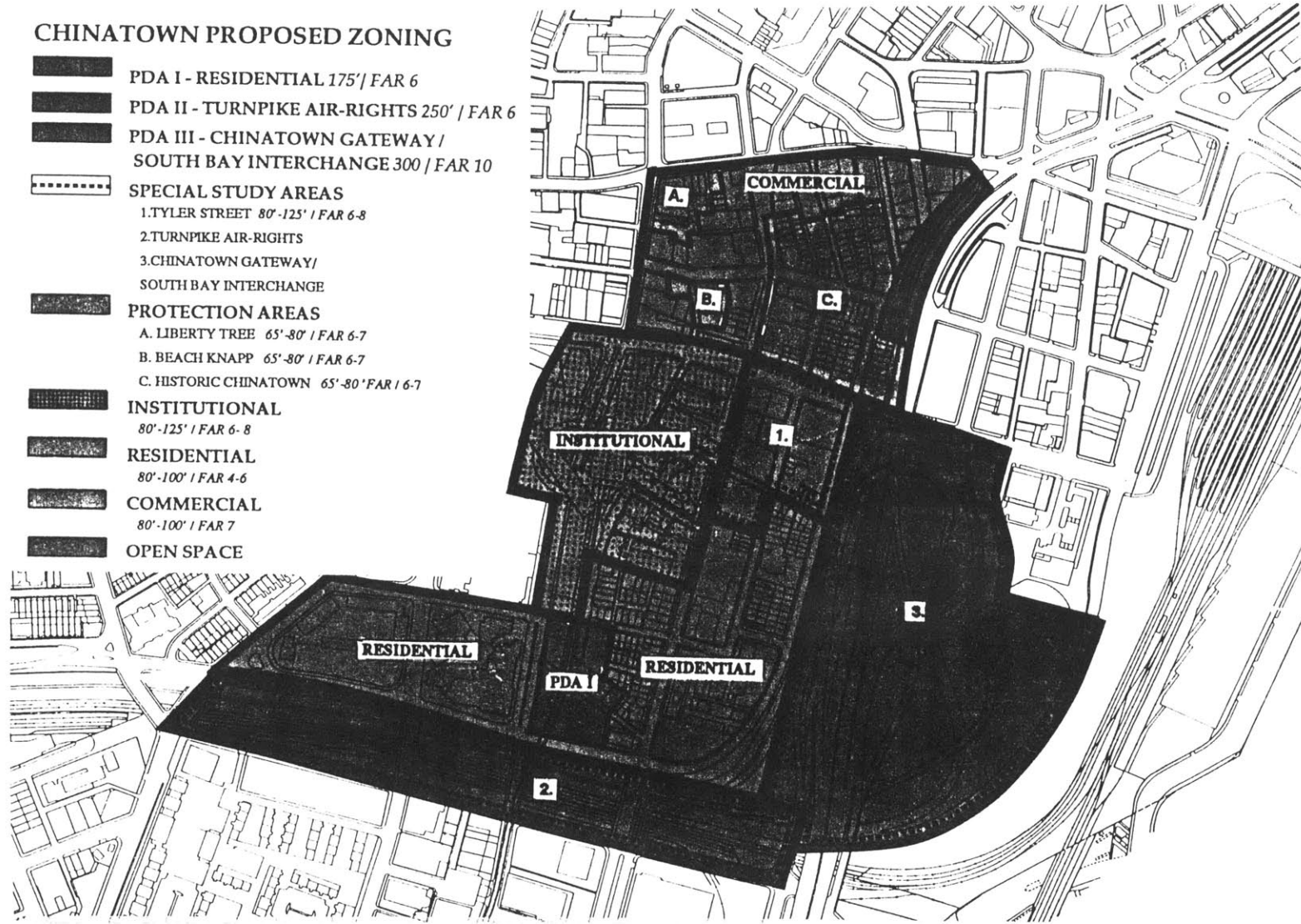


Figure 2.13 Zoning of Chinatown (Source: Proposed Chinatown Zoning, BRA, 1987, p24).

Under the coordination of HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) and BRA, two major housing projects, Tai Tung Village and Mass Pike Tower were constructed respectively in 1973 and 1974. Other housing projects, Quincy Towers and On Luck House were built to cater the needs of elderly residents. Some renovation projects like Oxford Place and Edinboro Housing rehabilitated the existing structures. Recent developments are Waterford place and Oak Terrace.

The financial districts and combat zone, and highways have limited the expansion, forcing it to grow towards South End.

The continuity of growth in Chinatown is located in its functions, not the means of performing them. The development patterns change as the functions required.

2.4 Figure-Ground Study

The figure-ground study is to identify the urban fabric, clarifying the structure of urban spaces (Figure 2.14). The overall typological form, of the patterns of solid and void, in Boston Chinatown is a combination of irregular grid and angular patterns. The solid patterns in the historic Chinatown are more conformed by the street space. The solid patterns of new residential development have a less defined edge with the street space. Judging from these patterns, we can conclude that streets play a dominating role in the urban fabric

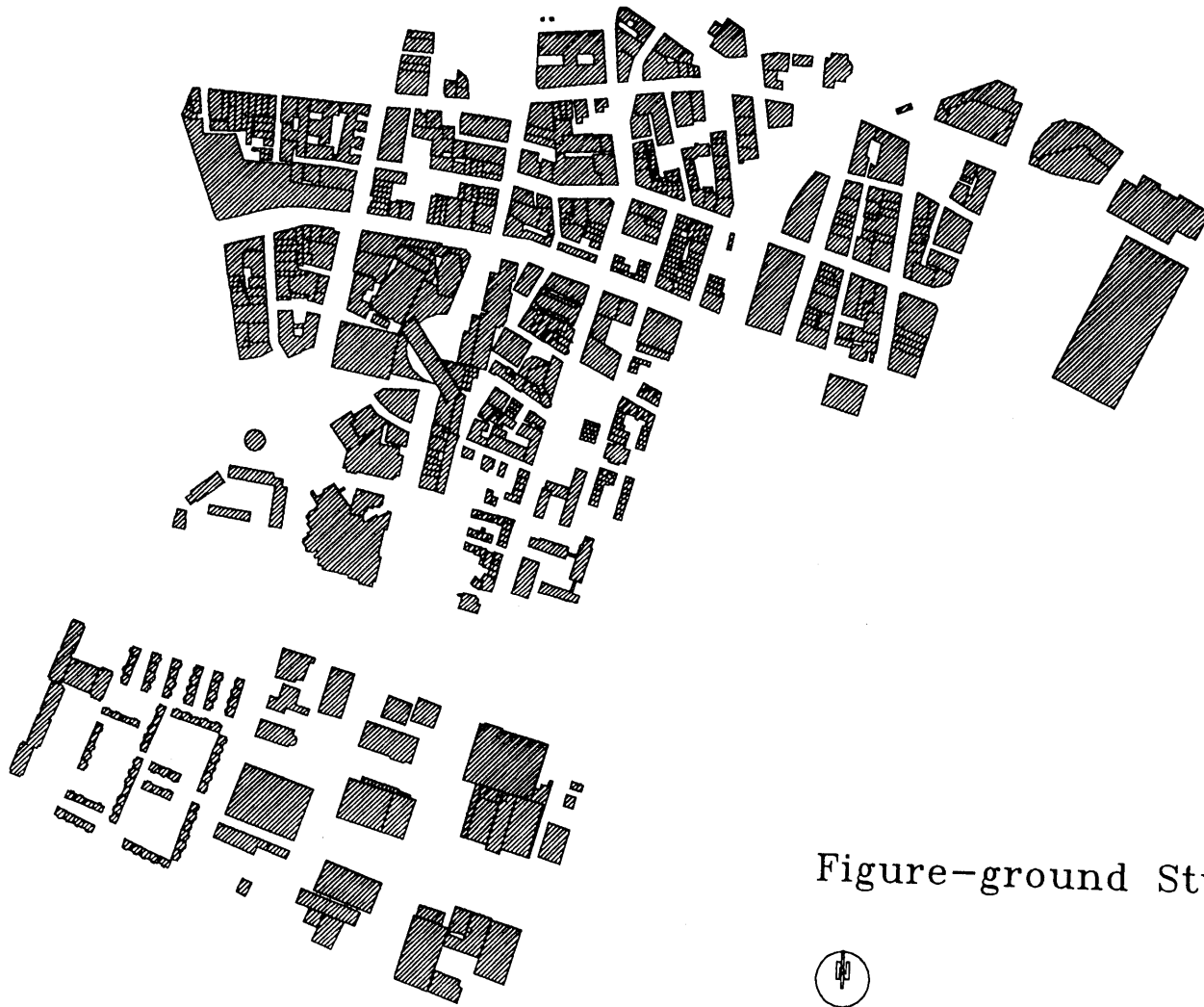


Figure-ground Study



0 100 200 300

of the historic Chinatown, and become less significant as they extend south to the new development.

