

**E d g e a s P l a c e :**  
**Building a Community Link in Boston's Chinatown**

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for making me feel loved even from far  
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dedicated to:  
**MOM**

# Edge as Place: Building a Community Link in Boston's Chinatown

by Janice Y.K. Li

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on 23 January 1998 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Architecture

## Abstract

*How does one inhabit an edge with two sides that are different in culture, everyday life, and scale?*

*How does one connect a physically fragmented community?*

*How does one design a building that identifies with the Chinatown community without applying the usual "pagoda" kitsch?*

This thesis takes Boston 2000, a urban development plan for the Central Artery Project, as a starting point for an exploration on the above design problems with special attention paid to the roles urban context and cultural issues play on architecture.

Thesis Advisor: Michael Dennis  
Title: Professor of Architecture







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*All photographs and drawings are property of the author unless otherwise noted*

*All text notes are cited as endnotes*



## 1. Introduction

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*Figure 1.1 (previous page): Wall ornament in San Francisco Chinatown.*

*Figure 1.2 (above): Public housing in San Francisco Chinatown.*

*Figure 1.3 (right): Boston Chinatown.*



From when the first wave of Chinese laborers arrived in the United States over a century ago, Chinatowns throughout the country have served as refuges for immigrants from all over Asia. Newly arrived immigrants choose to settle in Chinatowns because of the comfort they derive from seeing familiar faces and hearing familiar languages. Chinatowns are where these immigrants can find their first jobs and receive the necessary social services.

Chinatowns are important not only to the new immigrants who live there, Asian American living elsewhere also relate to Chinatowns as their cultural, social, economic and service centers. Every weekend, Chinatowns are crowded with Asian American who come to enjoy the traditional dim sum and to stock up on special ethnic groceries. Many of these people, though they may live elsewhere, have strong ties with Chinatown either through family or business relations.

In addition to Asian Americans, Chinatowns also attract others visitors with their authentic ethnic restaurants. The biggest source of income for Chinatowns is the restaurant industry. Physically, Chinatowns are characterized by their many restaurants and bakeries with their colorful signs in Chinese and English. These restaurants often employ traditional Chinese symbols as decorations. The symbols most often seen are dragons, pagodas, and flying eaves, painted in red and gold. While these symbols certainly invoke images of Asia, they often appear incongruous with their surroundings.(Fig. 1.1, 1.2)

Most Chinatowns (ex. Boston, New York City) are not built by Asian immigrants. Instead of building a community from scratch, these immigrants usually moved into a neighborhood that was abandoned by another ethnic group. Then, they proceeded to adopt the existing structures for their own uses and began to express their identity through physical additions. These additions are in the forms of signs and facade alterations, where traditional Chinese architectural features



**Fig. 1.4: The Lee Family Association Building in Boston Chinatown**

are applied onto the structures left behind by another group of occupants. As a result, an unique architectural style began to emerge as Chinatown's own style.(Fig. 1.3, 1.4)

This method of adding cultural symbols onto existing structures has been in use for the last century. As Asian immigrant population has been on the increase in this country since the 1970's, there is a necessity for Chinatowns everywhere to expand. What is the next step for Chinatown architecture when there is no more existing structures for the immigrants to adopt and transform? When there is a need for a completely new building in Chinatown, what should be the design approaches?



Certainly, new buildings have been designed and constructed in Chinatowns. These new buildings can be categorized into two groups: buildings designed with and without the Asian culture in mind. First, buildings that were designed without any consideration of the Asian culture tend to be public housing projects built in the 1970's. These projects were designed to be economical and efficient in construction and maintenance. They tend to be large scale concrete high-rises that often do not relate to the neighborhoods that they are built in, be it Chinatown or elsewhere. On the other hand, attempts have been made to incorporate the Asian culture into building designs. Often times, these projects reference traditional Chinese architecture in their planning and design.(Fig. 1.5) While these efforts to include cultural issues into design are commendable, it is debatable whether traditional Chinese architecture is an appropriate architectural reference in contemporary Chinatowns.

*Figure 1.5: Chicago Chinatown with the Sears Tower in the background.*



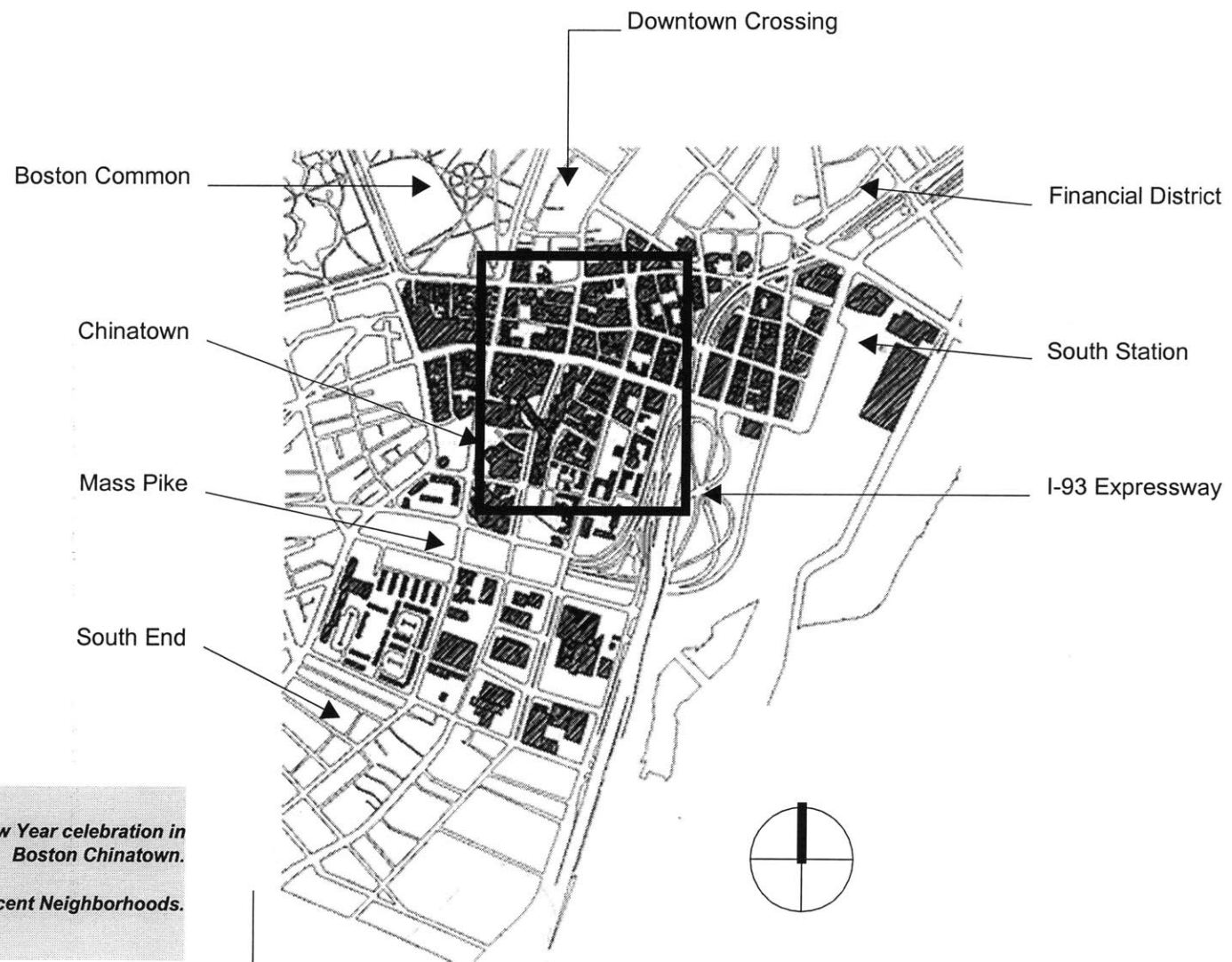




## 2 . B o s t o n C h i n a t o w n

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*Figure 2.1 (previous page): Chinese New Year celebration in Boston Chinatown.*

*Figure 2.2 (right): Chinatown and Adjacent Neighborhoods.*

## History of Boston Chinatown

In the mid-17th century, as trade began to develop between the United States and China, hundreds of Chinese emigrated to the U.S. as contract laborers in the building of the transcontinental railroads. When the constructions of these railroads were completed, these workers began to seek employment elsewhere in the country.<sup>1</sup>

In 1875, a group of 100 Chinese workers were brought to Boston from California to break up a shoe factory strike. When the strike was over, these workers moved on to other manual low-wage employment and began to settle in the area near South Station for the convenience of transportation.<sup>2</sup>

This historical core of Boston's Chinatown is bordered by Kneeland Street to the south, Essex Street to the north, Washington Street to the west and Surface Road to the east. (Fig. 2.3) Initially, this area was developed for middle class families. In 1840, construction of the South Station Terminal was completed and land values depreciated. Therefore, the original residents moved out of this neighborhood and were replaced by European immigrants. Later the elevated railroad was built along Washington Street, thus further depressing the real estate values and making it easier for the Chinese to buy and rent properties in this area.<sup>3</sup>

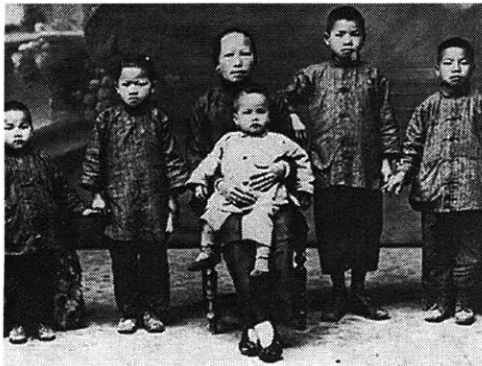
By 1890, it is estimated that 250 Chinese had settled in Boston. This small community consisted mostly of male adults who considered their stay in the U.S. a temporary one. Their goal was to earn enough money to send home to China and to return home eventually themselves. Because of this mentality, these immigrants never really considered the U.S. as their new home and hence, never embraced the American culture and institutions. Due to language barriers and racial



**Figure 2.3: Map of Chinatown - Showing Historical Core**

discrimination, these early immigrants lived and worked within the confines of Chinatown. They sought to be inconspicuous and tried to be invisible to the city. They had little interaction with the outside world and were content to live in the enclave that they had created for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Because of restrictive legislative measures and anti-foreign sentiments, this small community of Chinese immigrants grew slowly. The Exclusion Act of 1882 forbid any Chinese to enter the U.S. for 60 years with the exception of the wives and children of those who were already American citizens. This situation was reinforced by the Immigration Act of 1924 which refused citizenship to all alien Asians. It was after the Second World War that the immigration laws were relaxed for Chinese immigrants. In reaction to the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the U.S. established the Refugee Relief Acts that allowed more than 14,000 Chinese to come to the U.S., many of whom came to Boston.<sup>5</sup>

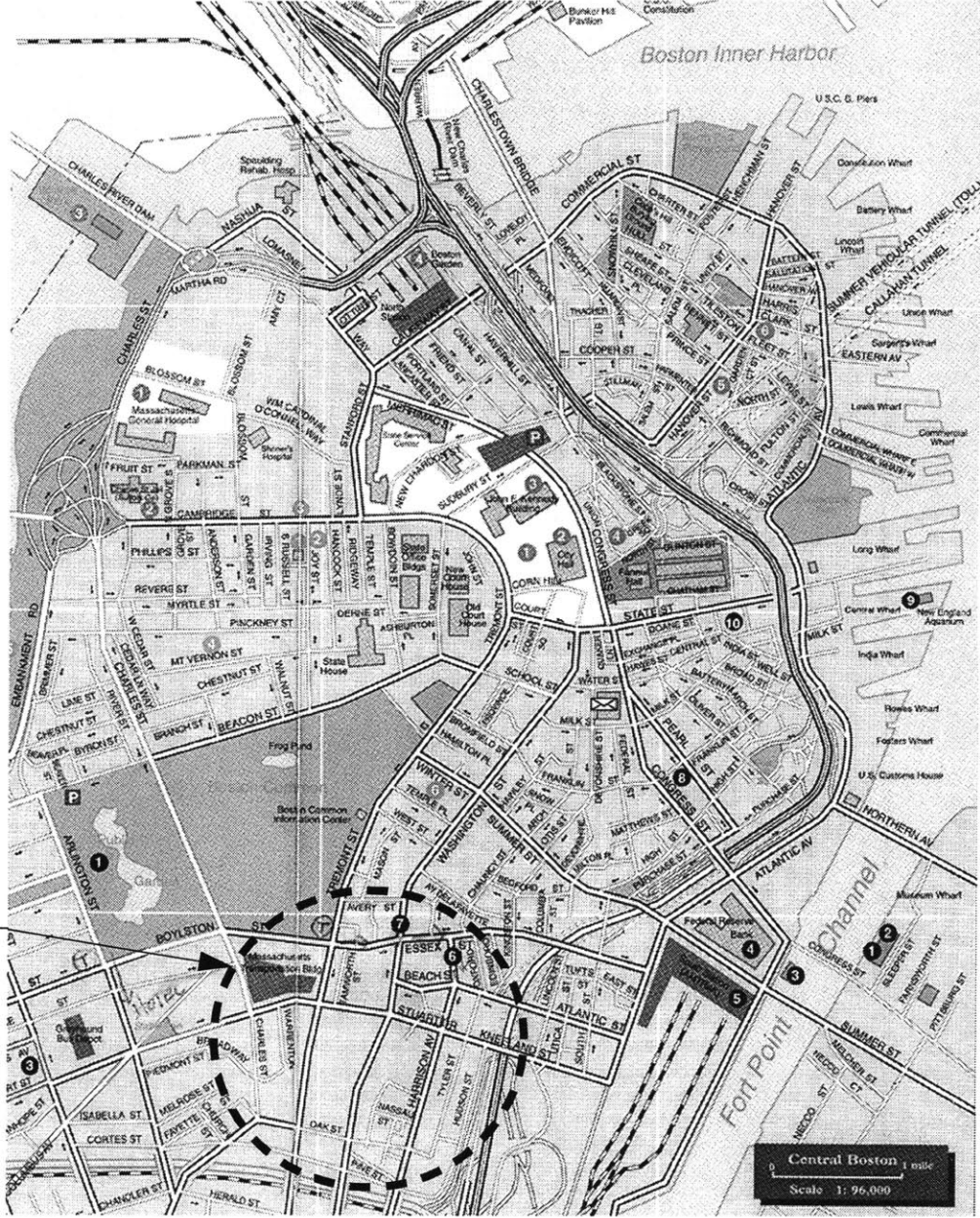


*Figure 2.4: Chinese immigrant family in Boston, c.1900.*

The Chinese population in Boston grew slowly at first but exploded after World War II. In 1910, it numbered only 1,100 and increased at the steady rate of approximately one hundred per decade to 1,600 in 1940. Then in 1960, the number jumped to 5,200 and 7,900 in 1970.<sup>6</sup> Today, there are a little more than 10,000 Chinese living in Boston and nearly half of that population lives in Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> As their population increased, some of the Chinese immigrants and their descendents began to assimilate themselves into the American society and moved into other neighborhoods. But nonetheless, Chinatown has remained the center of social and cultural activities for all Chinese in Boston.

Until only recently, Chinatown was essentially closed to outsiders. All matters were taken care of by relatives and friends. Adhering to the Chinese traditions, various family associations all but governed Chinatown. They settled disputes and helped new immigrants find housing and work.

Chinatown residents turned to these community groups for assistance and would rarely ask for outside help. Chinatown had become a self-contained community.<sup>8</sup> But as the community started to lose its properties to the city government and other powerful institutions, Chinatown's residents have learned to work together against outside encroachment.

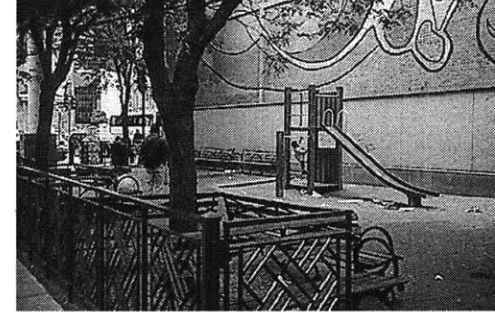


Chinatown

Figure 2.5: Boston City Map.

## Chinatown Today

Boston's Chinatown is the social, cultural, economic, political, and service center for not only its residents, but also Asian Americans throughout the city of Boston. For the past century, it has served as a refuge for immigrants from Asia. Today, despite problems in population density, low income level, and language barriers, Chinatown continues to grow, not only in size but also in its cultural and community life.



Currently, Chinatown is facing a serious problem in overcrowding and has an urgent need for affordable housing. While the population has increased over the years, from 1,500 in 1970 to more than 5,000 today, land and housing in Chinatown has been reduced by 50% due to various urban renewal projects, infrastructure constructions and institutional expansions.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1950's, large numbers of housing units were demolished for various urban renewal projects. Housing on both sides of Albany Street and Hudson Street were torn down for the construction of the I-93 Expressway. Further demolition for the Massachusetts Turnpike (Mass Pike) and the taking of several properties by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) on behalf of the Tufts-New England Medical Center (T-NEMC) took 1,200 housing units from Chinatown.(Fig. 2.7) As a result, within Chinatown, 78% of the residential units are overcrowded compared with a citywide figure of 8%.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.6 (above): Gateway Park**

**Figure 2.7 (bottom): Chinatown map.**

**I - Commercial Chinatown**

**II - Mass Pike**

**III - I-93 Expressway**

**IV - T-NEMC**

**V - Residential Chinatown**

Besides the lack of housing, Chinatown also lacks adequate green open space for the use of its residents. The only green space area developed for recreational use is Gateway Park, which is small in size and has minimal facilities.(Fig. 2.6) Many of the community's elderly have to walk all the way to the Boston Common for exercise. There is only one outdoor basketball court for the



youth in the community and its location is far from acceptable. It is bordered on all sides by high traffic streets and freeways, making it hard to access and is possibly the most polluted plot of land in Chinatown.<sup>11</sup>

Today, 40% of Chinatown's residents are recent immigrants. As an immigrant community, Chinatown provides much needed social services to its residents. Because of cultural and language barriers, many immigrants find themselves either unemployed or holding low income jobs. Nearly half of Chinatown's population does not speak English. Only 35% of its residents have completed high school and 9% have college degrees.<sup>12</sup> In order for these immigrants to have a better life, a wide range of social services are needed.

In addition to the 11 family associations, there are 16 social services providers and community organizations in Chinatown.<sup>13</sup> The services that they provide include English as a second language classes, vocational skills training, family counseling, health care education, and housing. Unfortunately, every one of these organizations lacks sufficient funding and are under staffed, resulting in long waiting lists for their classes and services. Many residents are uninformed of the services that are available to them because there lacks a efficient communication network in the community.

Even with the burden of the many problems mentioned above, the community of Chinatown is still thriving today. The restaurant industry, the largest income source for Chinatown, is on the rise as Asian cuisine is becoming more and more popular to the Boston public. The recent revival of the Theater District has also attracted theater-goers to venture into Chinatown for meals. In addition, due to the strong Asian economy, there is a considerable amount of investment coming into Chinatown from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In order to inform more people about Chinatown and



**Figure 2.8a, b: Chinese New Year celebration in Boston Chinatown.**



what it has to offer, a web site was recently constructed. Among the many features in the Boston Chinatown Web Site are a very thorough history on Chinatown and a list of its restaurants and bakeries. The site also announces cultural and community events like the annual Chinese New Year Festival and the Moon Festival, which attract visitors from all over Boston.(Fig. 2.8a,b)

There is no doubt that Chinatown is becoming more open to the “outside world”. It is no longer a closed community inhabited by ignorant immigrants who do not want to be involved with the rest of the city. The present situation in Chinatown is aptly described by the Chinatown Community Plan, “Chinatown is a community at a crossroads.”<sup>14</sup> Chinatown is now facing a number of urban development plans happening all around its neighborhood, i.e. the Central Artery Project and Mass Pike Air Right Study. These plans can either benefit Chinatown by placing the community at a vital spot in the city, or displace the community by raising its land value to a point where it is no longer affordable to the residents. In order to ensure a stable future for Chinatown, The Chinatown Community Plan was drawn up by the Chinatown/South Cove Neighborhood Council to help guide Chinatown in its future development.



*Figure 2.9: Banner in Boston Chinatown*

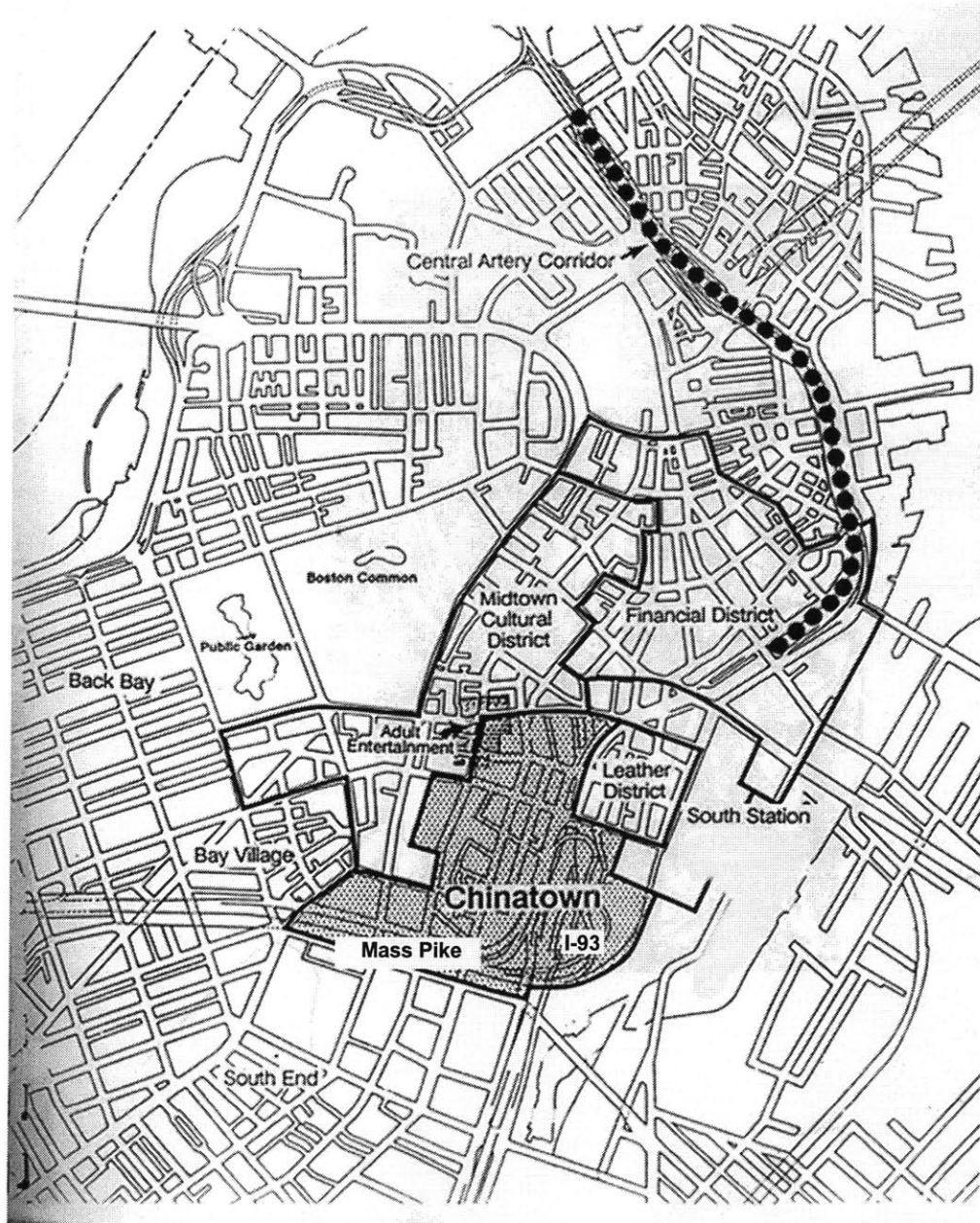


Figure 2.10: Chinatown Map showing physical barriers.

## Community Development in Chinatown

The city of Boston is currently conducting and planning several urban development projects, a number of which has a direct impact on the future of Chinatown. These projects will no doubt attract attention to Chinatown since the community is located in the center of the various development plans. This new phase of urban developments began with the disappearance of the physical barriers that have isolated Chinatown from the rest of Boston since the urban renewal era.

While Chinatown's population increased over the years, the area's physical size was unable to expand any further because of the physical barriers created by urban renewal projects. When Scollay Square, the old red-light district of Boston, was torn down in the early 1960's to make way for Government Center, the adult entertainment business, with the city's silent approval moved into the area northwest of Chinatown and became known as the Combat Zone.<sup>15</sup> For 30 years, Chinatown had to live with this notorious neighbor and all its crimes. Because of the presence of the Combat Zone, it was impossible for Chinatown's residents to move into this area. Together with Downtown to the north, the Expressway to the east, the T-NEMC and Mass Pike to the south, the Combat Zone acted as a wall that clearly separated Chinatown from the rest of the city.

(Fig.2.10)

Today, these physical barriers are slowly disappearing as new urban plans are made for this area. The city government has made tremendous progress in cleaning up the Combat Zone. In 1970's, there were 39 pornographic bookstores, strip joints and peep show parlors in Washington Street.<sup>16</sup> Only three are left today. As part of the Washington Street Economic Development Plan, grocery markets and trendy ethnic restaurants now replace these adult stores, with more theaters and

other cultural activities to come.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, there are the Central Artery Project, which will put the Southeast Expressway underground by the year 2004, and the Mass Pike Air Right Study which explores the potential in building construction above the Mass Pike. Over 30 acres of land will become available for real estate development, some of which will be located in Chinatown.<sup>18</sup>(Fig. 2.11) More importantly, these figurative walls that once physically isolated/protected Chinatown from its neighbors will disappear.(Fig. 2.12) It may be possible for Chinatown to have the opportunity and the space to expand into these new plots of land, thus alleviating its problem in overcrowding. But by the same token, such large scale redevelopment may also extend into Chinatown and land prices may become too high for housing or green space.

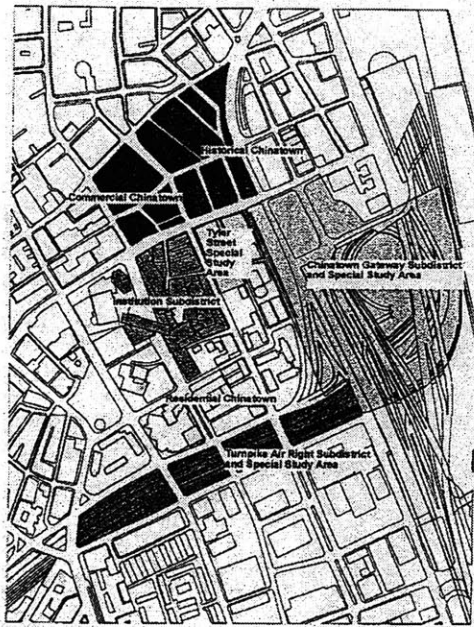


Figure 2.11: Map of future development plans.

Because of these changes and its proximity to the Financial District, the Boston Common and various major transportation nodes (South Station and the freeways), Chinatown has become a prime target for real estate developers. While more land may become available for the housing and open space that are urgently needed by Chinatown's residents, this land can also go to outside developers for more lucrative uses. If the residents want more land and housing for themselves, they will have to make their intention clear to the city's government.

Throughout all these changes to their physical environment, Chinatown's residents were not involved in making any of the decisions. The community felt powerless as these plans were sanctioned by the city government. All these years of isolation had caused the community to misunderstand the working of the American government. They did not realize that they too can participate in the planning of their community.

Starting in the 1960's, the T-NEMC, with the help of the BRA, has relentlessly expanded in

Chinatown, taking up land and housing that had originally belonged to the community. Faced with possible displacement from Chinatown, representatives from various community organizations negotiated a memorandum of agreement with the Mayor's office in 1970. This memorandum recognized the damage done by the highway constructions and T-NEMC's expansion and acknowledged the interests of the Chinese community in all property in Chinatown and in nearby vicinities (especially in South Cove, an area south of the Pike) not already owned by T-NEMC. But the legality of the memorandum was questionable and it did not offer full protection to the Chinatown community against further outside encroachment.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the memorandum of agreement that Chinatown had with the Mayor's office, T-NEMC continued to expand. In 1977, T-NEMC bought two factory buildings that were outside of the agreed upon boundaries in the memorandum. Eight hundred factory jobs that many Chinatown households depended on were put at risk. In fear of displacement, the community recognized the need for them to work together in order to get what they deserve. A coalition of community organizations negotiated a settlement with T-NEMC which included land for housing, money for scholarship funds and job training programs.<sup>20</sup>

A similar controversy occurred again in 1987. T-NEMC proposed to build a parking garage in Chinatown on a property that was promised to Chinatown by the BRA for a community center. Once again, the community was able to stop this plan through public protests and by voicing their complaints to various government agencies.<sup>21</sup> The community now has a better understanding in dealing and negotiating with the city government and the various outside institutions.

In the late 1980's, a number of Chinatown community organizations joined forces and together with the BRA's help, composed the Chinatown Community Plan. The goals of the plan are:

“1) to reinforce Chinatown as a distinct historical and cultural district by designating Chinatown as a historical district; 2) to prevent real estate speculation and direct and indirect displacement of residents and local businesses by protective zoning regulations; 3) to expand Chinatown with commercial uses toward the north and housing toward the south; 4) to exert community control over downtown/institutional expansion through monitoring and participating in the planning process with the city government; and 5) to provide more affordable housing in Chinatown by establishing Chinatown Housing Improvement Program (CHIP).”<sup>22</sup>

As a contribution to the Chinatown Community Plan, the BRA agreed to set aside all of its five available properties in Chinatown for housing developments.<sup>23</sup>

Today, Chinatown residents are becoming more and more active in the planning of their community as their understanding of the operation of the American government increase. Throughout the planning and construction phases of the Central Artery Project, Chinatown has been involved in the decision making process. The community was able to vote down a plan which would place a freeway exit ramp right in the residential neighborhood of Chinatown. From years of experience and painful lessons, Chinatown has learned how to empower its community and to become more concerned and assertive in community development issues.



*Figure 2.12: Aerial photograph showing how Chinatown is isolated by the freeways.*



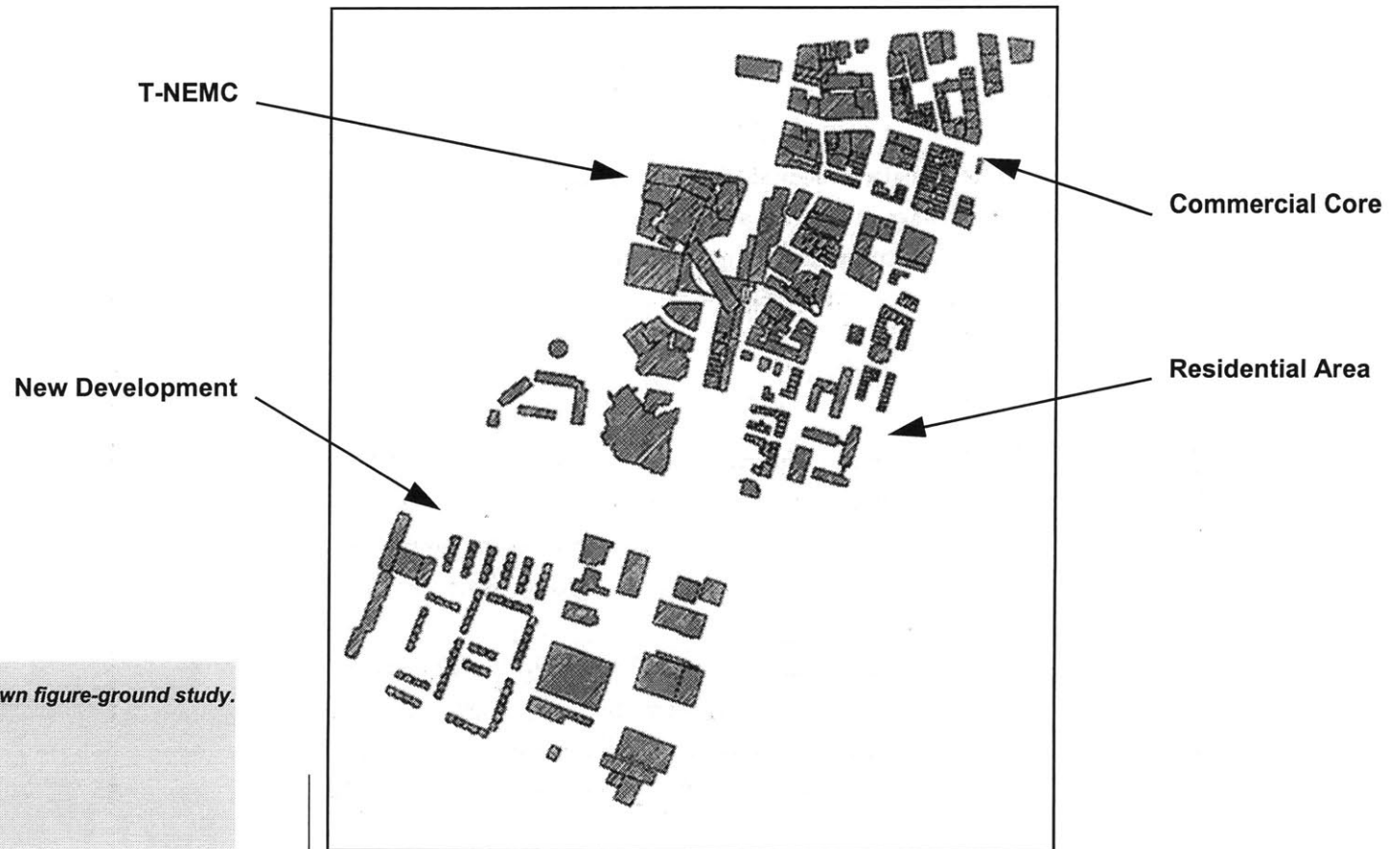


Figure 2.13: Chinatown figure-ground study.