Urban Solid

The New England Medical Center is a massive piece of solids. Its existence is not coherent with the adjacent solids. The solid patterns in the historic area is more coherent as compare to that of the new development south to the Massachusetts Turnpike (Figure 2.15).

Urban Void

In the historic area, the primary void is the street space. The housing in the residential area consists of a void in the middle, the 'semiprivate residential space'.¹¹ A major void, the linear open-space system, is created by the Massachusetts Turnpike, Surface Road and the highway interchange.

The relationship of solid and void in the historic Chinatown area is harmonious, can be read a whole, and therefore creates a more successful spatial structure. The residential and new development area have fragmented solids scattered on the ground. This disjoint relationship suggest a less workable spatial structure.

¹¹Trancik, Roger. Finding Lost Space. New York : Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986. pp. 103

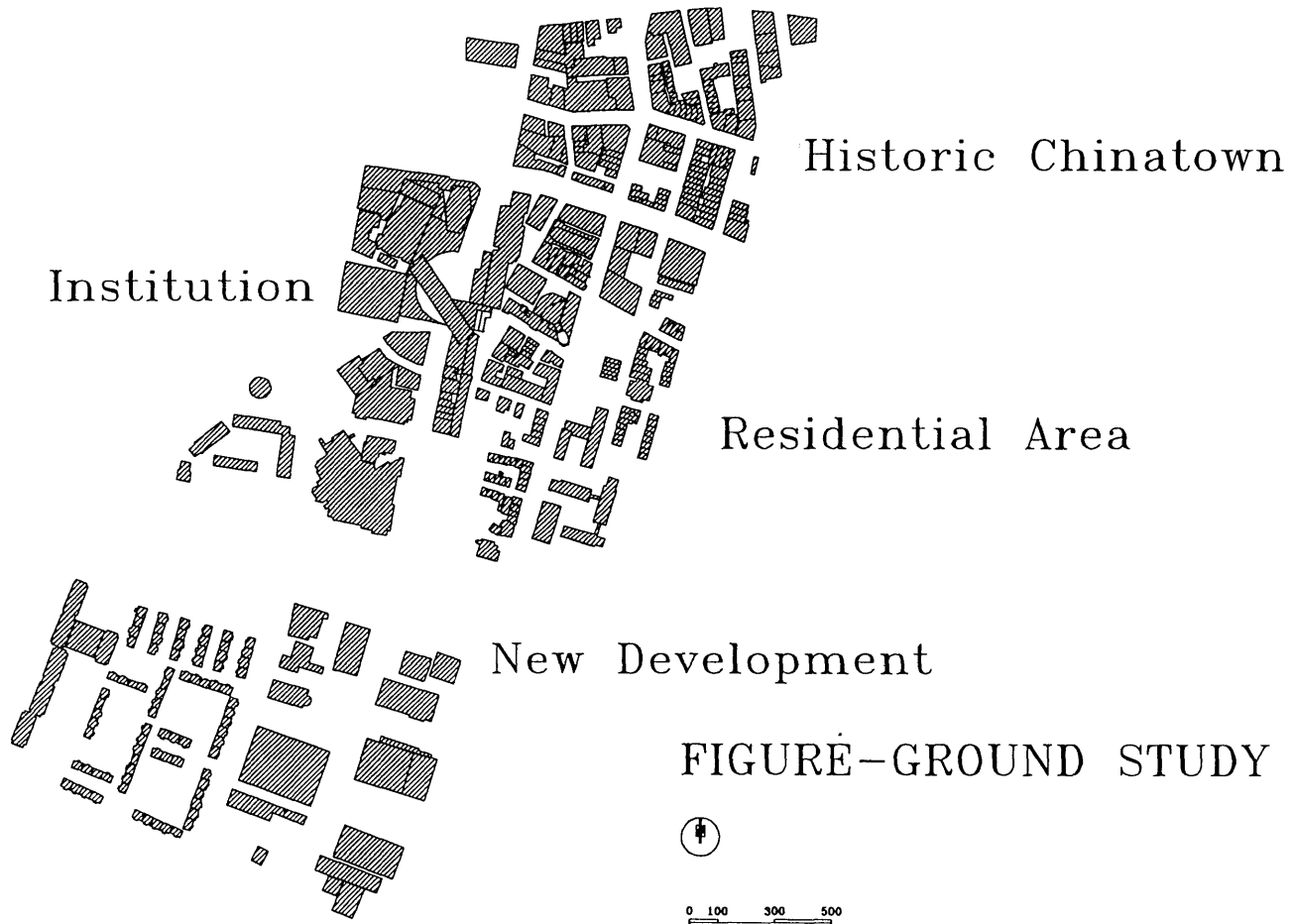


Figure 2.15 Figure/ground studies of the different areas of Chinatown.

2.5 Visual Characteristics

The strongest characteristic of Chinatown is its streetscape (Figure 2.16). The streets give liveliness and make an integral wholeness. The shops always extend to the pedestrians. The street is crucial in expressing the way of life in Chinatown and bonds among the inhabitants. The street is particularly important in the social behavior of the society. It provides access to permit them to socially interact.

The gateway is a powerful landmark. It demarcates an entrance and separates the area from the surrounding (Figure 2.17)

The facades with ornaments and fixtures of Chinese Architecture, and signboards of Chinese Characters make the area visibly different from other neighborhood (Figure 2.18). The skyline in Boston Chinatown is not define by the building silhouette like the typical Boston cityscape, but by these ornaments, signboards and fixtures (Figure 2.19). If we call the outline of a building 'primary profile', and the protruding signboards and fixtures 'secondary profile'¹², then the cityscape in Chinatown is dominated by the 'second profile', whereas other districts in Boston are defined by the 'primary profile'.

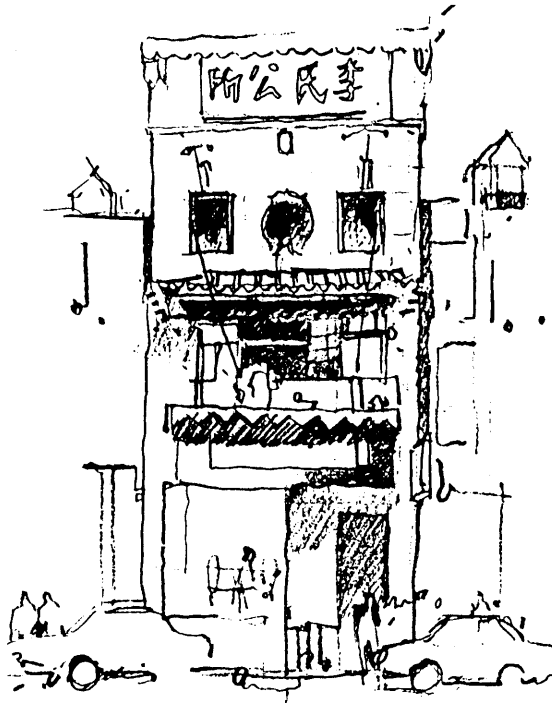


Figure 2.18 Lee Family Association Building on Tyler Street.