## Urban Pattern of Chinatown

The construction of Mass Pike and I-93 Expressway had reduced the housing stock in Chinatown by 50% in the 1960's. Consequently, several housing projects were built in the 1970's to meet the increasing housing demand in Chinatown. As a result, the urban fabric of Chinatown was changed drastically and irrevocably. From a figure-ground study, Chinatown's historical core and new residential development area can be clearly identifiable as separate entities. (Fig.2.13)

The relationship between solid (buildings) and void (streets) in the historical core of Chinatown is very defined. It has a recognizable urban pattern formed by streets and city blocks. Whereas the new residential development is not only physically severed from the core by T-NEMC and Mass Pike, it also has a distinctively different urban composition. Buildings, instead of following a city block pattern, are scattered throughout this area. The solid pattern here has a less defined edge with the void.<sup>24</sup> The urban fabric of this part of Chinatown is fragmented and incoherent.

As a result, Chinatown now consists of two distinctively disparate parts with very different qualities of life. The busy streetscape that most people, either Chinatown's residents or outside visitors, have learned to associate with Chinatown can only be seen in the historical core. (Fig. 2.14-16) The streets are vital to the Chinese way of life. They are where people can socially interact with each other. The streets of Chinatown signify this neighborhood as a cultural enclave. Street activities give Chinatown its special characteristics and make this neighborhood unique from all others.

Today, none of the Chinatown streetscape quality can be found south of Kneeland Street. The new residential developments are characterized by vast empty plazas and streets. (Fig. 2.17-19)



Figure 2.14 (top): Tyler Street in commercial Chinatown

Figure 2.15 (bottom): Beach Street in commercial Chinatown

The scale, planning and architectural characteristics of the new residential development discourage the type of street activities that are common in the historical core. Not only is there a lack of liveliness, but it is also impossible to relate this area back to the historical core of Chinatown. There is a need to integrate these two parts of Chinatown in a more coherent manner through architecture and urban planning.



*Figure 2.16: Hudson Street in commercial core.*

*Figure 2.17: Hudson Street in residential area.*



*Figure 2.18 (left): T-NEMC to the left and Quincy Tower, elderly housing in Chinatown, to the left.*

*Figure 2.19 (above): Plaza of Tai Tung Village, public housing in Chinatown.*



3 . Site



Boston 2000 Chinatown Parcels

Project Site - Parcel 24

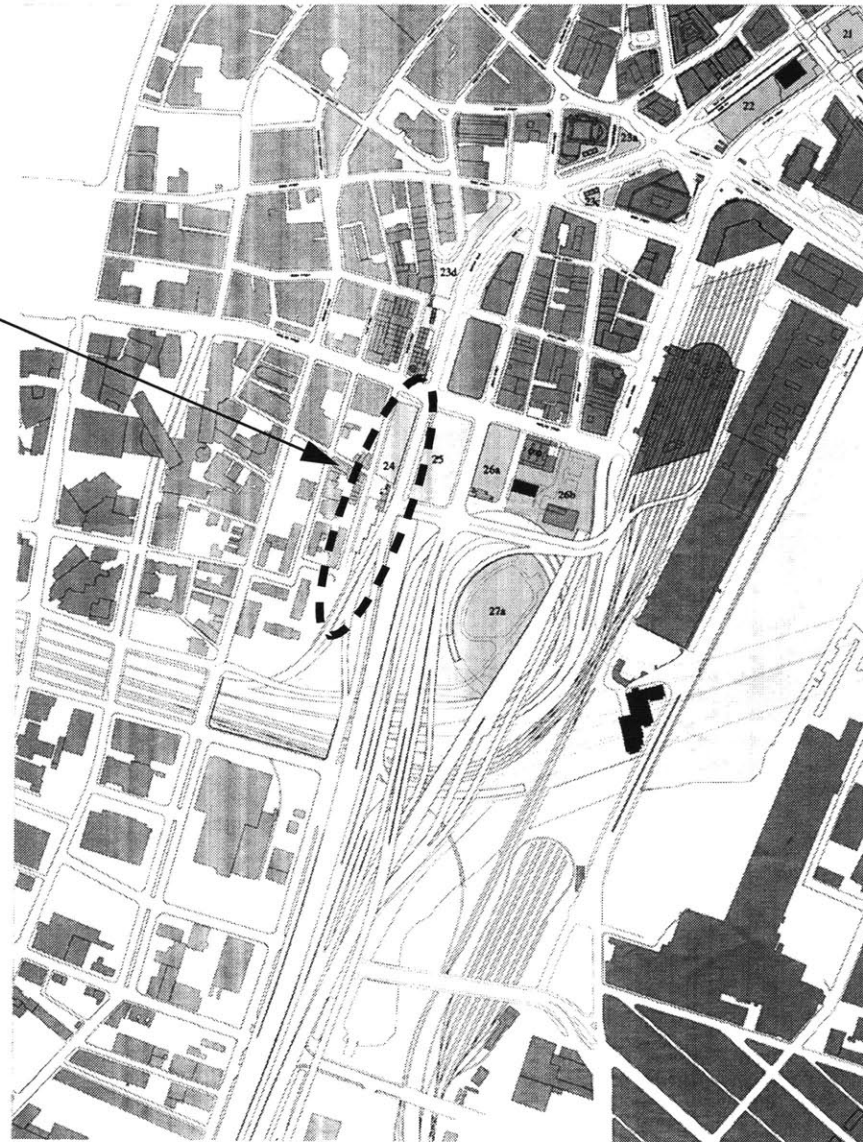


Figure 3.1 (previous page): Photograph of the project site, taken from across Kneeland Street.

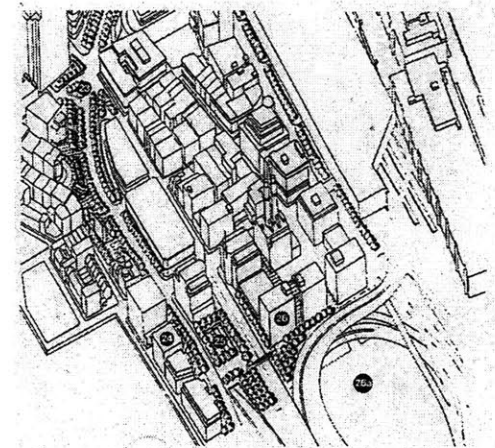
Figure 3.2 (right): Boston 2000 development map for Chinatown parcels.

## Central Artery/Boston 2000

In the year 2004, when the Central Artery Project in the city of Boston is scheduled for completion, 27 parcels of land will be available for development, some of which are in the neighborhood of Chinatown. This thesis proposes to design a community center, with functions and amenities that are urgently needed by the community of Chinatown, on a location that will help the project to define Chinatown's edge and its relationship with the city, emphasizing on the projection of an updated image of Chinatown. In addition, the proposed project have the potential to act as a link between Chinatown's historical core and residential area, which are currently separated both in their urban fabric and architectural styles.

Parcel 24 in Boston's Chinatown is the site for this thesis.(Fig. 3.2) The site is bordered by Kneeland Street to the north, a future surface road to the east, a future expressway ramp to the south and Hudson Street to the west. Parcel 24 and its neighbors have the potential significance as the "Gateway" to both Chinatown and Boston. As visitors drive into downtown Boston from the south on the Expressway, this site and its neighbors will be the first thing that they will see, signaling the entry into the core of the city.

According to Boston 2000, a urban development plan designed for the Central artery, Parcel 24, along with 25, 26, and 27A, are designated as the Chinatown Gateway Special Study Area with a height limit of 80'/100' and an FAR of 6/7.(Fig. 3.3) It is very likely that these parcels may also be developed as a Planned Development Area with more generous height limits (100-300 feet) and FAR 7-10. Current zoning plans call for "a comprehensive plan with urban design guidelines to address the transition between residential areas and development at South Station, encourage the creation of housing, open space plan for Chinatown Gateway, and encourage neighborhood retail

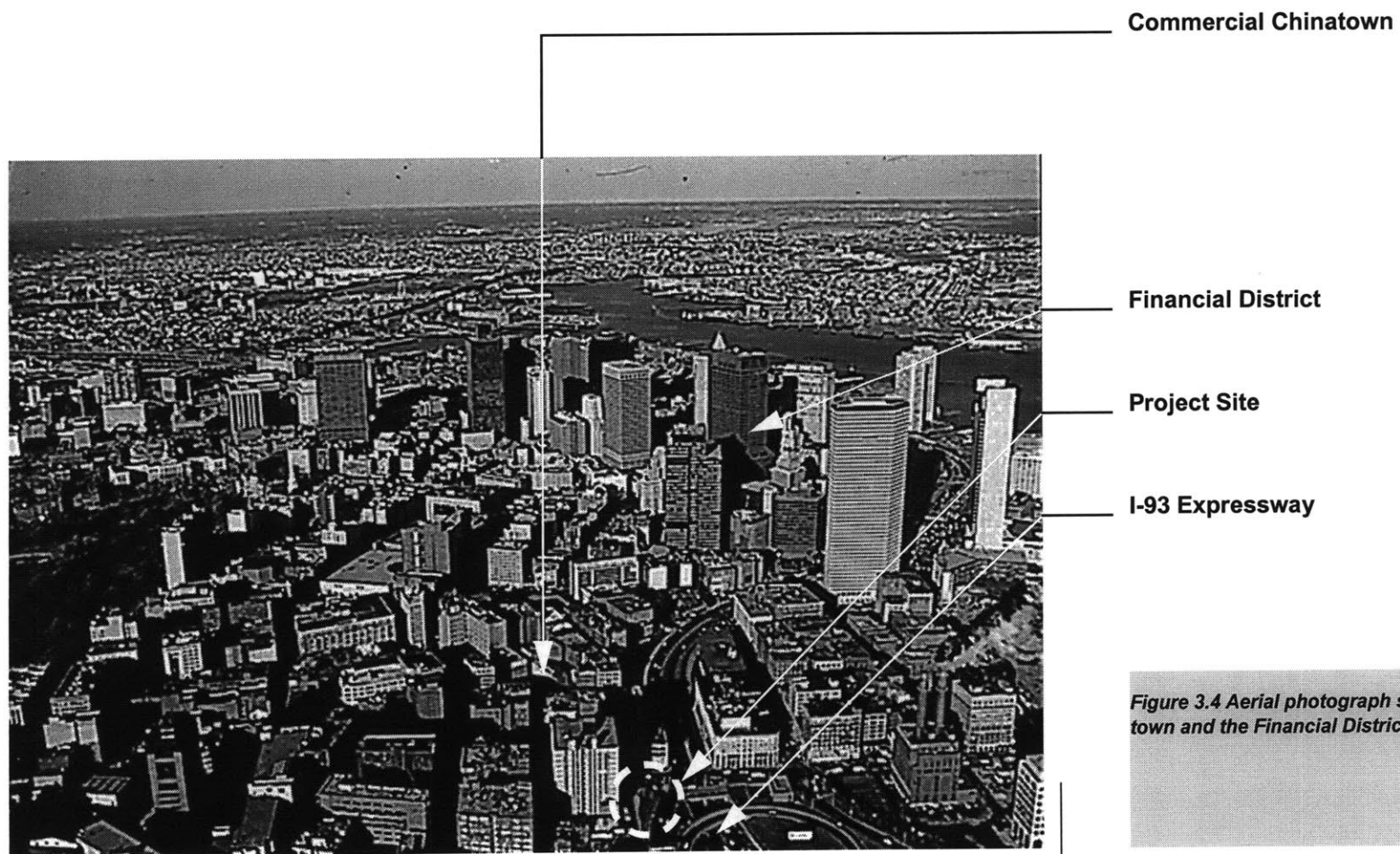


**Figure 3.3 - Boston 2000's proposed scheme for Chinatown parcels.**

use.”<sup>25</sup>

Parcel 24 is at the eastern edge of Chinatown, connecting Chinatown to the Leather District to the east and the Financial District to the north.(Fig. 3.4) Given its high level of visibility, this site is ideal for the purpose of presenting a new image of Chinatown to the city. In addition, Parcel 24 is situated between the historical commercial core of Chinatown and the residential area. It has the potential to link the two parts together through its uses and design. Therefore, this thesis is focused on the design of a community center on Parcel 24 with mostly community facilities, commercial uses on the ground floor and a youth hostel on the upper floors. As for the need for open space, there are already three parcels allocated for that purpose to the north of Parcel 24. Therefore, green open space will only take up a small amount of space on Parcel 24.





*Figure 3.4 Aerial photograph showing Chinatown and the Financial District*

**Commercial Chinatown**

**Project Site**

**Residential Chinatown**

**Mass Pike**

**I-93 Expressway**



*Figure 3.5: Aerial photograph.*



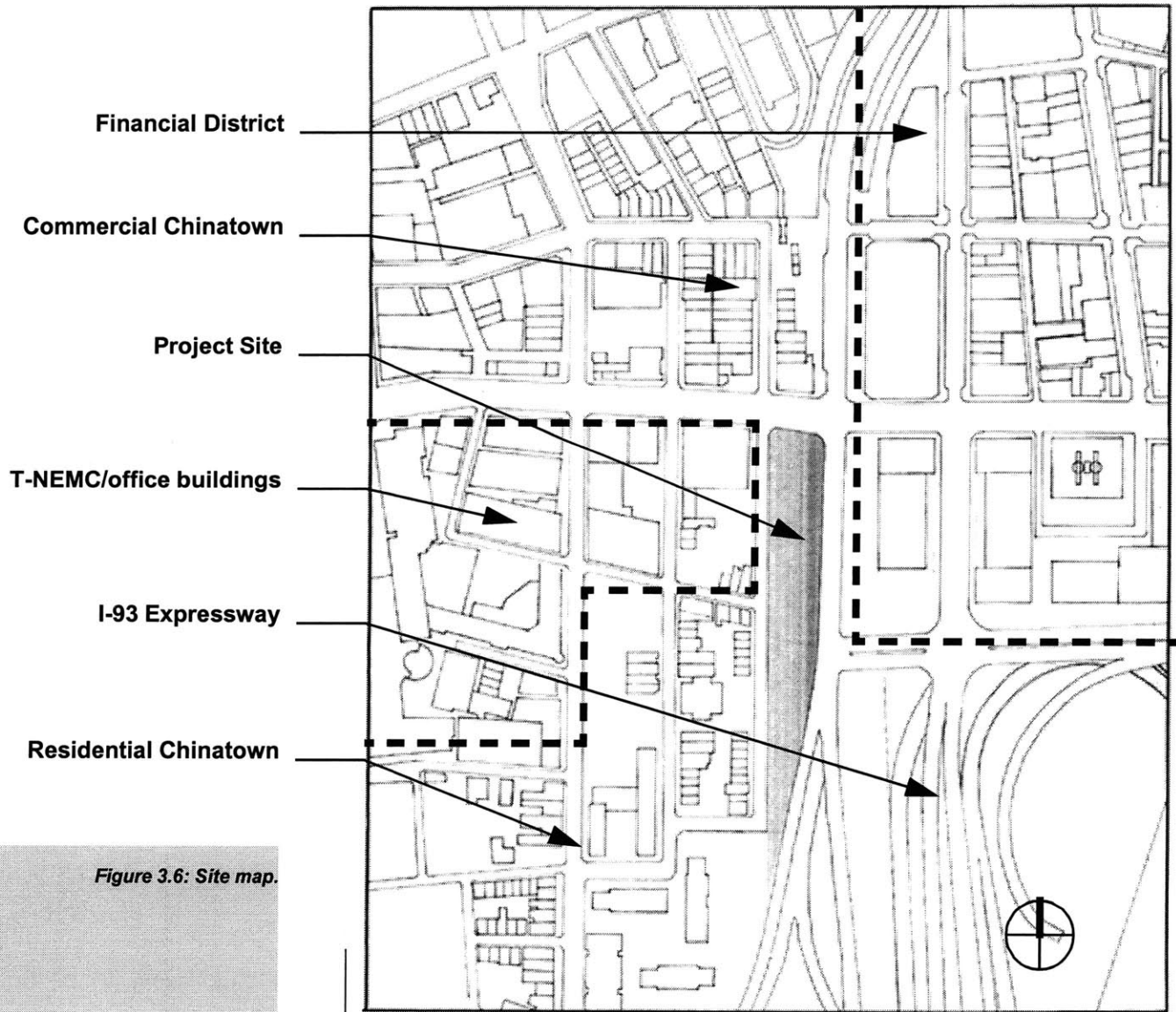


Figure 3.6: Site map.

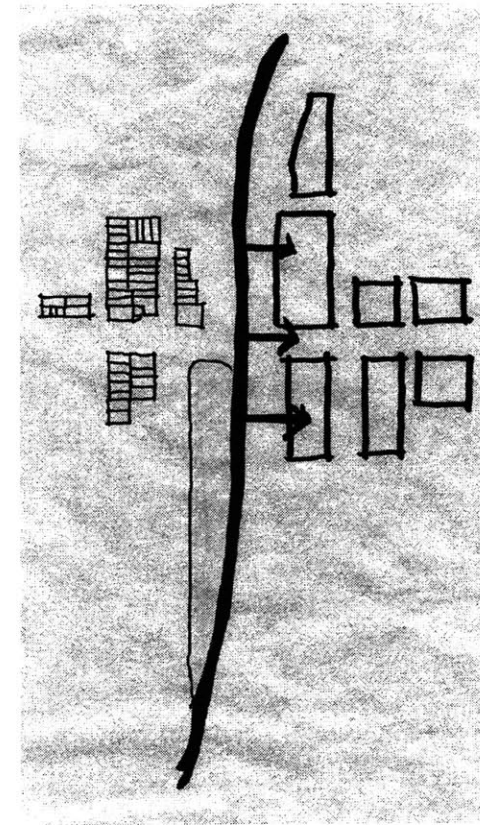
## Site Analysis

Because of the unique location of Parcel 24, it became quite a challenge to find the right programs and architectural forms that are appropriate to the site. In order to fully grasp the dynamics of the site, one needs to understand the power of each of the urban forces that is acting on the site, both cultural, social and physical.

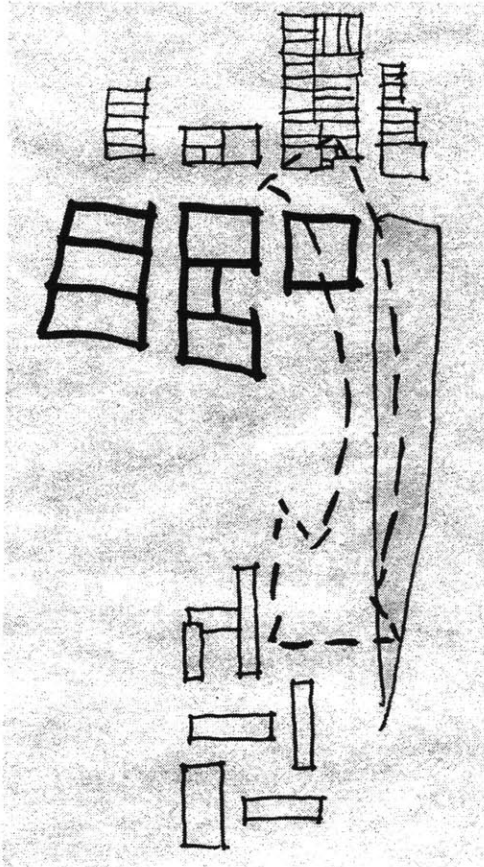
Located at the edge of Chinatown, Parcel 24 is a sliver of land (90' x 600') that will come into existence when the Central Artery Project is completed in 2004.(Fig. 3.6) This site truly exemplifies the meaning of “edge” on the strength of its distinct location. Physical, cultural, and social conditions differ drastically from one side of the site to the other.

What makes this site so powerful is the tension created by the two different cultures that exist on its two sides; an ethnic minority (Chinese) on one hand and a dominant majority (American) on the other.(Fig. 3.9) How does one reconcile or contrast these two cultures in architecture? In addition, the design will also need to address the social issues involved. Chinatown is a poor ethnic community which has been taken advantage of by the city government for years, while its neighbor on the other side of the site, the Financial District, has the money and power to “befriend” the city government. With the various ongoing urban development plans, displacement is a very possible future for the Chinatown community. Can that be prevented through architecture and programming?

Another distinction between the two sides of this edge is the building scale.(Fig. 3.7) The edge faces 3-story residential row houses on the Chinatown side; tall office buildings and freeway infrastructure on the Financial District side. The design will need to confront this issue and come



**Figure 3.7: Site analysis sketch diagram.**



**Figure 3.8 (above): Site analysis sketch diagram.**

**Figure 3.9 (opposite page): Conceptual Collage.**

up with a solution. In addition to having the characteristics of an edge, Parcel 24 can also serve as a connection in Chinatown. Currently, Chinatown has two very distinct urban fabric.(Fig. 3.8) As mentioned earlier, commercial Chinatown is vastly different from residential Chinatown in streetscape, scale and architecture. Also, these two parts are being cut off from each other by the large scale buildings of T-NEMC and other office high-rises. The site is located strategically so that it runs from the commercial core to the residential area. Therefore, the design of the site will have to reflect this possibility.

Parcel 24 is a difficult site to design for because of its physical features. It is wedged between a Mass Pike on ramp and a maze of freeways on one side and a quiet residential street on the other.(Fig. 3.10, 3.11) Therefore, some kind of a sound and noise barrier would have to be considered in the design of this site. Additionally, the Mass Pike on ramp slowly slopes up from Kneeland Street, reaching the height of 20 feet before sloping down again to reach Mass Pike. That means a retaining wall at least 20 feet high will be placed along the on ramp side of the site, limiting sunlight and view for the site at ground level.(Fig. 3.13)

Considering all the diverse and difficult features of Parcel 24, finding the right uses for it is half of the battle toward generating a design.







*Figure 3.10 (top): Residential row houses on the Chinatown side of the site*

*Figure 3.11 (bottom): Mass Pike on ramp on the freeway side of the site.*





*Figure 3.12 (top): Photo collage taken from the site showing view toward the Financial District.*

*Figure 3.13 (bottom): Photo collage taken at the site from across Hudson Street, showing existing freeway retaining wall.*

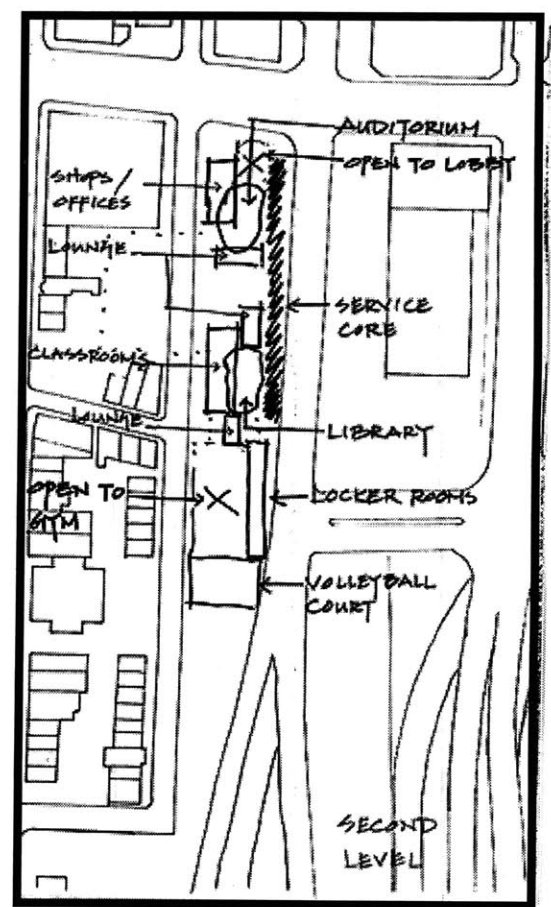
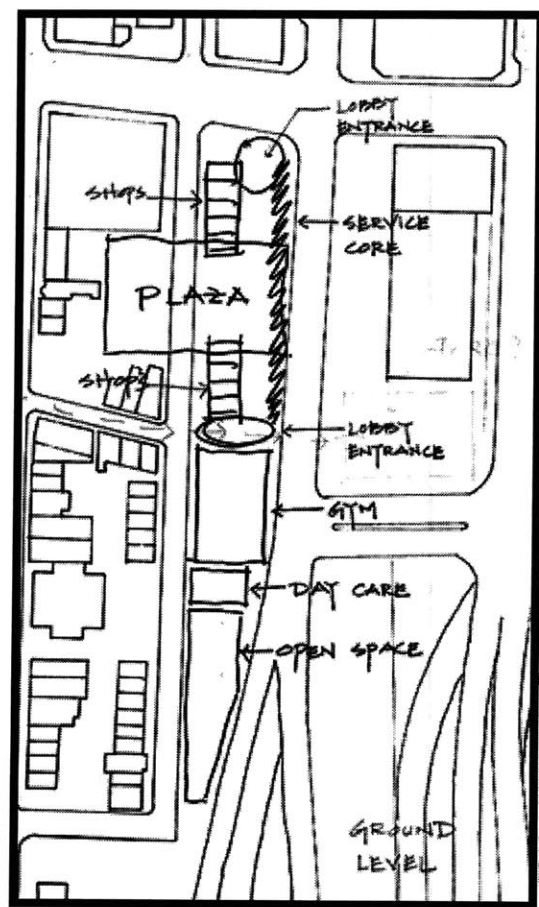


4 . P r o g r a m



Figure 4.1 (previous page): Night market in Hong Kong.

Figure 4.2a,b,c,d,e: Use diagrams

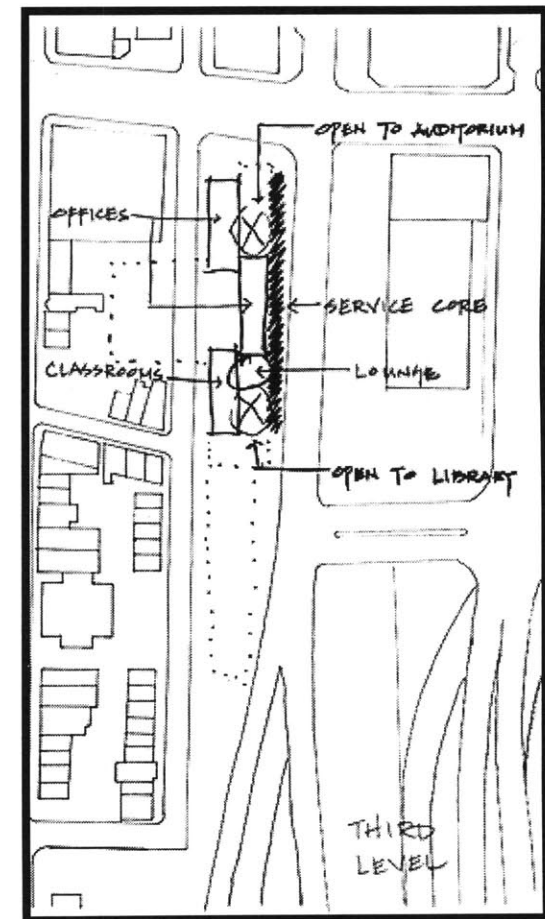


Due to the diverse, powerful, and often conflicting urban forces that directly affect the thesis site, a program has to be carefully formulated to utilize the site to its fullest potential. The Boston 2000 planning committee is currently studying the possibility of having housing and commercial uses for Parcel 24. Although Chinatown is in urgent need of more housing units for its community, I consider housing to be an inappropriate program for this site.

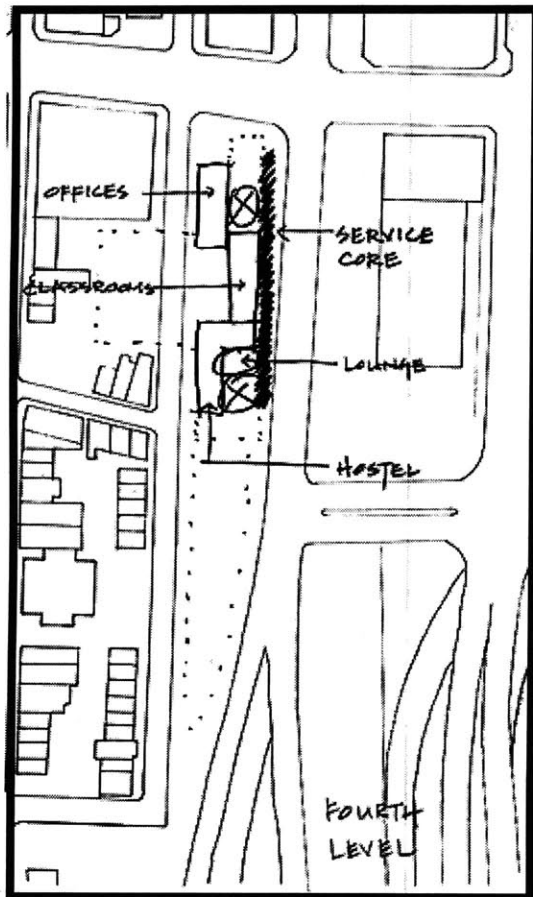
Bordered on one side by a Mass Pike on ramp and the I-93 Expressway, Parcel 24 is hardly an suitable site for housing. Even without an environmental study, one can imagine the noise and air pollution generated by the freeways cannot be healthy for people, especially when they have to live right next door to it. Therefore, housing was ruled out as a possible program almost from the very beginning.

Although housing may not be a fitting program for Parcel 24, the other program, commercial uses, should definitely be considered. One of the ingredients that contributes to the lively streetscape in the commercial core of Chinatown is the stores and restaurants. By having a high concentration of these commercial uses, the core of Chinatown becomes a place frequented not only by the residents, but also outside visitors. The residential part of Chinatown, on the other hand, lacks the active streetscape seen in the commercial core. By designating commercial uses along the street side of the site, more activities may began to spread into residential Chinatown. And as the site is located between the commercial core and the residential area, commercial uses can also help link the two parts together by offering a more coherent streetscape.

The size of Parcel 24 is too large to have only commercial uses. A mixed use program is more appropriate. I propose that the additional program should be a community center. As an immigrant community, Chinatown needs a wide range of social services to help its residents to adjust to their



new country. Immigrant orientation programs and legal rights services inform residents of their rights and civic duties. And because of the language problem that many immigrants have, classes in English and vocational skills training are needed for both adults and children. Chinatown's demographic consists of a large percentage of elderly people. Therefore, health care and elderly services are also crucial to the community. And as many residents holds low income jobs, most households require both parents to be working and as a result, child care and youth programs are needed. There are many social organizations and family associations in Chinatown that are established specifically to help the residents with the above problems. But most of the residents are not aware of the availability of these services. Presently, these organizations are scattered physically throughout Chinatown and are often hard to locate. And among these organizations, they lack coordination and communication. Therefore, having a community center where all these services can be centralized and visible to the community can raise the level of effectiveness of these organizations.

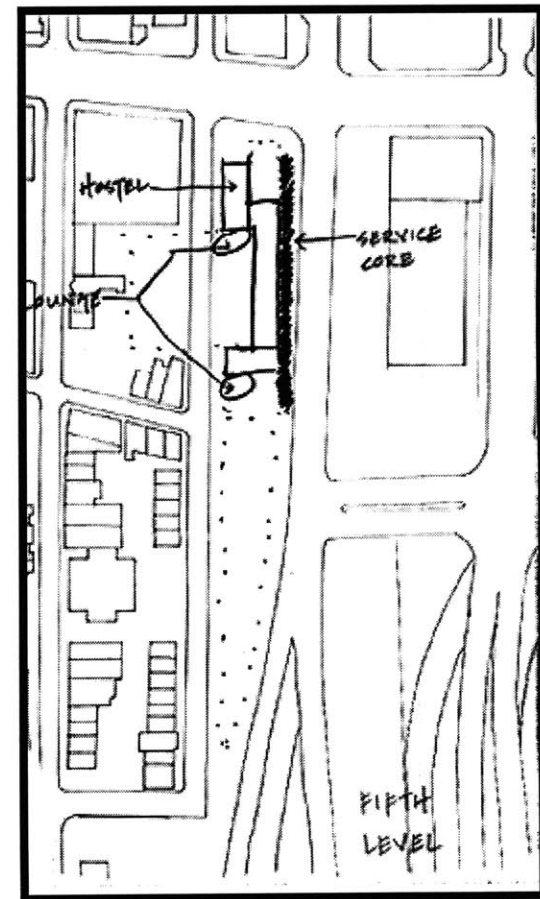


A centralized community center will provide a permanent home, quality facility, and expansion opportunity for several major social service providers in the neighborhood. The South Cove YMCA can finally move out of its current dilapidated facility - a "bubble" erected over 20 years ago which was meant to be temporary. Other agencies like the Asian American Resource Workshop and the Chinese Progressive Associations can move inside the neighborhood from their current locations in some nondescript buildings in the Leather District and become more accessible to the community. Programming use for these organizations include child care, counseling offices, classrooms, medical services, fitness and exercise rooms, multiple use conference rooms, library and resource center, arts and crafts workshops, game rooms, and a gymnasium.