¹²Ashihara, Yoshinobu. *The Aesthetic Townscape*. Cambridge : MIT Press, 1983. pp. 76

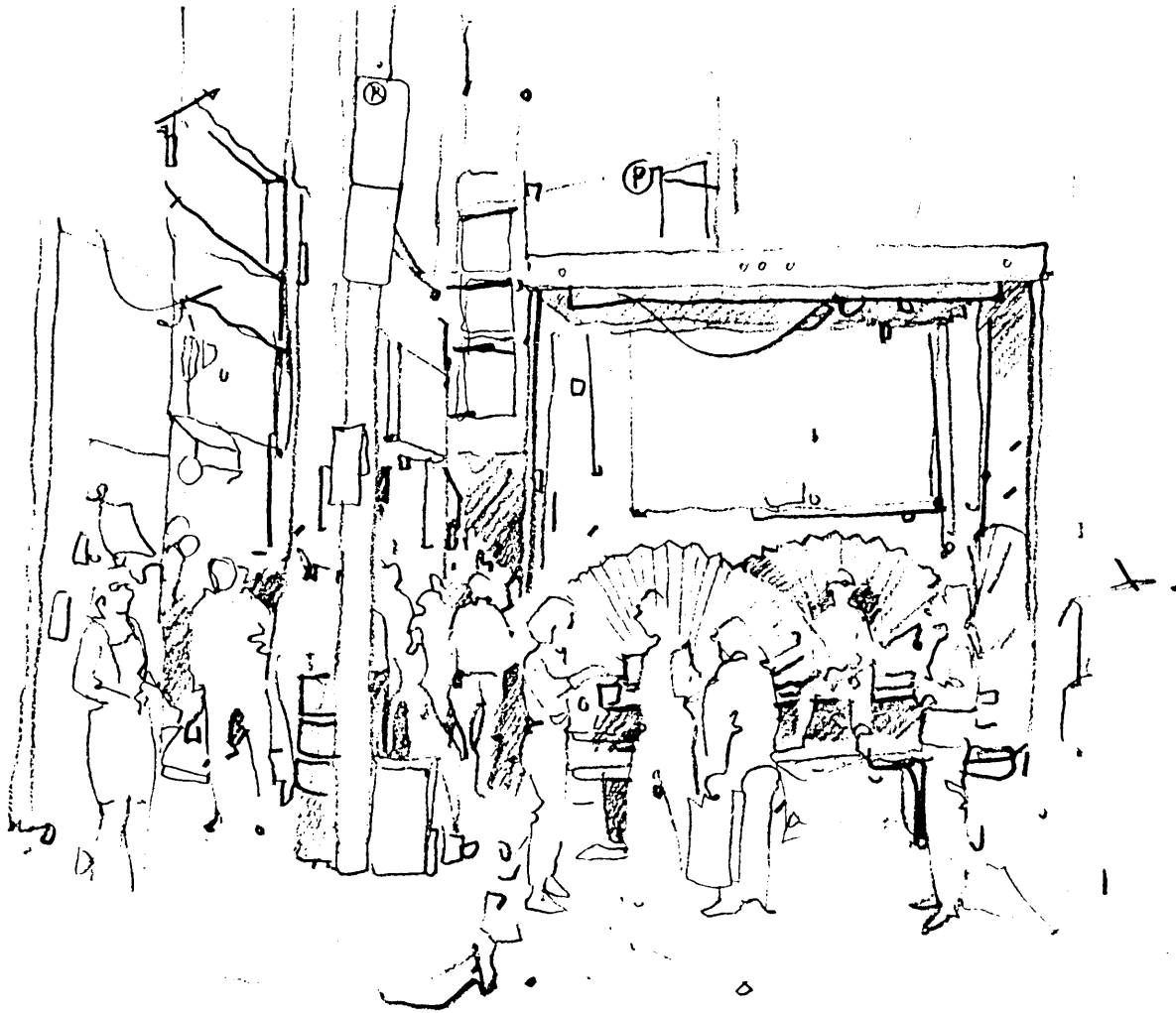
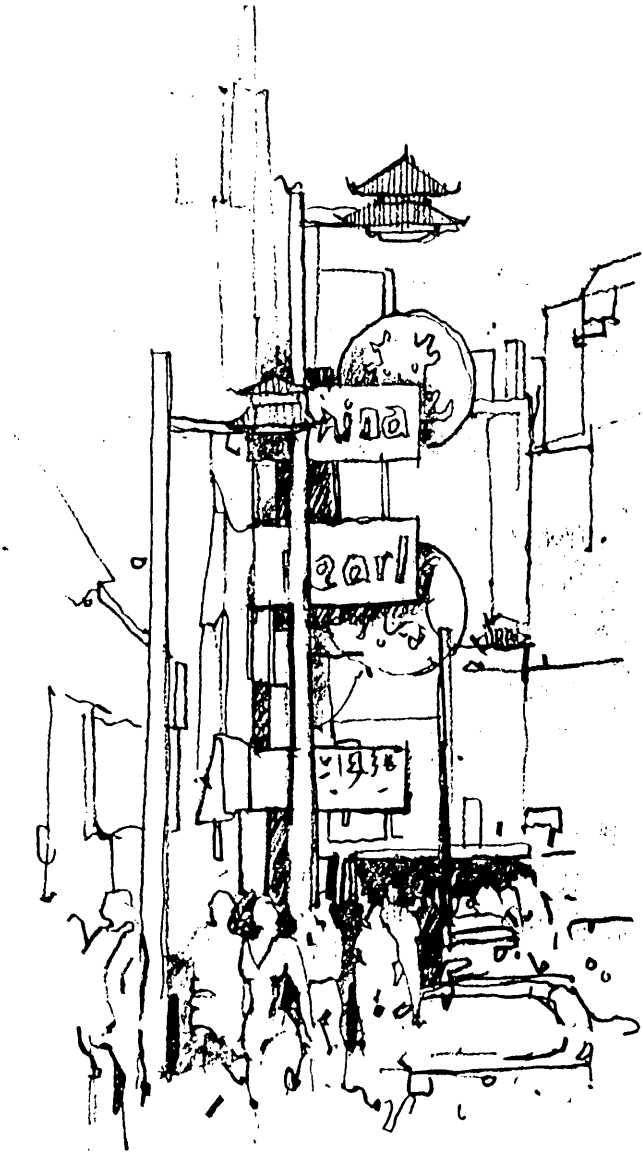




Figure 2.17 Beach Street, Chinatown Gateway in the back ground.



Chapter 3

Social and Cultural Contexts

3.1 Socio-Cultural Context in the Process of Creating 'Wholeness'

To further understand the process that produces the wholeness of Boston Chinatown, a study of the underlying socio-cultural structure is required. The physical development of the area, as discussed in the previous chapter, occurred in successive stages, spontaneously assembling itself piece by piece. In this chapter, I discuss how the socio-cultural structure of the community shapes their built environment.

Both social and cultural structures are complimentary in the developing process of building the wholeness. I see the social structure in the urban context of Boston Chinatown as a medium that develops the public interest, and the cultural structure a refinement that generates the environmental qualities. The activities that take place in both the interior and exterior spaces within the community can give us a clear understanding of what the public interests and environmental qualities are. Therefore, I use these urban activities as a referential framework to study the socio-cultural structure.

If Chinatown in its entirety is seen as a living organism, then its social structure is the mechanism of the organism's organization, and the cultural

structure is its heredity. The social structure, like an operating force that unifies the association of elements and the functions of working organs inside a living body, affects and develops the presence and transformation of the wholeness as corresponding to the public interests. The cultural structure, on the other hand, like the preexisting and preformatting characteristics of a living organism inherited from the mother body, governs the features and qualities of the wholeness.