Besides convenient community facilities, Chinatown also lacks adequate amount of open space. I would like to propose that the community center should take over the parking lot located on the

other side of Harrison Street. If the South Cove YMCA is housed in the community center, then its existing facility (the “bubble”) next to the parking lot can then be taken down. The resulting empty space and the parking lot can then be used as an outdoor plaza, where open air market and cultural events like the Moon Festival and the Chinese New Year celebration can take place. On these occasions and possibly during weekends when there are heavy pedestrian traffic, Harrison Street can be closed off from Kneeland Street to Oak Street to provide a car free zone for Chinatown residents and visitors to enjoy the plaza and the community center. By packing a variety of uses into the design and being centrally located, the community center can strive to be a place where residents would stop by everyday on their way to work, school, or grocery shopping.

To plan and design a community center that truly represent and serve Chinatown, we also need to consider the issues of its image, relationships with the city, as well as its own urban fabric. More importantly, we need to re--think what architecture “style” best represent the common heritage shared by the residents. In this case, design considerations for a Chinatown community center should include the projection of an updated image of Chinatown. Chinatown is no longer a closed community inhabited by immigrants who do not want to be involved with the city. Soon, Chinatown will be in the center of activities as the various urban development plans are being carried out. The community center can then act as an anchor for the community so that it will not be displaced amidst all the development activities.



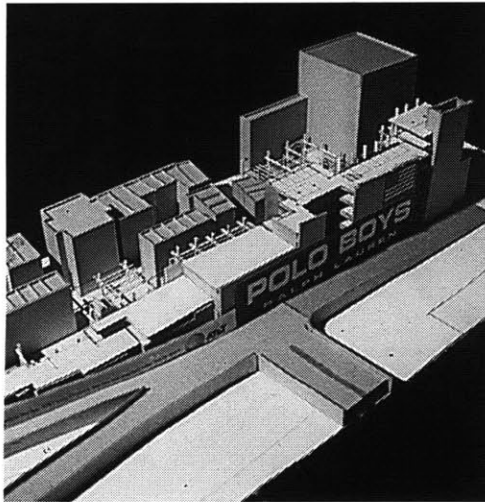




5 . D e s i g n

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**Continuous vs. Fragmented**

*Figure 5.1 (previous page): Elevation Relief  
1/32" = 1'-0"*

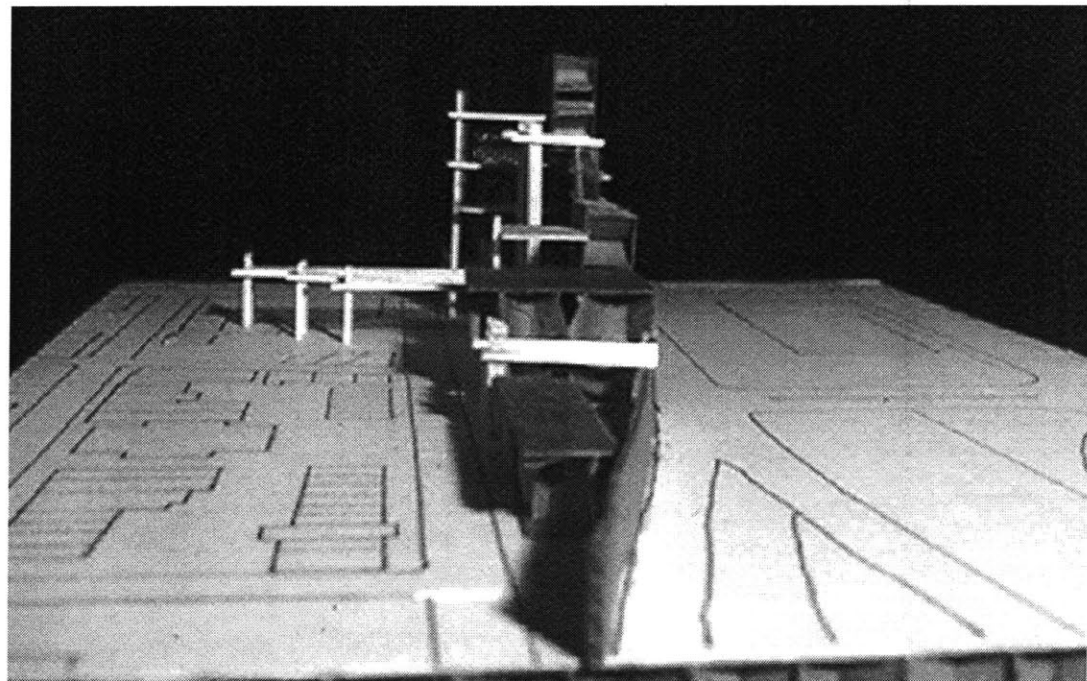
*Figure 5.2 (above): Sketch model 1/32" = 1'-0"*

*Figure 5.3 (right): Conceptual Model 1/50" =  
1'-0"*

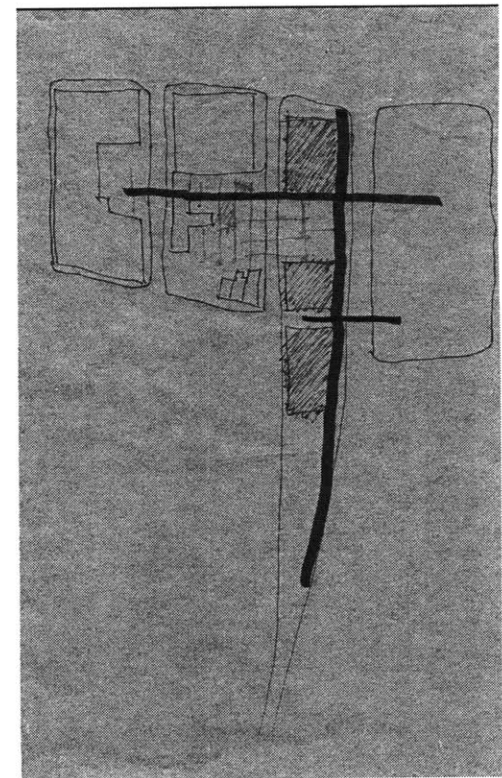
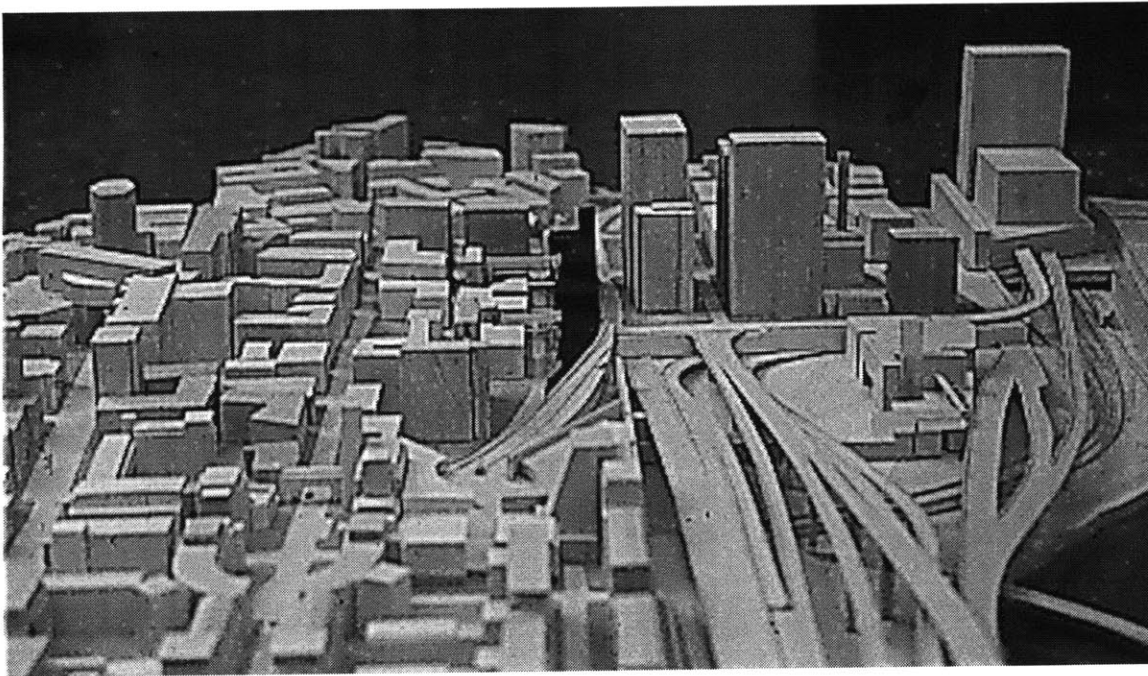
**City Scale vs. Community Scale**

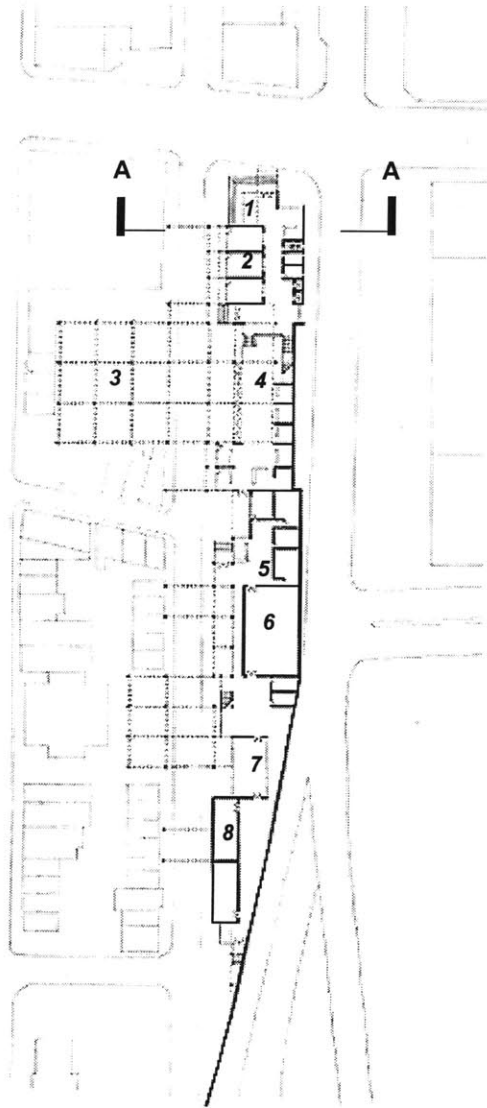
*Figure 5.4 (opposite left): Site Model 1:1000*

*Figure 5.5 (opposite right): Conceptual Sketch*



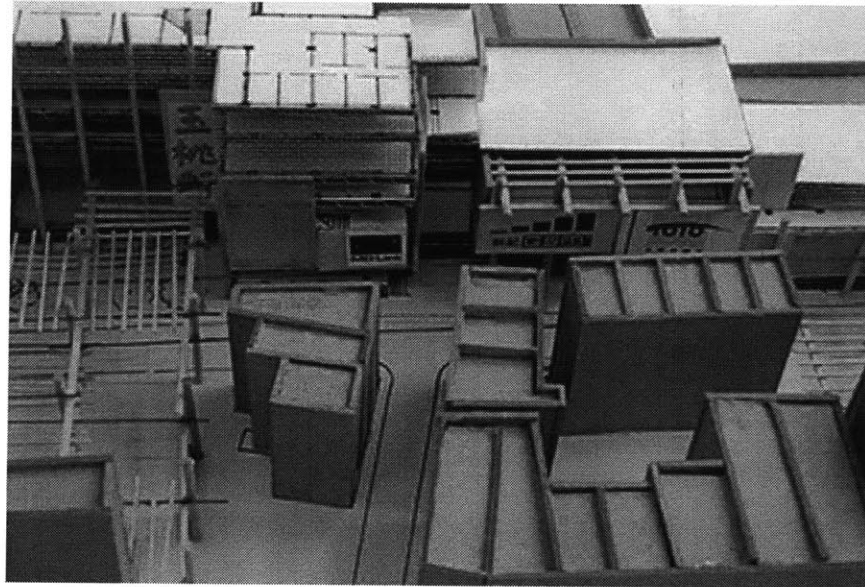
*How does one inhabit an edge with two sides that are different in culture, everyday life, and scale?*

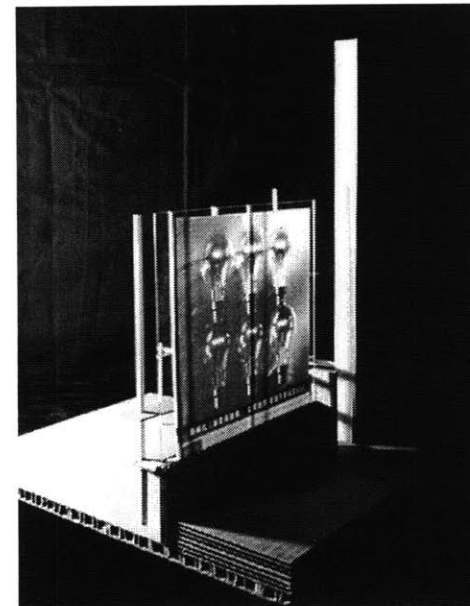
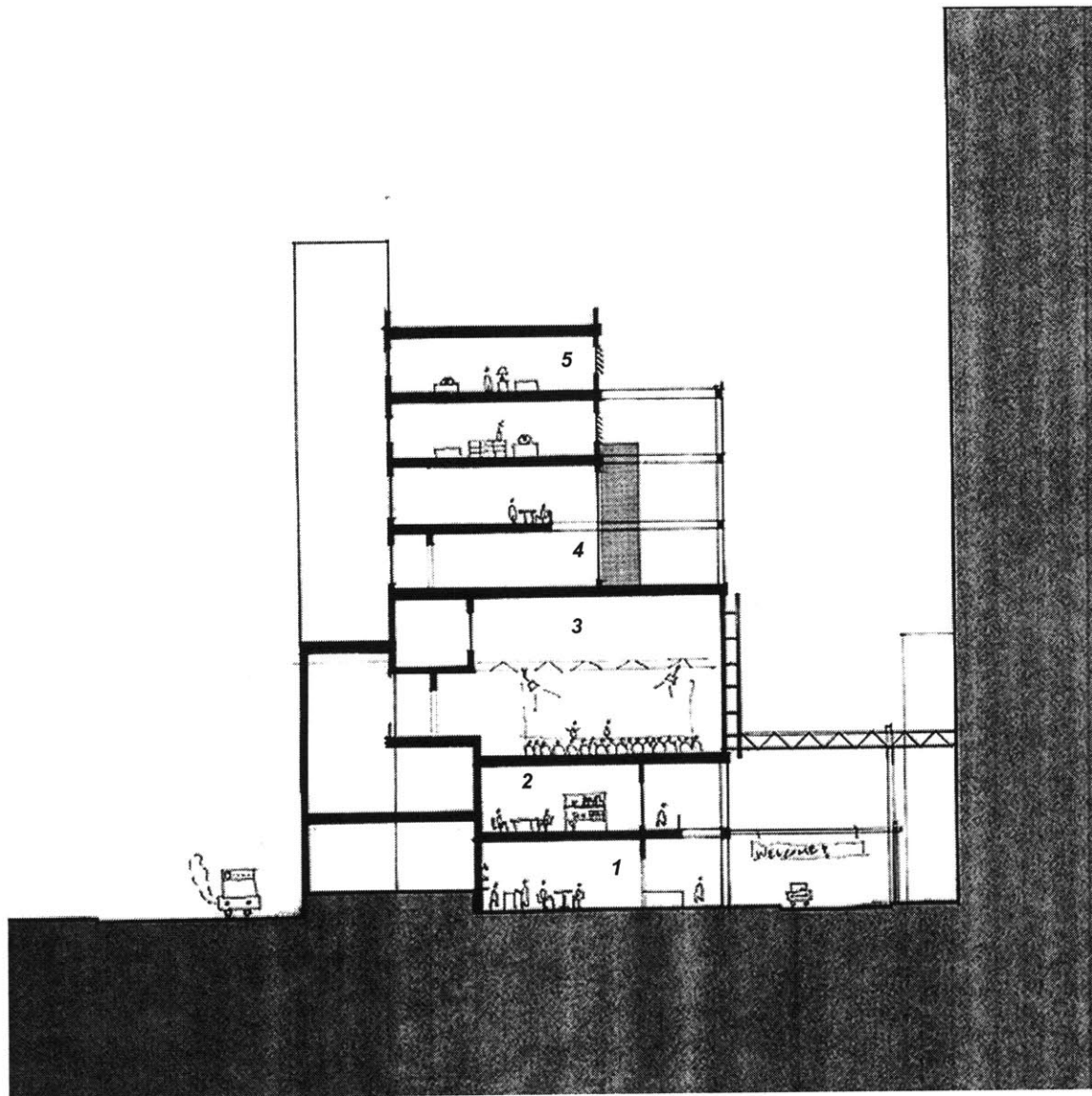