3.2 Social Context

The social structure of Boston Chinatown cannot be separated from its physical environment. It is a consequence of human action in the development of the community, and a reflection of the public interests. It is also a setting that conforms to human action.

To understand the social structure, it is necessary to look at two ruling components, namely family structure, and social and political organizations. With this understanding, I then make an attempt to illustrate the spatial conceptions generated by the social structure. These spatial conceptions are the reasons why Boston Chinatown is still a vibrant community.

Family Structure

The family is the basic social unit that makes up the whole community. The change of the family structure has significantly affected the growth pattern.



Figure 3.1 Junction between Beach Street and Harrison Avenue.

As more families have migrated to the Chinatown District, the focus of development has shifted from a vibrant mixed-use environment (Figure 3.1) to a more quiet residential neighborhood (Figure 3.2).

I think there are three distinctive features in the family structure that sustains the vitality of the neighborhood in Chinatown, namely, inheritance of property, family as an economic unit and ties among family members, relatives and friends. These are discussed below.

1. Inheritance of Property

It is the traditional value of Asians, Chinese in particular, to transfer property to the next generation. This system maintains a continuity of businesses in Chinatown. Some business owners may live elsewhere, but this inherited business brings them back to the community.

2. Family as an Economic Unit

Many residents of Boston Chinatown are immigrants. Most of them look for stability and better living conditions; owning a house is a priority and considered a lifetime achievement. In most cases, the whole family, parents and teenage children work hard to achieve the goal. The major source of employment is within the community. Some of them will run a family business, in which the whole family is involved in the operation.



Figure 3.2 Junction between Oak Street and Harrison Avenue.

3. Ties among Family Members, Relatives and Friends

Even when some people move out of the community upon gaining financial stability, they still come back to visit friends and relatives, or perhaps old parents who are unwilling to move out.

Leadership in Chinatown

Not coincidentally, the neighborhood's political maturity can be traced to the emergence of a new group of more assimilated and educated leaders. From the late 1970s until the late 1980s, Chinatown was ruled by a dapper restaurateur Harry Mook, whose power base was the Chinese Freemasons Society, a social club which had ties to organized crime. According to federal officials, Mook's society worked closely with the infamous Ping On ("Peace"), a Chinese gang that was allegedly involved in prostitution, gambling, loan-sharking and heroin smuggling.¹ After Harry Mook was convicted of racketeering in 1992, and sentenced to prison for almost 4 years, a new group of community leaders emerged, like Bill Moy and Robert Guen - leaders of the neighborhood council. They envisioned Chinatown as a center of Asian Culture and diverse business interests.

¹Canellos, Peter, Globe staff. New Leaders Work with City to Roust Adult Business, Boston Globe. January 10, 1993.

Building an Image of the Hometown

Attachment to the homeland ties the residents together as a community. Many of the residents simply desire a safe and peaceful living environment, as the earliest worker immigrants to this district did. Their homes are the center of their world and they seldom look beyond the peripheries of the district.

The place is perceived as an ideal place to start a new life for many new immigrants. For many of these new comers, the American dream is to be able to own a house and their own businesses.

New Immigrants

"Indeed, for those with limited English skills, the United States can be a sort of purgatory, where life is defined more by what they cannot do than by what they can."² As reported in Boston Globe, a newcomer, Zhong Mei Wong, 36, who came to United States in 1989 from China, has become accustomed to the isolation due to the language barrier. She depends on her network of friends in Chinatown on getting the information she needs. She does not mingle with Americans, even when working in the Boston Sheraton Hotel, for the reason that "...when you cannot understand what people are saying, you can't tell whether someone is good or bad...I (Wong) was shy about getting to know people."³

²Tong, Betsy, Q.M., Contributing Reporter. Breaking Language Barriers. Boston Globe, December 12, 1993.

³Tong, Betsy, Q.M., Contributing Reporter. Breaking Language Barriers. Boston Globe, December 12, 1993.

A report complaining against a garment factory in Chinatown refers to pay below the minimum wage with no benefits and overtime. It was filed by two women, Chin and Ling in 1993, both are new immigrants from China, complaining that for the past 11 months, they have only received between \$75 and \$180 for two weeks' work, and they have been working for 6 to 7 days a week. "We didn't struggle to come to this country to be treated like that...."⁴ According to them, the dresses made by them are later sold in Talbots and other fine dress shops in the city.

Besides such injustices, newcomers also tend to be the victims in the city's crime. They don't speak out for themselves, and are therefore easy and preferred targets. Fanny Kwan, reported a case of fighting off a mugger whom she surprised by speaking English. She said in the newspaper: "He [the mugger] didn't expect me to speak English, and that save me."

Despite this, to many new immigrants, the distinction of being inside the territory of Chinatown is being able to comfortably communicate and interact with people. Chinese signage, people, and other such ethnic indicators facilitates interaction and assimilation for the incoming immigrants.

⁴Lewis, Diane, Globe Staff. Chinatown Company Faces Scrutiny, Boston Globe, May 19, 1993

3.3 Cultural Context

Boston Chinatown still fosters many cultural ties of kinship, language and festivities. It is a major source from where the cultural continuity emanates. Amos Rapoport in the article "Culture and the urban order" defines culture into three general classes.

1. A way of life typical of a group, a particular way of doing things;
2. A system of symbols, meanings, and cognitive schemata transmitted through symbolic codes;
3. A set of adaptive strategies for survival related to the ecological setting and its resources.⁵

For many, culture is largely equated with tradition and contemporary populations are seen as its carriers. For others, culture is created by thought and actions of both historical and living populations.⁶

When the Chinese laborers came to Boston, they brought with them their culture and tradition. Their culture was basically preserved for not interacting with the main stream American society. They celebrated cultural events on streets, their communal space within the settlement. Culture was a strong tie in the community. Culture is the "glue" of society, but it cannot exist independent of human activity.⁷

⁵Agnew, John, John Mercer and David Sopher, eds. *The City in Cultural Context*. Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1984. pp.50-51

⁶Agnew, John, John Mercer and David Sopher, eds. *The City in Cultural Context*. Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1984. pp.1

⁷Agnew, John, John Mercer and David Sopher, eds. *The City in Cultural Context*. Boston : Allen & Unwin, 1984. pp.2

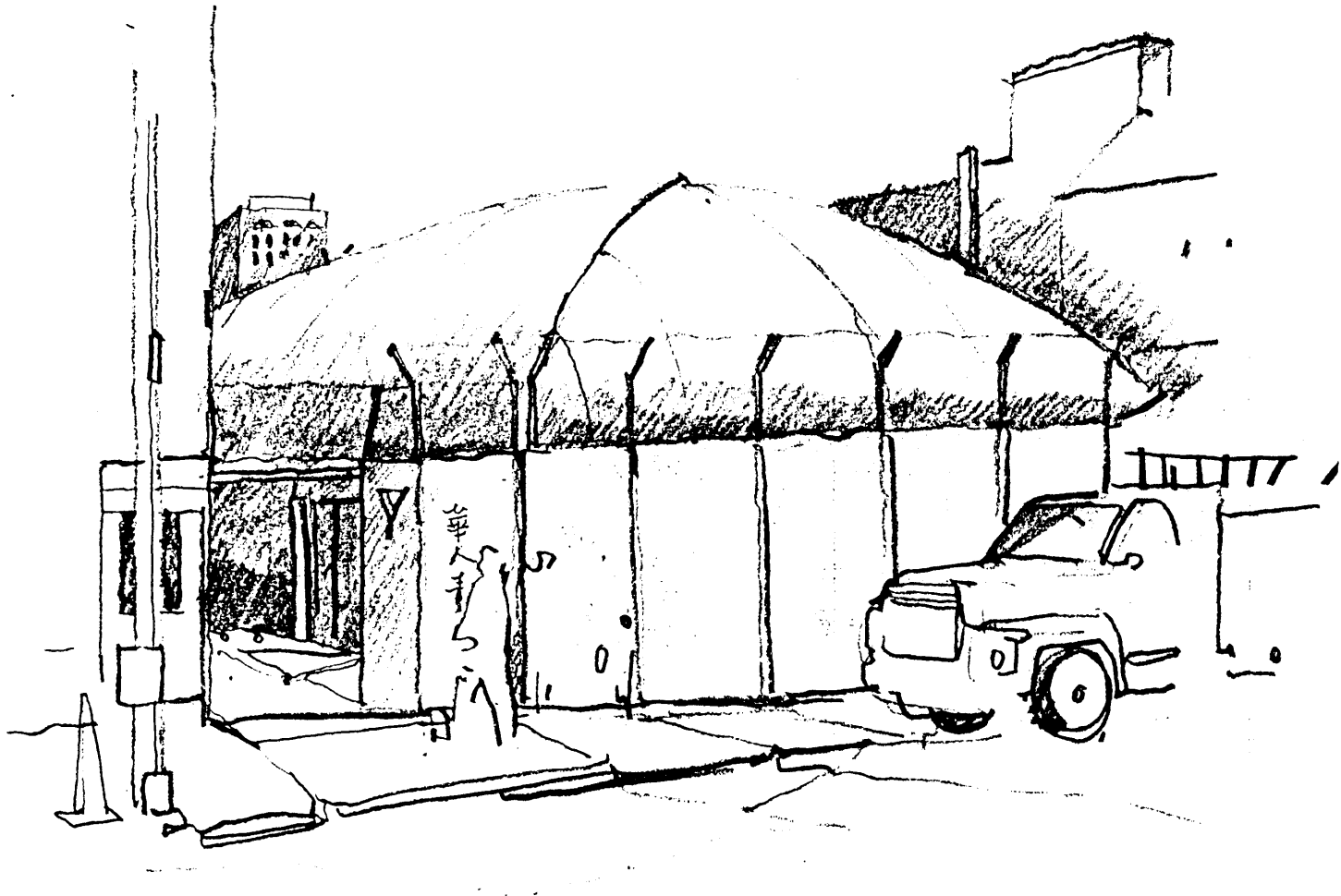


Figure 3.3 South Cove YMCA, Tyler Street.

In present day Chinatown, children are exposed to traditional cultural values at the New England Kwong Kow Chinese school. Founded by On Leong Merchants Association in 1920, this school imparts traditional Chinese education to about 500 students and serves as an important supplement to the mainstream school system.

3.4 Identity

Chinatown draws Asian Americans who seek to affirm their identity. Dong Huynh, 17, his brother Vu and his friends say they come from Dorchester to the Y (South Cove YMCA) (Figure 3.3) every week to play basket ball and because they feel comfortable in Chinatown.... Agrees Richard Leung, Program Director at the Y, who grew up in Chinatown and now lives in Newton: 'I always come back to Chinatown. There's nothing Asian-American about Newton. It is a very nice place, but there's nothing that affirms your Asian-American Identity. This is still home to me.' ⁸

The Chinatown district not only caters to the needs of its residents but also serves as an emotional anchor to Chinese expatriates living outside of it.

⁸As reported by a globe staff member.

The account in this chapter and the incidents related here serve to underline the continued relevance of Chinatown as a cohesive whole. In summary, the district serves the following important functions:

1. Survival

From the perspective of nineteenth century Chinese immigrants, the idea of living together was merely a survival strategy. Today it is also a defense against discrimination.

2. Transitional Place for New Immigrants

To many new immigrants, Chinatown is a transitional place to ease their adaptation to the new country. Its physical environment has the qualities of their hometowns yet carries the features of the new country.

3. Base for Social Mobility

Socially, the environment enables the new immigrants to facilitate mobility within main-stream society and to stand up as Chinese/Asian Americans.

4. Place for Social and Cultural Events

It is a vibrant place of eating, shopping, meeting and socializing. It caters to the needs of local residents, visitors, scholars and students.

Urban design guidelines, therefore need to take into account these contemporary functions that the Chinatown district serves.

Chapter 4

Rebuilding Boston Chinatown?

Inner city residential communities must compete with other areas of the city for resources to maintain and improve the structures which they have been inherited. Subjected to the centrifugal and centripetal forces of invasion and succession by the alternative land uses, the stability of the inner city communities may be enhanced by their relatively unattractive physical setting.¹

I think any development done in the Chinatown District, so to speak, to enhance its attractiveness, can be a "double-edged sword."² Therefore, there has to be an awareness of the consequences of any action that is taken to develop the neighborhood. On one hand, the development can improve the environmental qualities of the neighborhood. On the other hand, it can lead to gentrification. The majority of the residents in Boston Chinatown are low-income people, as indicated by the survey of Boston Redevelopment Authority in 1987, only 7% of the residents earn over \$20,000 per year. If the land value increases, they can no longer afford the rents, eventually having to move out of the neighborhood. A discussion on land management issues is not within the scope of this thesis. But I believe that strengthening the cohesiveness of the community is a positive move and the ultimate way to preserve its stability. My aim in this chapter is to

¹Williard T. Chow. *The Reemergence of an Inner City : The Pivot of Chinese Settlement in the San Francisco Bay Area*. San Francisco : R & E Research Associates , 1977. pp.3

²Brook Larmer, Staff Writer of the Christian Science Monitor, *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 1985.

suggest ideas and guidelines that can serve to inform the formulation of comprehensive urban design recommendations for generating a successful design.

4.1 Recommendations for an Increased Awareness in Housing Development

Within the Chinatown District there is a continued need for housing, particularly for new immigrants. Chinatown's housing has a high mobility rate. The mobility of moving in and out of a community can be explained with the idea of "pull" and "push" factors.³ These factors reflect the desirable qualities of a neighborhood. The compelling reason, the "pull" factor, for living in the district is convenience, in communication and proximity to work, restaurants, grocery stores, language school, medical and social services. Most Chinatown residents move out when their financial situation gets better, whereas the poor still remain for lower rents in the district. The "push" factor of Boston Chinatown is its unpleasant living environment due to overcrowding, deteriorated building conditions and dirty environment. In other words, a better living environment has a "pull" quality to attract the residents. In the housing development process, there are three major factors, sense of community, safety and stability. They should be considered to generate "pull" qualities. Without an increased awareness of these factors, the outcome of a housing development can become sterile. These factors are discussed below.

³Loo, Chalsa M. Chinatown : Most Time, Hard Time. New York : Praeger. pp.60

1. Sense of Community

Sense of community is a very important factor in sustaining an ethnic neighborhood. In the case of housing in Chinatown, as discussed in Chapter 2, social and cultural activities are crucial in creating cohesiveness within the community. A good housing should have space to allow these activities to happen, encouraging interaction among the inhabitants. An example of such a space is the community garden on East Berkeley Street, located south to the Castle Square which allows the residents to plant vegetables, and concurrently through such activities they get acquainted with each other.

2. Safety

Crime on the streets has become a major fear to residents of Chinatown. According to the police's record, the reported assaults increased from 24 incidents in 1991 up to 31 in 1993. As Chin, a current resident of Chinatown recalled, before the construction of the Central Artery Project, the Chinatown neighborhood was considerably safe. "We (Chin and neighbors) would put the kids to bed and we would sit outside on the doorstep talking until 2 or 3 in the morning and not worry."⁴ To incorporate the concept of security, the design of a housing project should be as visually clear for neighborhood surveillance as possible to create "defensible space."⁵ When the residents feel secure about their neighborhood, they would become more approachable, and begin to communicate with each others, like the case of Chin and his neighbors; thus creating a strong sense of community.

⁴Tong, Betsy, Q.M., Contributing Reporter. Chinatown Fighting Back against Crime, Boston Globe. October 24, 1993.