**Ground Floor Plan:**

- 1. Hostel Lobby
- 2. Stores/Cafe
- 3. Market Plaza
- 4. Food Court
- 5. Locker Rooms
- 6. Volleyball Court
- 7. Exercise Room
- 8. Racketball Courts





**Opaque vs. Translucent vs. Transparent**

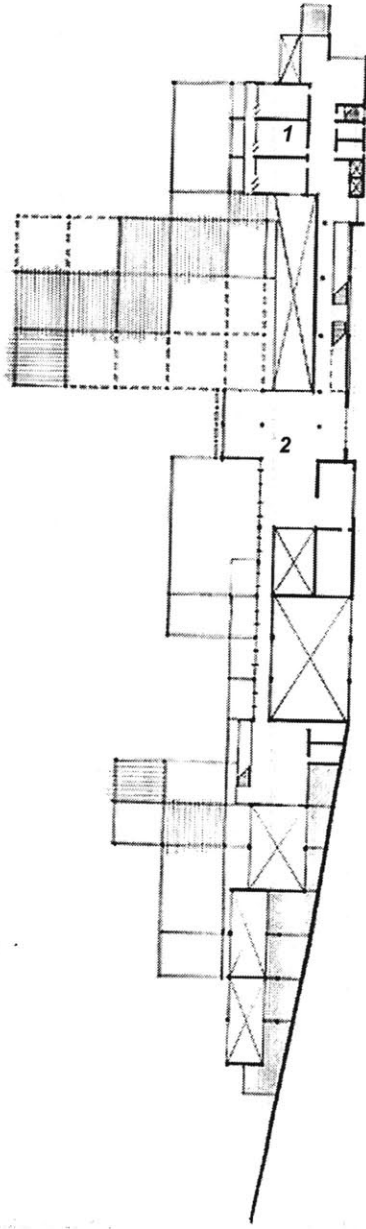
**Figure 5.6 (opposite left): Ground Floor Plan**

**Figure 5.7 (opposite right): Sketch Model 1/32" = 1'-0"**

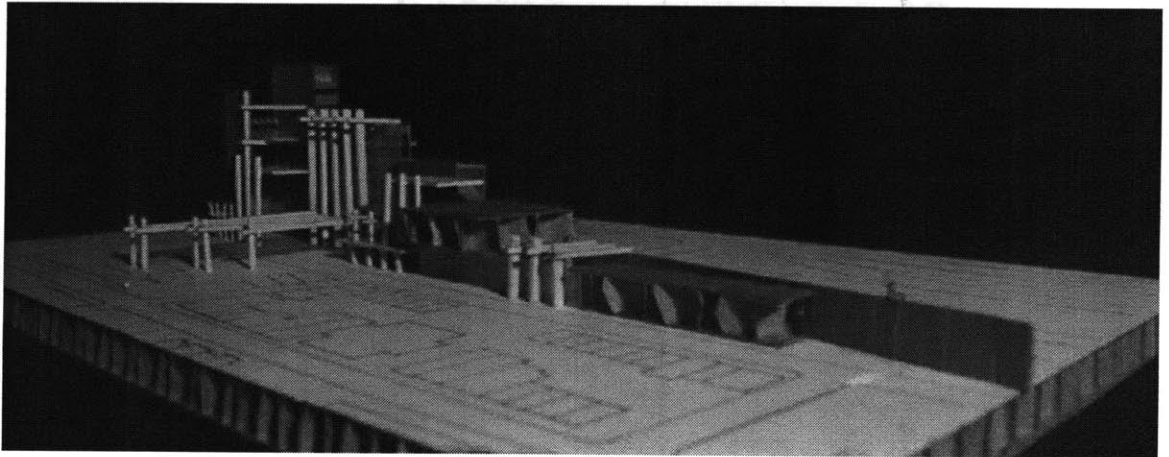
**Figure 5.8 (above): City Wall Study Model 1/8" = 1'-0"**

**Figure 5.9 (left): Section A-A**

- 1. Cafe
- 2. Office
- 3. Auditorium
- 4. Classrooms
- 5. Hotel

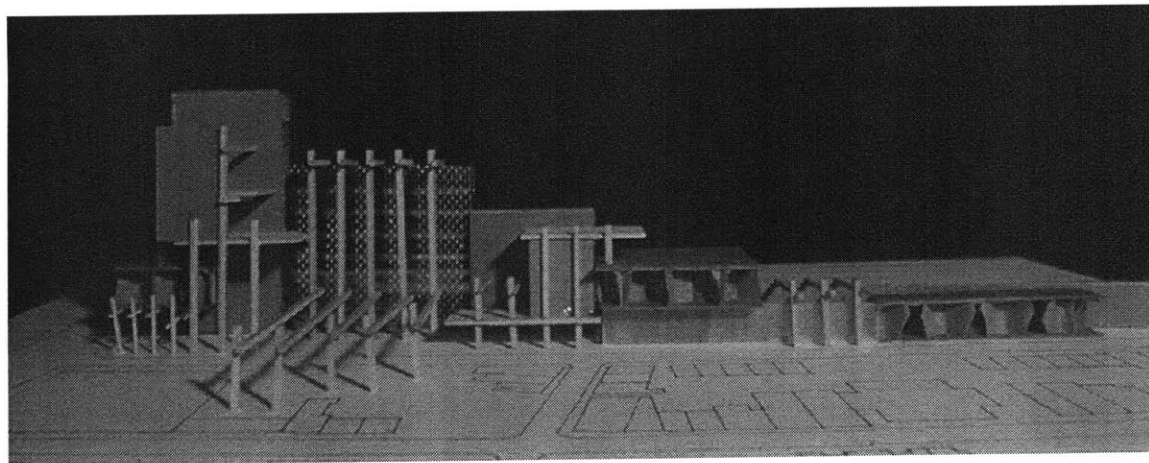
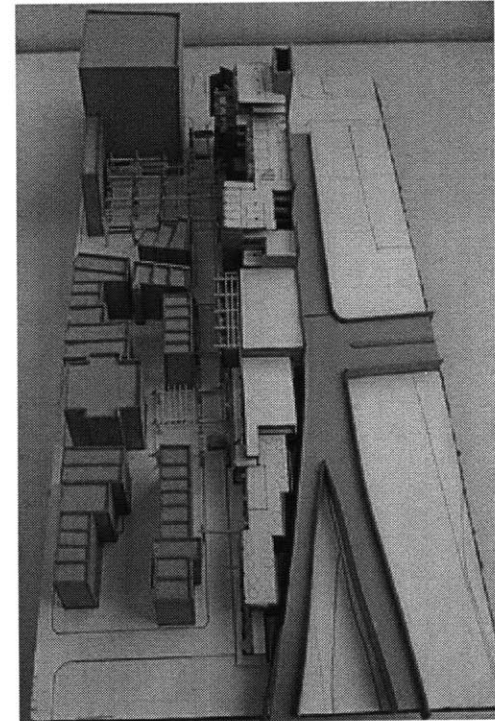
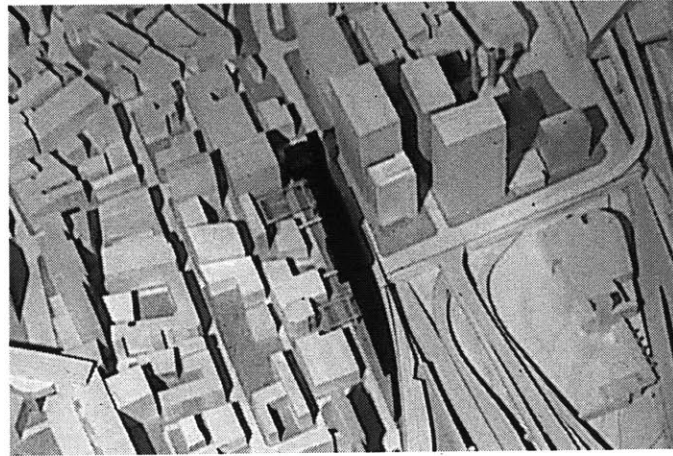


**Second Floor Plan:**  
1. Offices  
2. Library





*How does one connect a physically fragmented community?*



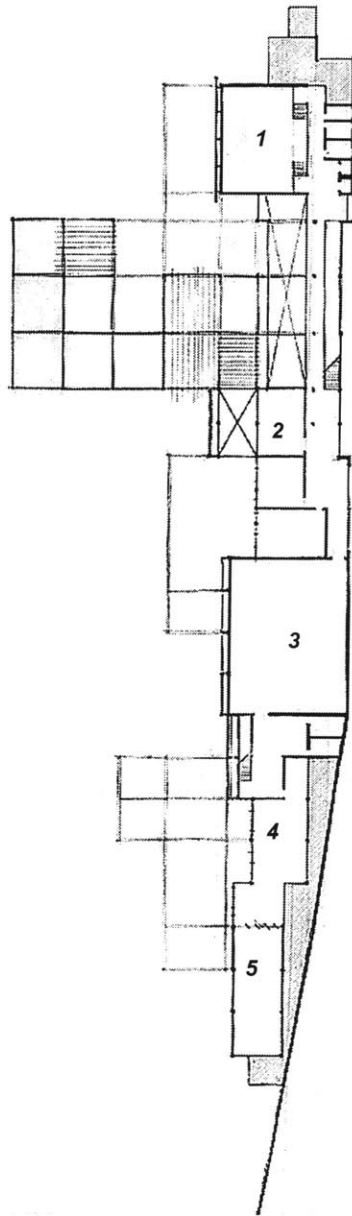
**Scale/Use/Location**

*Figure 5.10 (opposite left): Second Floor Plan*

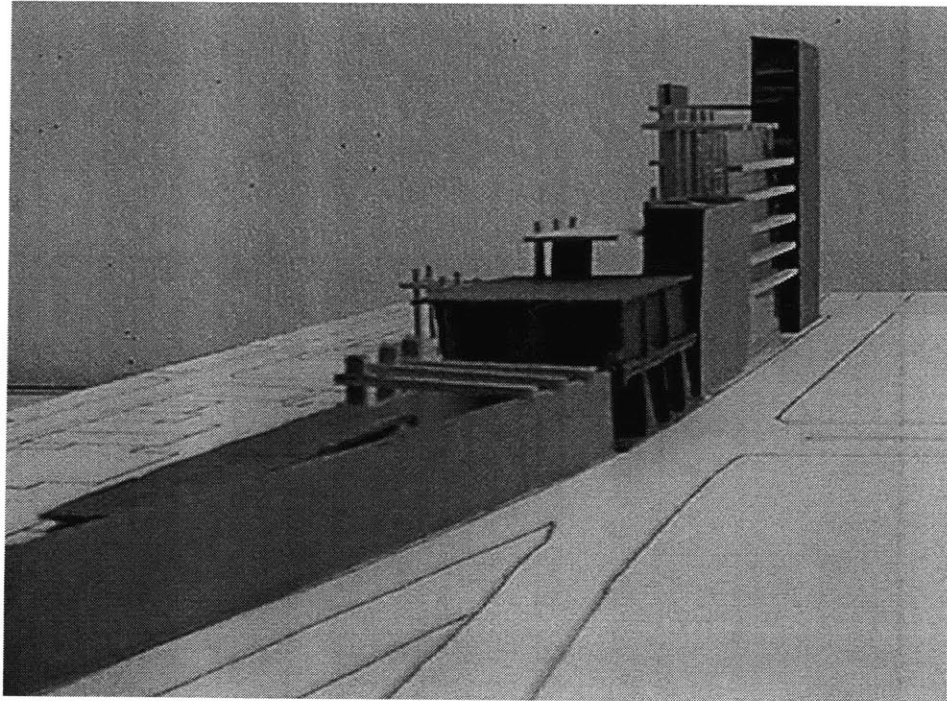
*Figure 5.11 (opposite right): Conceptual Model  
1/50" = 1'-0"*

*Figure 5.12 (below): Conceptual Model 1/50" =  
1'-0"*

*Figure 5.13 (right): Sketch Model  
1/32" = 1'-0"*



**Third Floor Plan:**  
1. Auditorium  
2. Classrooms  
3. Basketball Court  
4. Day Care Center  
5. Roof Terrace





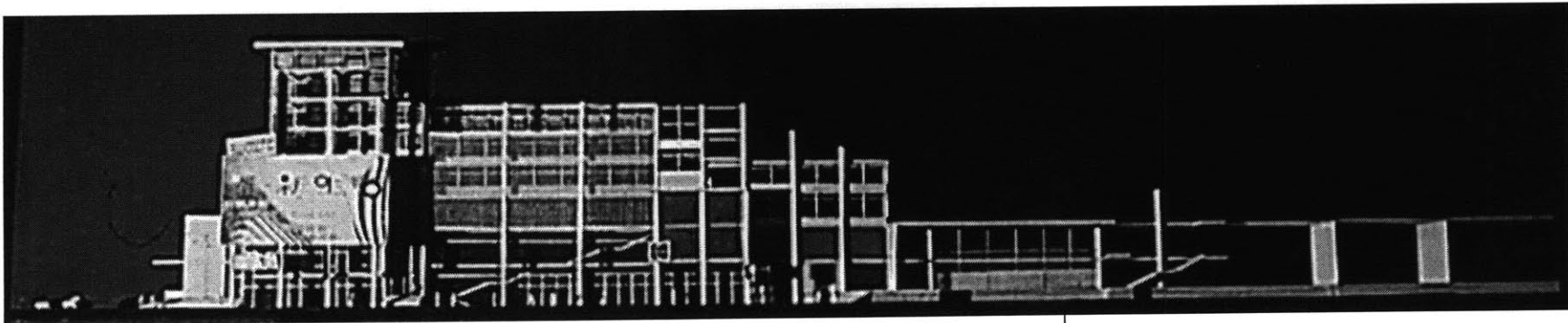
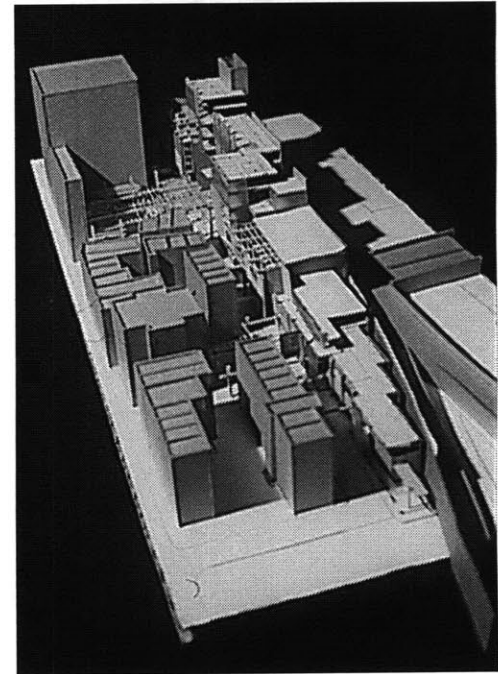
**Existing Sizes & Proportions**

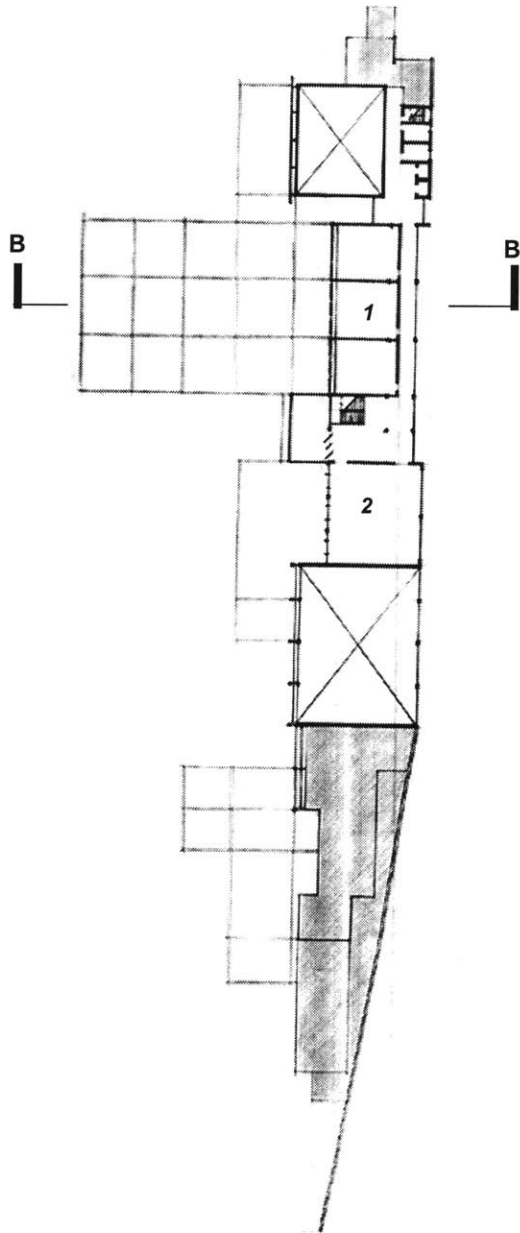
*Figure 5.14 (opposite left): Third Floor Plan*