⁵Newman, Oscar. Design Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975. pp.4



3. Sense of Stability

The third factor to be considered is the sense of stability. What I mean is not stability in terms of home ownership, but stability in residency, meaning the neighborhood is occupied by a stable group of residents. Also, by stability, I mean the sense of contentment within a protective whole, away from the threats, danger and stress in the city. A stable group of residents tend to develop a bond among themselves. To promote stability, a housing project should provide a variety of options to accommodate a family of two to a big family with three generations living under one roof. And, it has to have a variety of dwelling types, to attract a diverse group of people, adding liveliness to it and making it a small city within a city.

An example of a housing project where there has been an endeavor to meet the above discussed parameters is 'Oak Terrace'. This is an affordable housing project in Chinatown currently nearing completion. The \$13.7 million project is a great step in responding to the current housing needs of the community.

The Asian Community Development Corporation was designated by BRA to develop the housing project. It contains 30 low-income, 30 moderate and 28 market rate rental units. Out of these units, 42 units have 3 to 4 bedrooms. The design has a central open space surrounded by a 10-story tower, 4-story double duplexes, and 3-story townhouses.

The design shows sensitivity in providing communal space for activities (Figure 4.1). The central courtyard can be a space where the residents hold their

various social functions, the kids get to know new friends, the parents meet to chat after a day of hard work, and the elders gather to play chess and talk. The arrangements of the windows of each unit have clear views towards outside and inside, and the plan has clear straight corridors. This design feature allows 'the inhabitants themselves to become key agents in ensuring their own security'⁶, being able to keep an watchful eye on each other's door. Different unit design in the complex will promote a mix of family types. This feature also attract different age and income groups, instead of a static and homogenous group, making it an exciting place to live.

4.2 Recommendations for an Increased Awareness in Mixed-Use Development

Mixed-use development has to be consistent with patterns of small and incremental growth, as findings in Chapter 1 shows, while maintaining a desirable mix of cultural, commercial, residential, industrial, recreational profile.

The basic interest for promoting mixed-used development is to insure that the district remains an interesting place to shop, eat and live. The development should increase the availability of retail space for a variety of small businesses, and the number of low and middle income rental housing, while creating open space for outdoor activities and cultural events.

⁶Newman, Oscar. Design Guidelines for Creating Defensible Space. Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975. pp.4

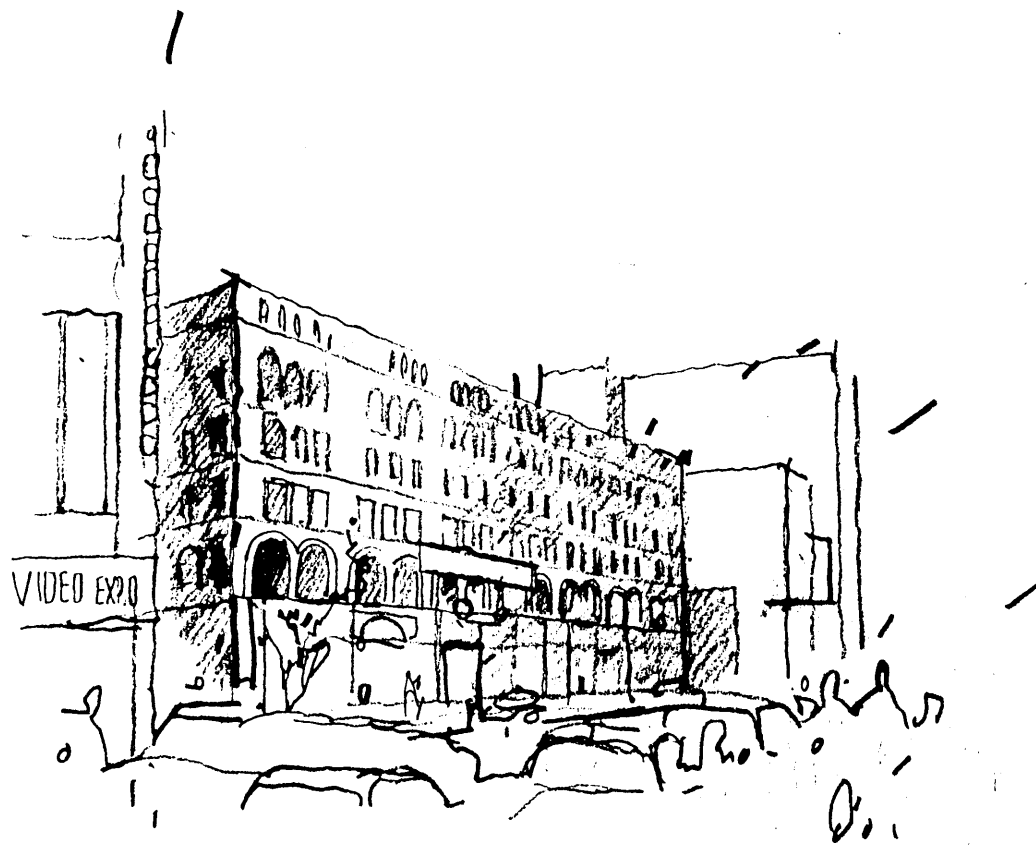


Figure 4.2 China Trade Center at intersection of Essex and Washington Streets.

In advocating a mixed-used development, it is important to insure that different uses correspond and relate to each other. Development has to be coherent, and not fragmented. A case study of China Trade Center illustrates this point.

A 1887 building on Boylston Street, originally built for Boylston Market Association, designed by Carl Fehmer, was rehabilitated and transformed into a new China Trade Center in 1985 (Figure 4.2). Its location on the Combat Zone was considered conducive in battling the negative business in the Combat Zone, the adult entertainment district.

The 6-story structure is converted into commercial building, housing retail arcades (2-stories and a basement) and office space (4 stories)⁷. It was envisioned similar to Faneuil Hall Marketplace and the Downtown Crossing. Public seating and tables were provided to attract people from Chinatown as well as tourists. The center symbolized another gateway to Chinatown. However, it failed to function as perceived.

The failure of the project explains why the idea of correspondence of parts in the surrounding is important. The center's existence in the midst of the adult entertainment business made it an entity isolated from the surroundings. Thus, without associating with the whole, the China Trade Center emerges as a failure.

⁷The building was bought by the Chinese Economic Development Corporation (CEDC). CEDC solicited a proposal from a developer, the Bay Group. The reconstruction work was done by the Boston Architectural Team Inc. of Chelsea and Lin Associates Inc. of Boston.