*Figure 5.15 (opposite right): Massing Models*

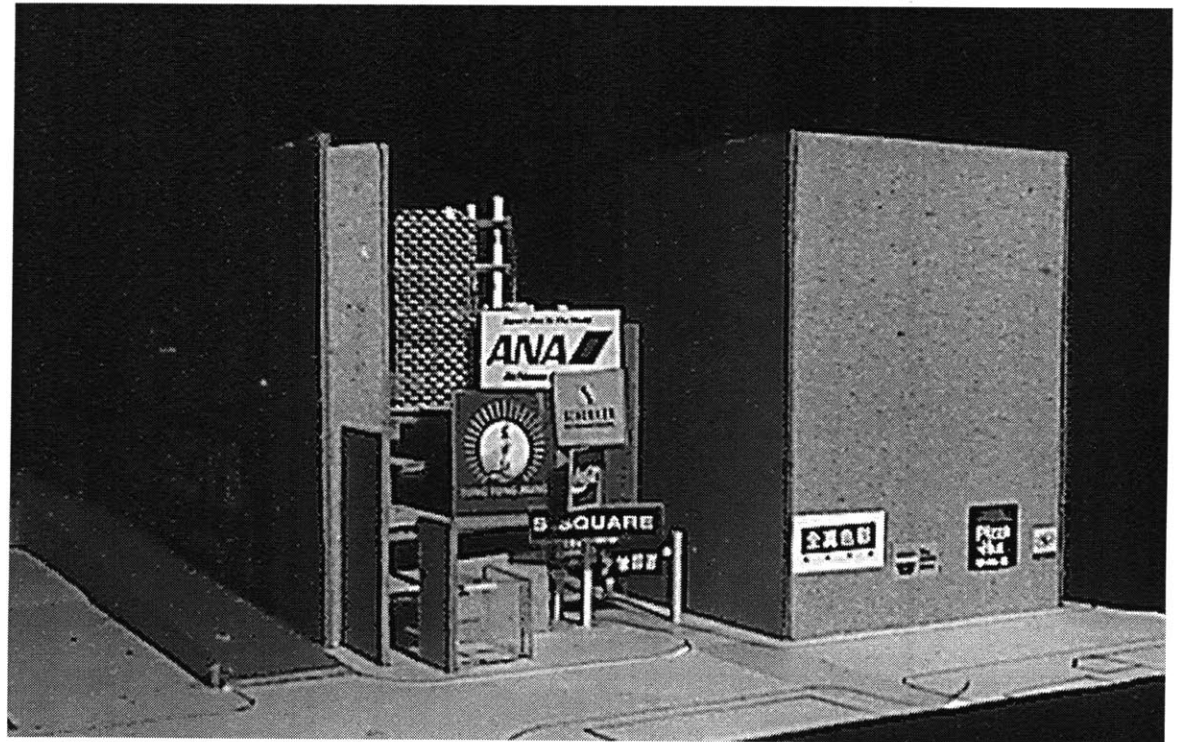
*Figure 5.16 (right): Sketch Model 1/32" = 1'-0"*

*Figure 5.17 (Below): Elevation Relief 1/32" = 1'-0"*





*Fourth Floor Plan:*  
 1. Classrooms  
 2. Multi-Function Room



### Contemporary Asian Lifestyle

Figure 5.18 (opposite left): Fourth Floor Plan

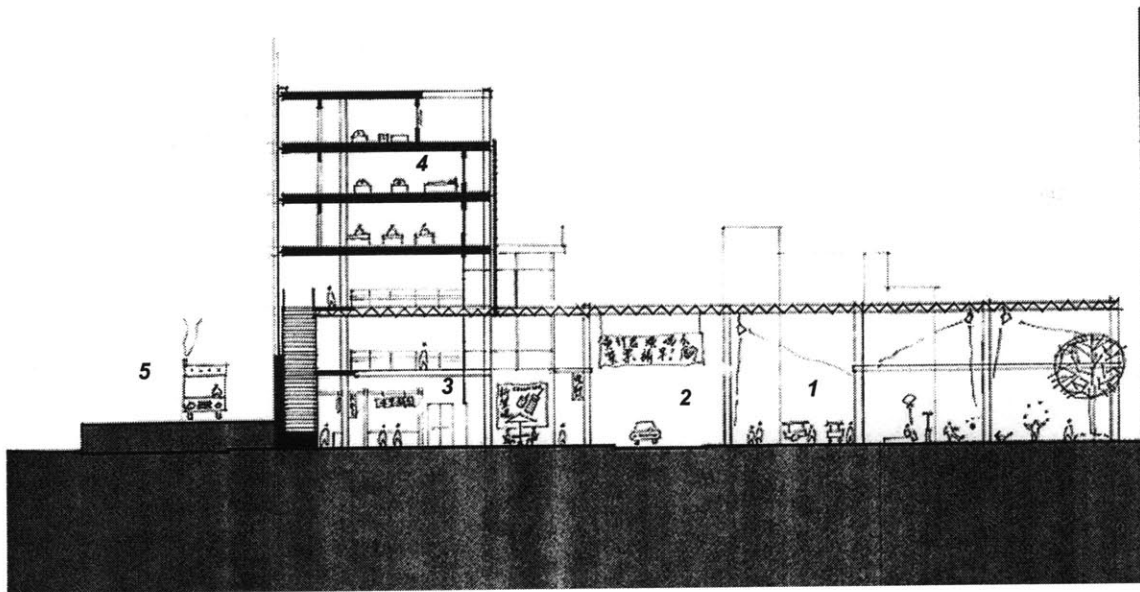
Figure 5.19 (opposite right): Sketch Model 1/32"  
= 1'-0"

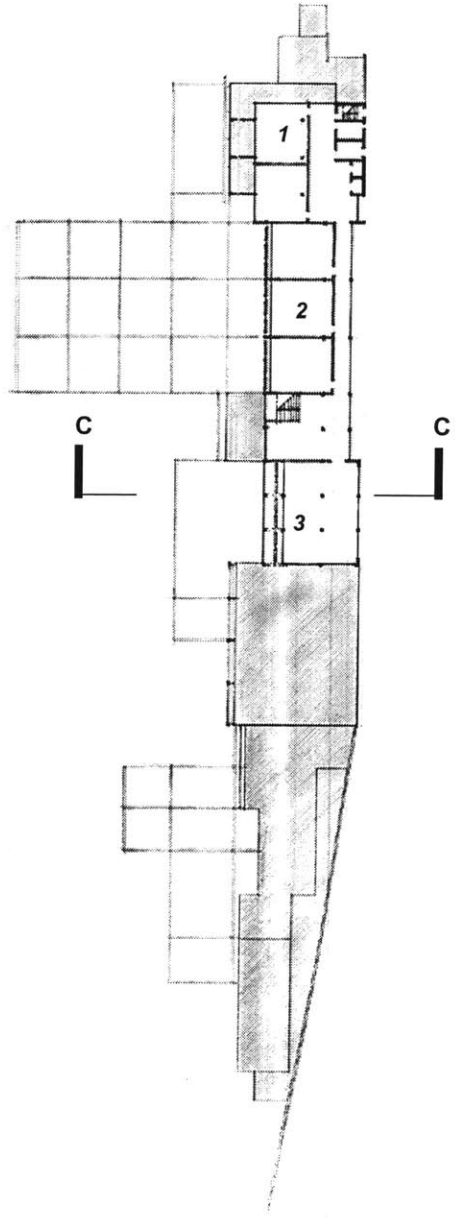
Figure 5.20 (below left): Section B-B

1. Market Plaza
2. Hudson Street
3. Food Court
4. Hostel
5. Mass Pike On Ramp

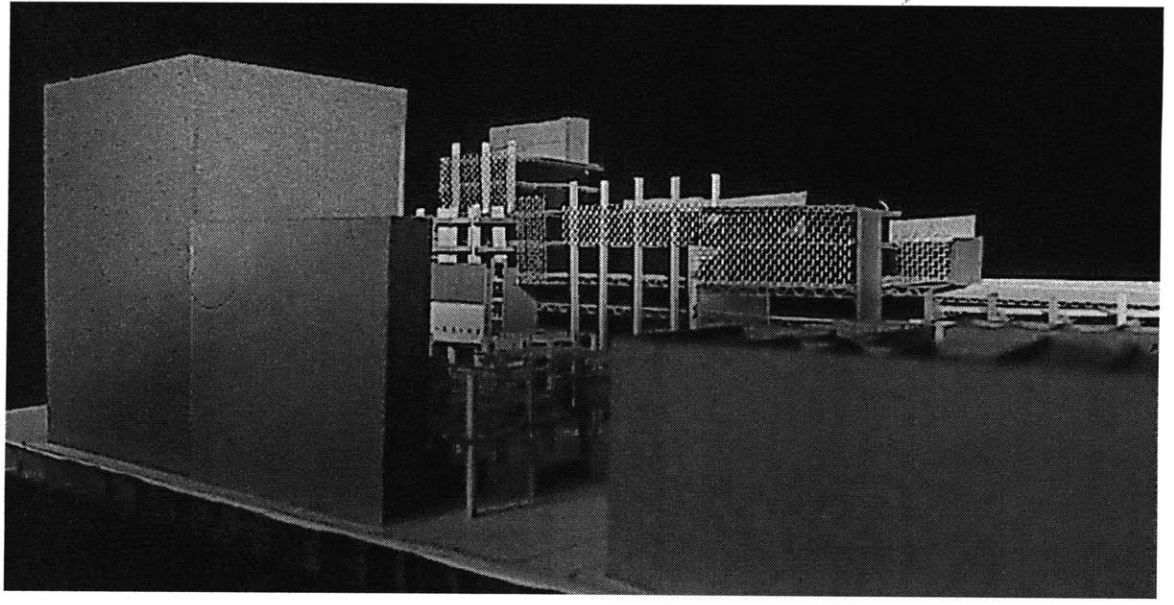
Figure 5.21 (below right): An Intersection in  
Tokyo, Japan.

**How does one design a building that identifies with the Chinatown community without applying the usual "pagoda" kitsch?**





**Fifth Floor Plan:**  
1. Offices  
2. Classrooms  
3. Multi-Function Room



## Asian City Culture

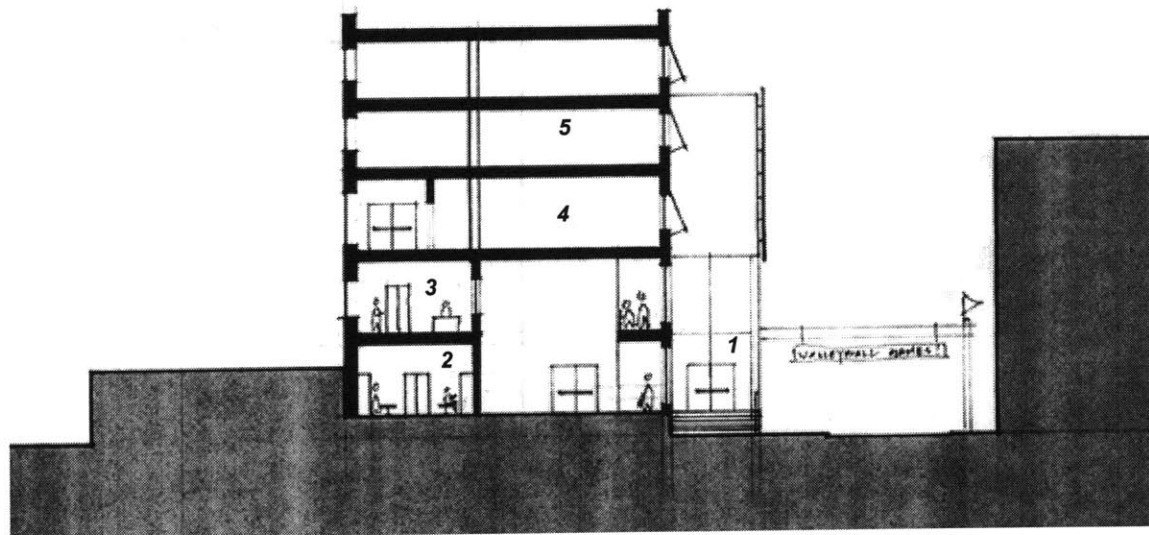
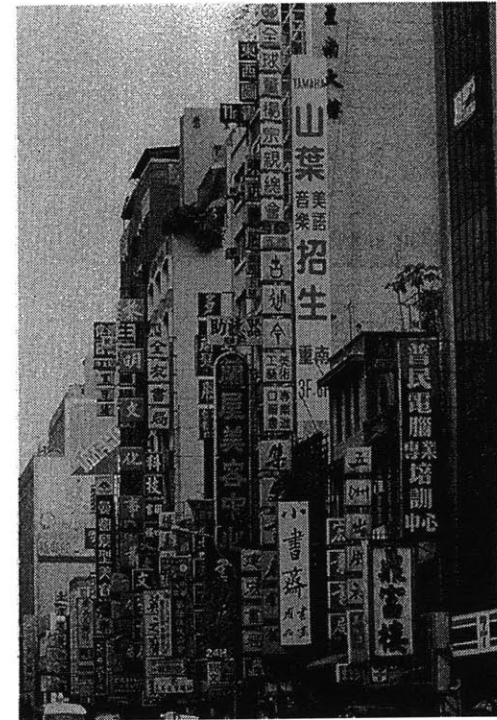
Figure 5.22 (opposite left): Fifth Floor Plan

Figure 5.23 (opposite right): Sketch Model 1/32" = 1'-0"

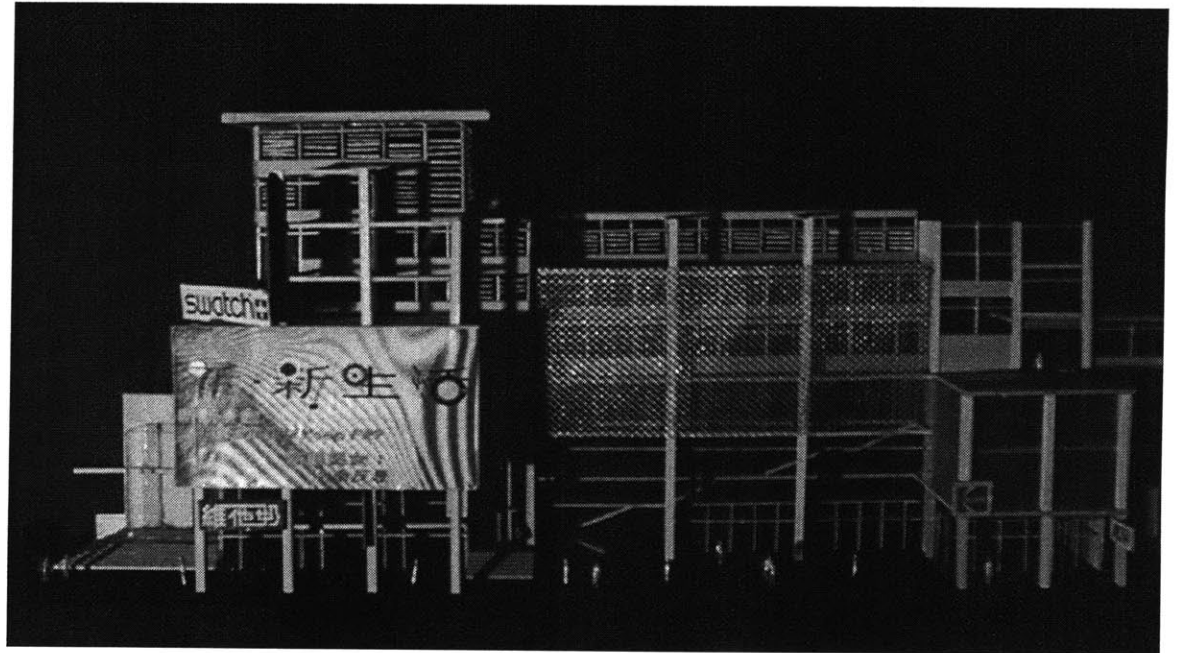
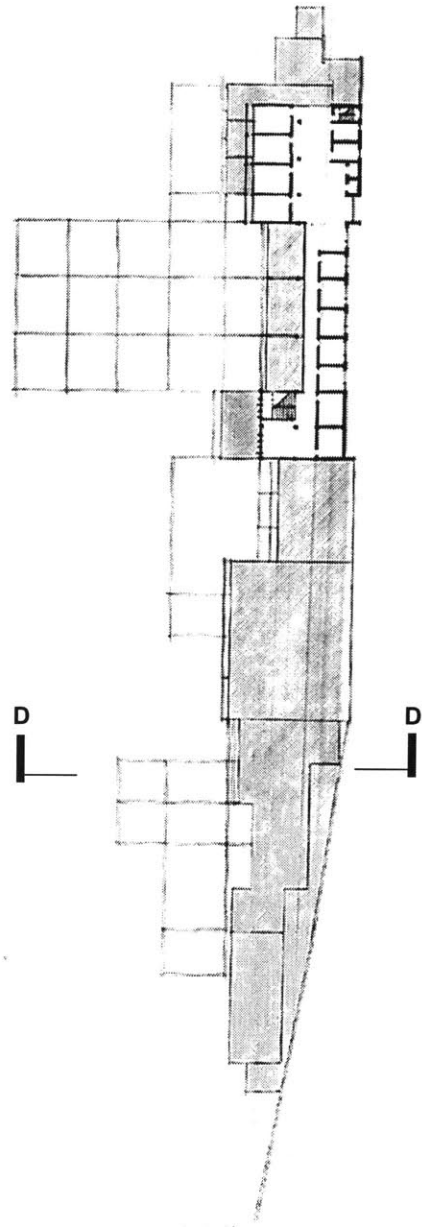
Figure 5.24 (right): Taipei, Taiwan