Junction between Washington and Essex Streets

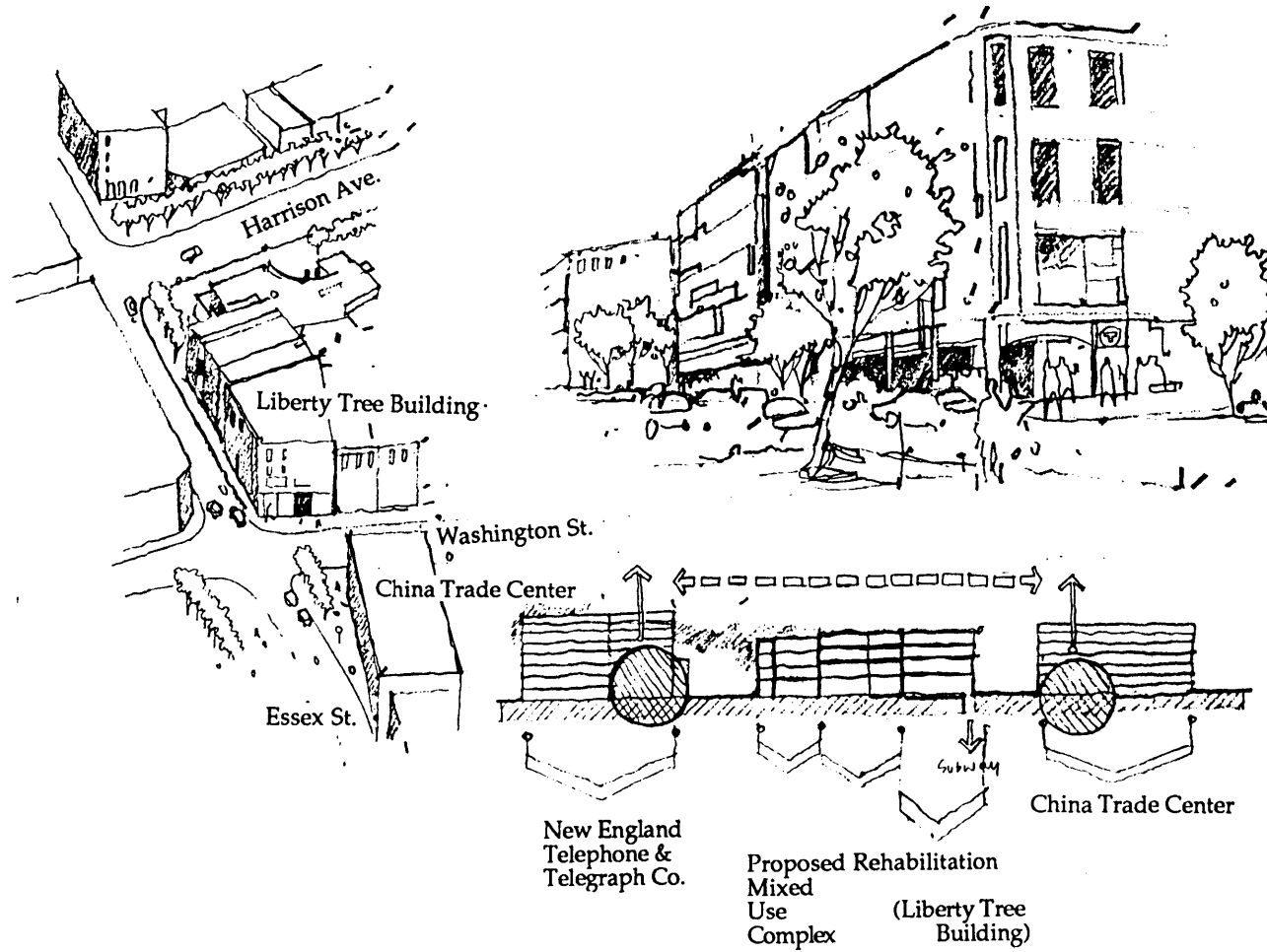


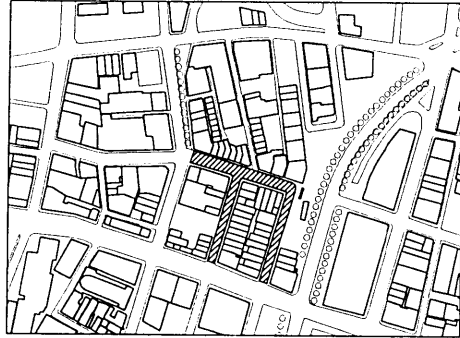
Figure 4.3 Design exercise based on the conservation recommendations.

4.3 General Recommendations

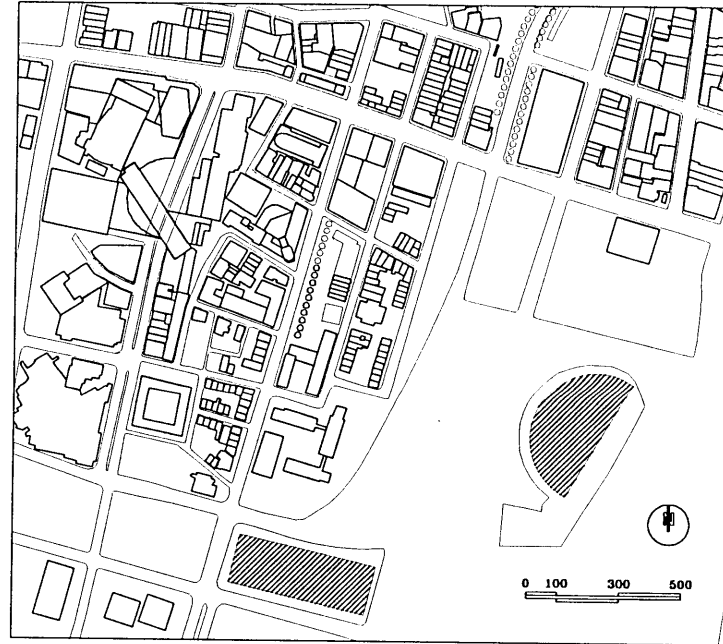
In addition to recommendations for housing and mixed-use developments, I propose the following general guidelines in order to maintain the unique characters of Chinatown District as an ethnic enclave.

1. A conservation exercise with an emphasis on the listing of all the historic buildings within the district should be carried out. As far as possible buildings deemed to be structurally safe should be preserved and rehabilitated (Figure 4.3).
2. Radical urban intervention should be minimal.
3. An important aspect for the 'remodeling' and improvement effects is circulation (Figure 4.4). I propose that improvements in circulation should lay emphasis on pedestrianization. Additional parking garages around the fringes of the district should be developed in order to reduce the volume of traffic within the core of the district. Streetscapes should be improved keeping the needs of the pedestrian in mind
4. In addition to passive recreation, open space facilities should be upgraded to provide active recreation amenities for different age groups residing in the district.

At a more specific level Boston Chinatown can be seen as being constituted of three major parts — the core, residential neighborhood and the new development (Figure 4.5). These parts are separated by Tufts University,



In the Cove, Beach, Tyler and Harrison Streets are closed exclusively for pedestrian at a designated time during the day.



Proposed locations for parking garages located around the fringe of Chinatown.

New England Medical Center and the Massachusetts Turnpike. To link these part together, I propose to strengthen the pedestrian movements along three major streets, Tremont, Washington, and Harrison (Figure 4.6). The intersections function as magnets (Figure 4.7), drawing people to move along the route connecting the three separated districts (Figure 4.8).

The open lands generated by the Massachusetts Turnpike and The Central Artery/Tunnel project should be mediators in connecting these districts. On the open lands above the Massachusetts Turnpike, mixed-use facilities consisting of cultural, commercial and residential amenities can be incorporated to from a center for the residential neighborhood and the new development. The linear open land generated by the Central Artery Project can be a strong link to the linear park (Figure 4.9). The open land next to the highway interchange can be developed as an extension of the core of Chinatown.

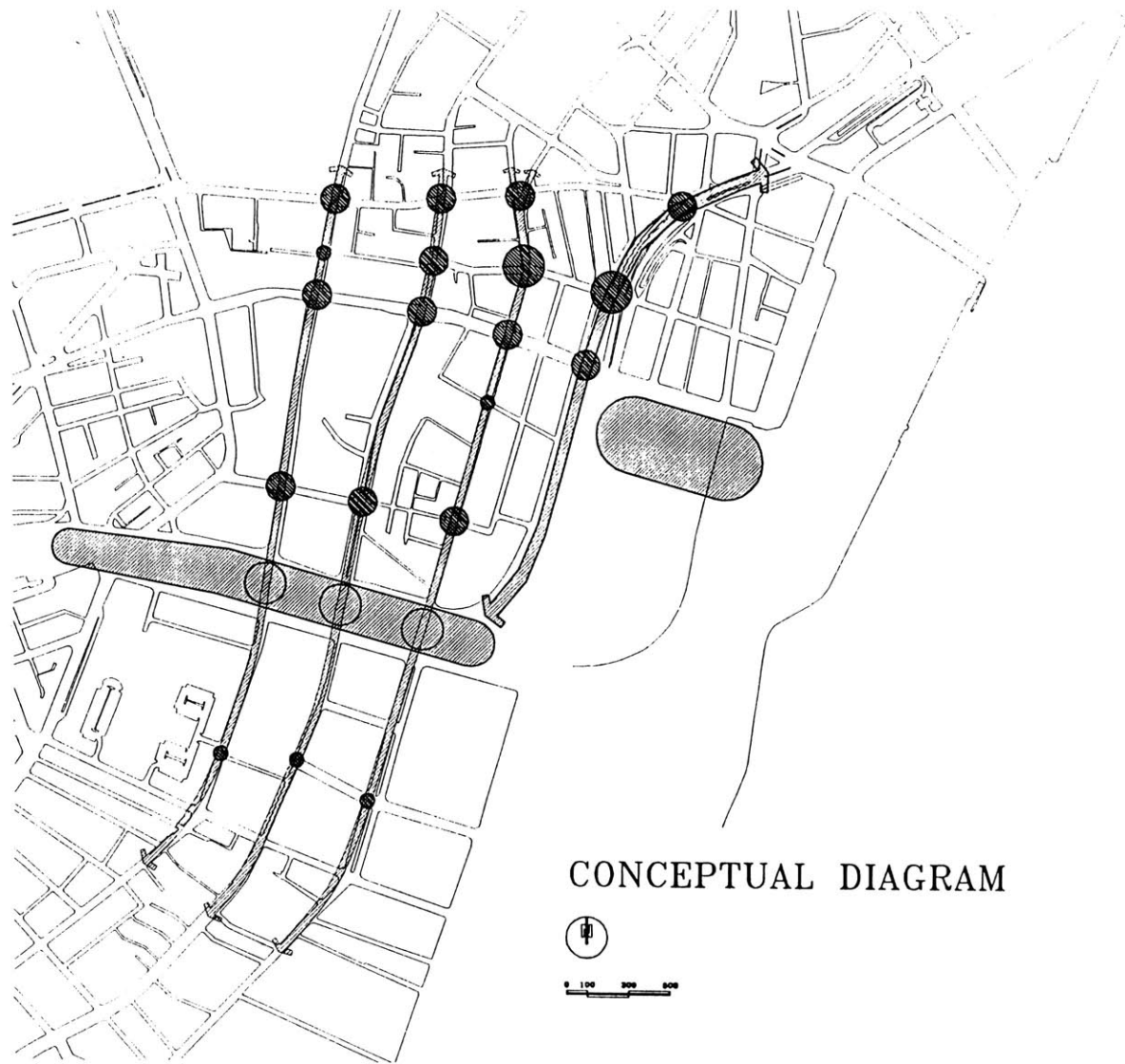
4.4 CONCLUSION

All the above guidelines should articulate the interest of the community. Both the public and private development should suggest means of improving the public interests of the Chinatown community while enhancing its image.

The major problem of development in this ethnic neighborhood is two dimensional land-use planning with a lack of concern for dimensions such as social life and cultural activities. Remodeling efforts need to meet the varied requirements of different users in the community while maintaining the



Figure 4.5 Subdistricts of Boston's Chinatown.



CONCEPTUAL DIAGRAM

Figure 4.6 Strengthening the pedestrian movements.

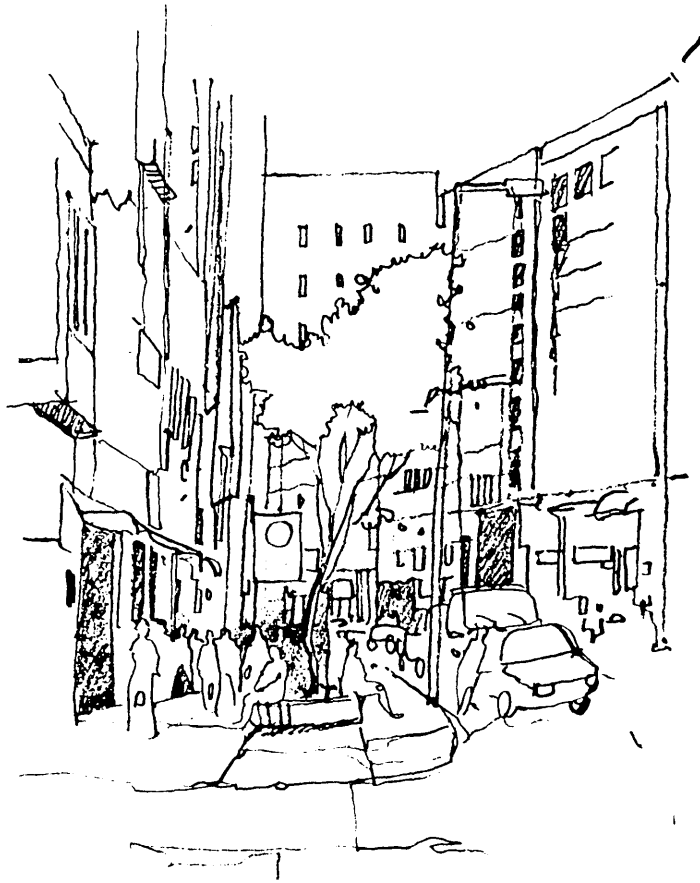
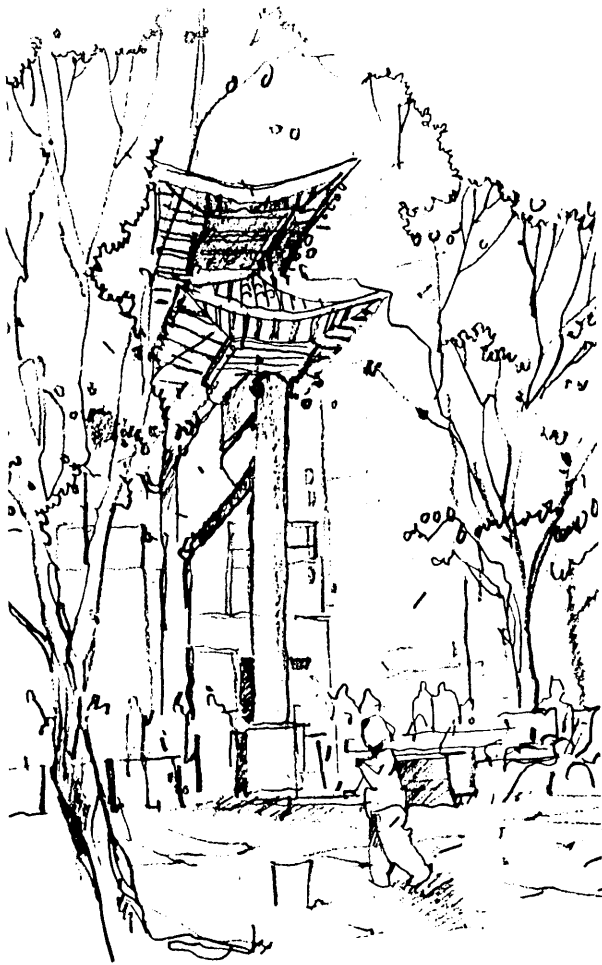


Figure 4.7 Sketch of proposed design change to center node at junction of Harrison Avenue and Kneeland Street.



Figure 4.8 Sketch of proposed design change to strengthen pedestrian activities on Harrison Avenue.



homogeneous character of Chinatown. All changes brought about by future development should serve to improve environmental quality and the district's role as a place of special identity in the regional context.

Growth within the district should ensure a positive financial impact on the economic status of the community. Small business interests should be preserved and protected from takeovers by larger cooperates. Boston Chinatown provides a rich mix of cultural and physical offerings, that should be retained. Venues for community interaction and cultural gatherings be supplemented.

The objective of all such small gestures is to enhance the vibrancy of the community and maintain its unique role in the cultural context of Boston.

Figure 4.9 Gateway Park, to be connected to the future Linear Park.

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