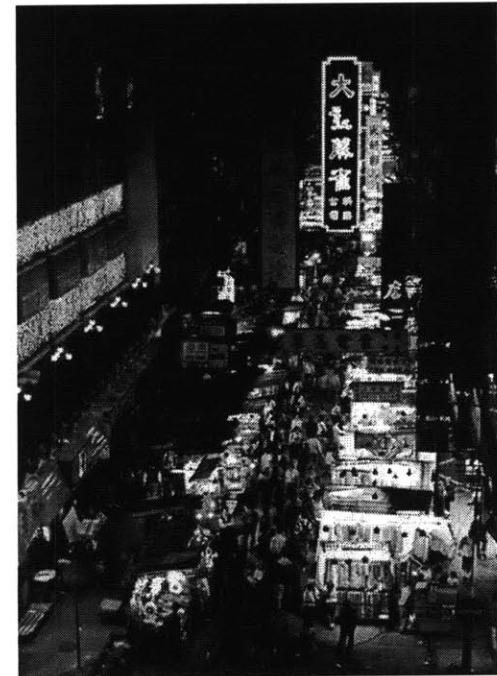
Figure 5.25 (below right): Yaumatei, Hong Kong

Figure 5.26 (below): Section C-C  
1. Recreational Facilities Entrance  
2. Locker Room  
3. Office  
4. Classroom  
5. Multi-Function Rooms









### Street Life

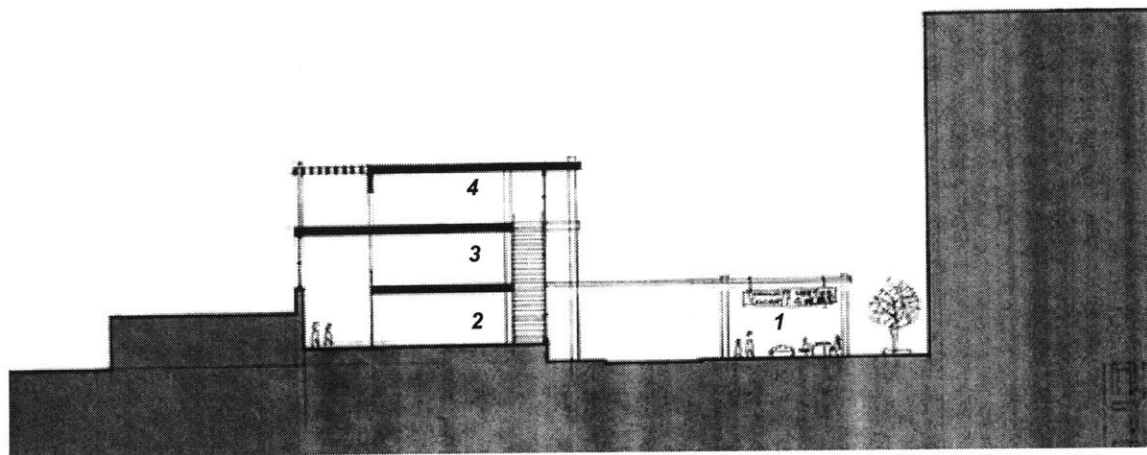
Figure 5.27 (opposite left): Typical Hostel Plan

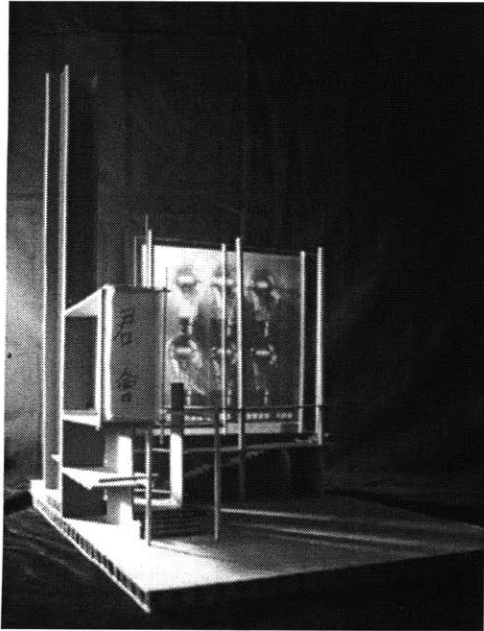
Figure 5.28 (opposite right): Elevation Relief  
1/32" = 1'-0"

Figure 5.29 (above): Mongkok, Hong Kong

Figure 5.30 (left): Section D-D

1. Mini Plaza
2. Exercise Room
3. Lounge
4. Day Care Center





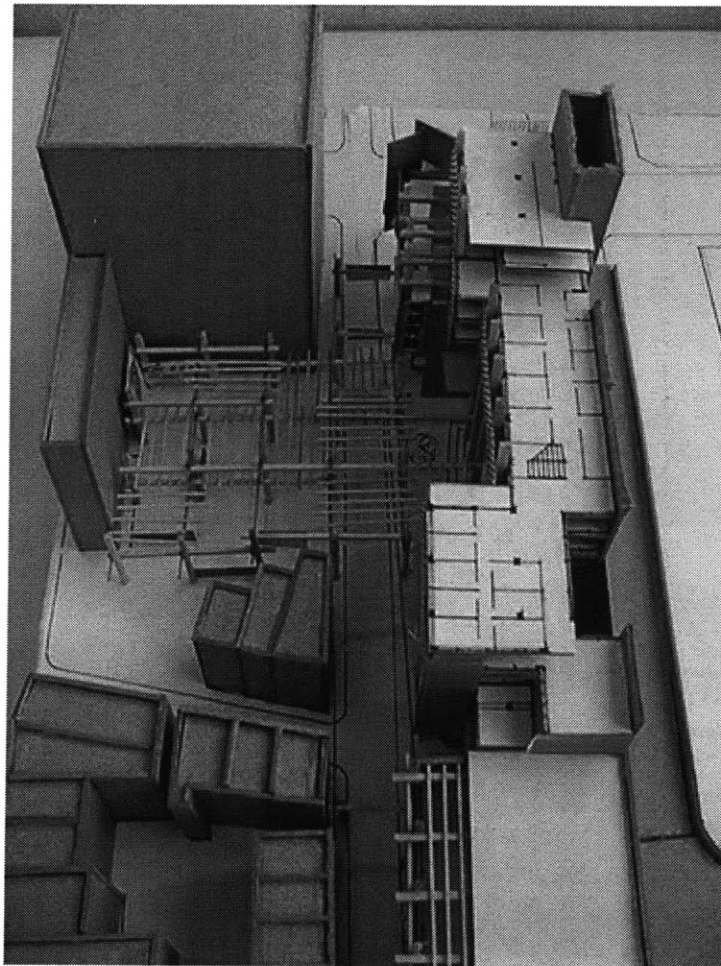
**Density**

**Figure 5.31 (above): City Wall Study Model**  
 $1/8'' = 1'-0''$

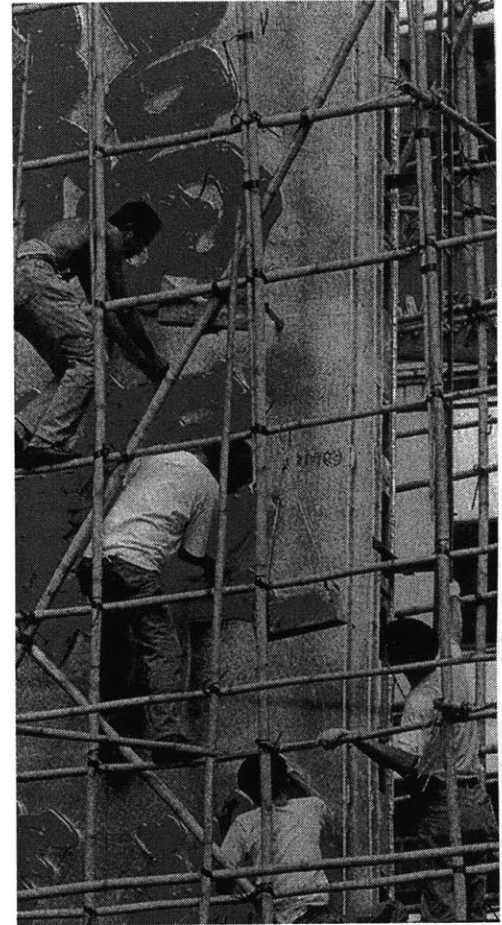
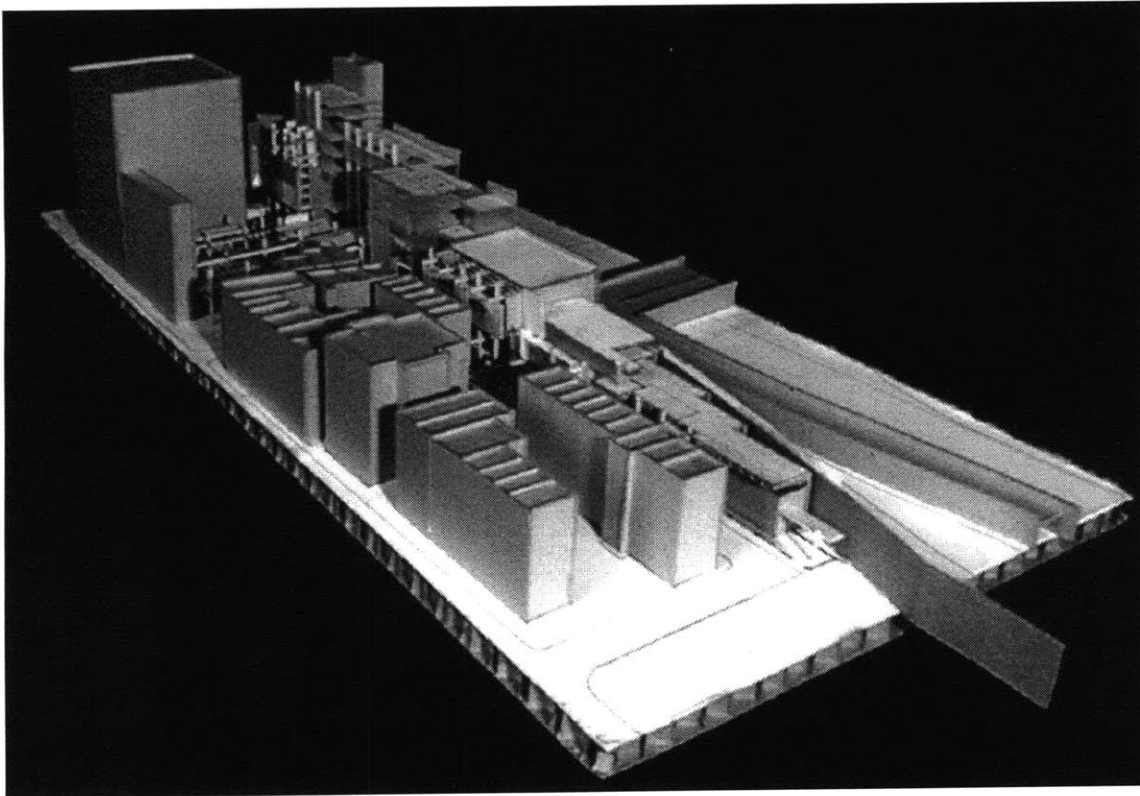
**Figure 5.32 (right): Sketch Model**  $1/32'' = 1'-0''$

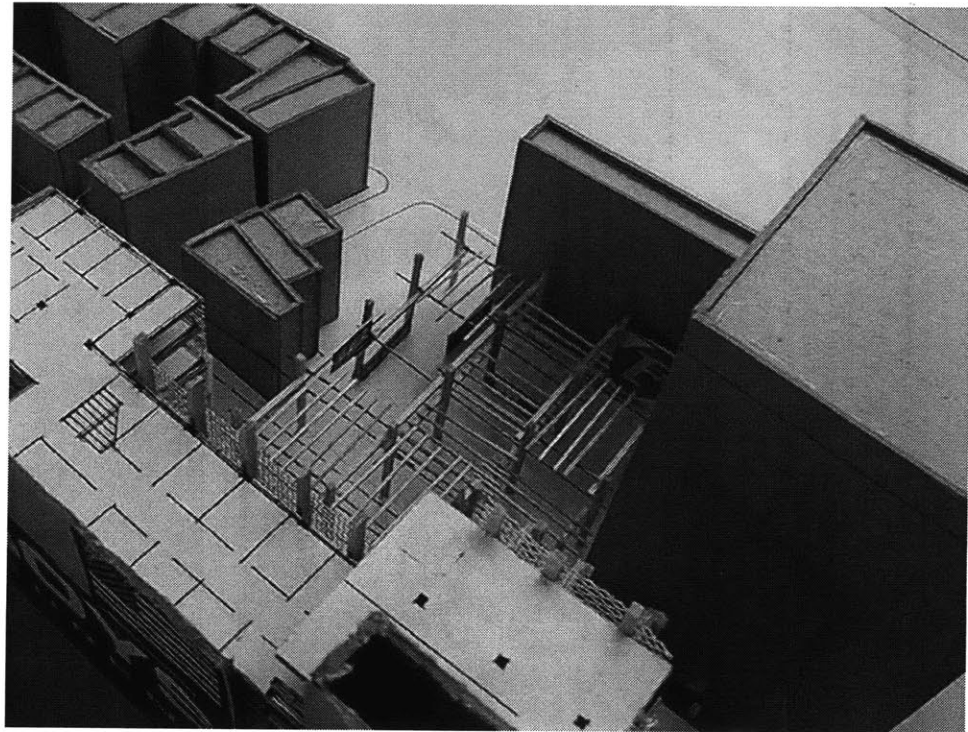
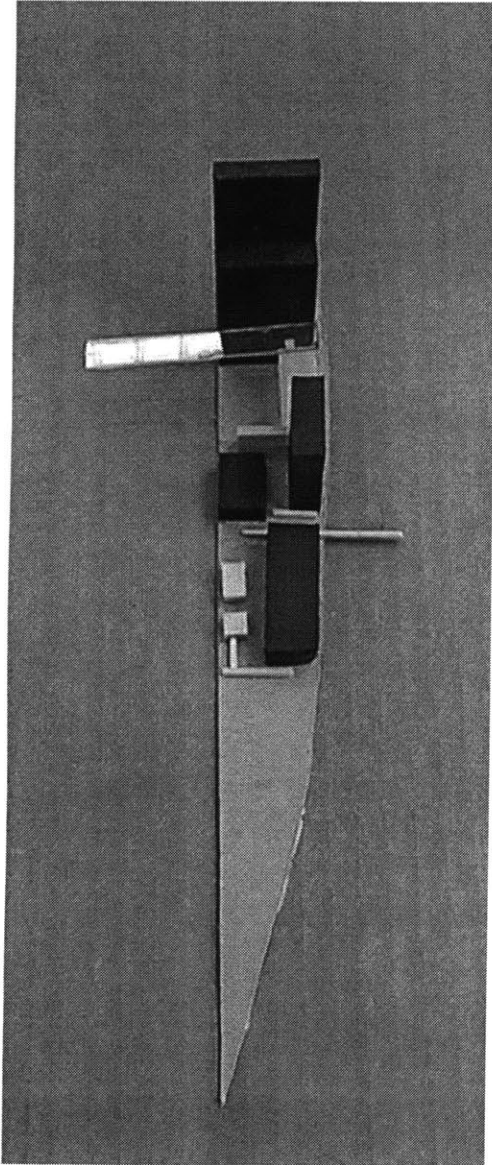
**Figure 5.33 (opposite left): Sketch Model**  
 $1/32'' = 1'-0''$

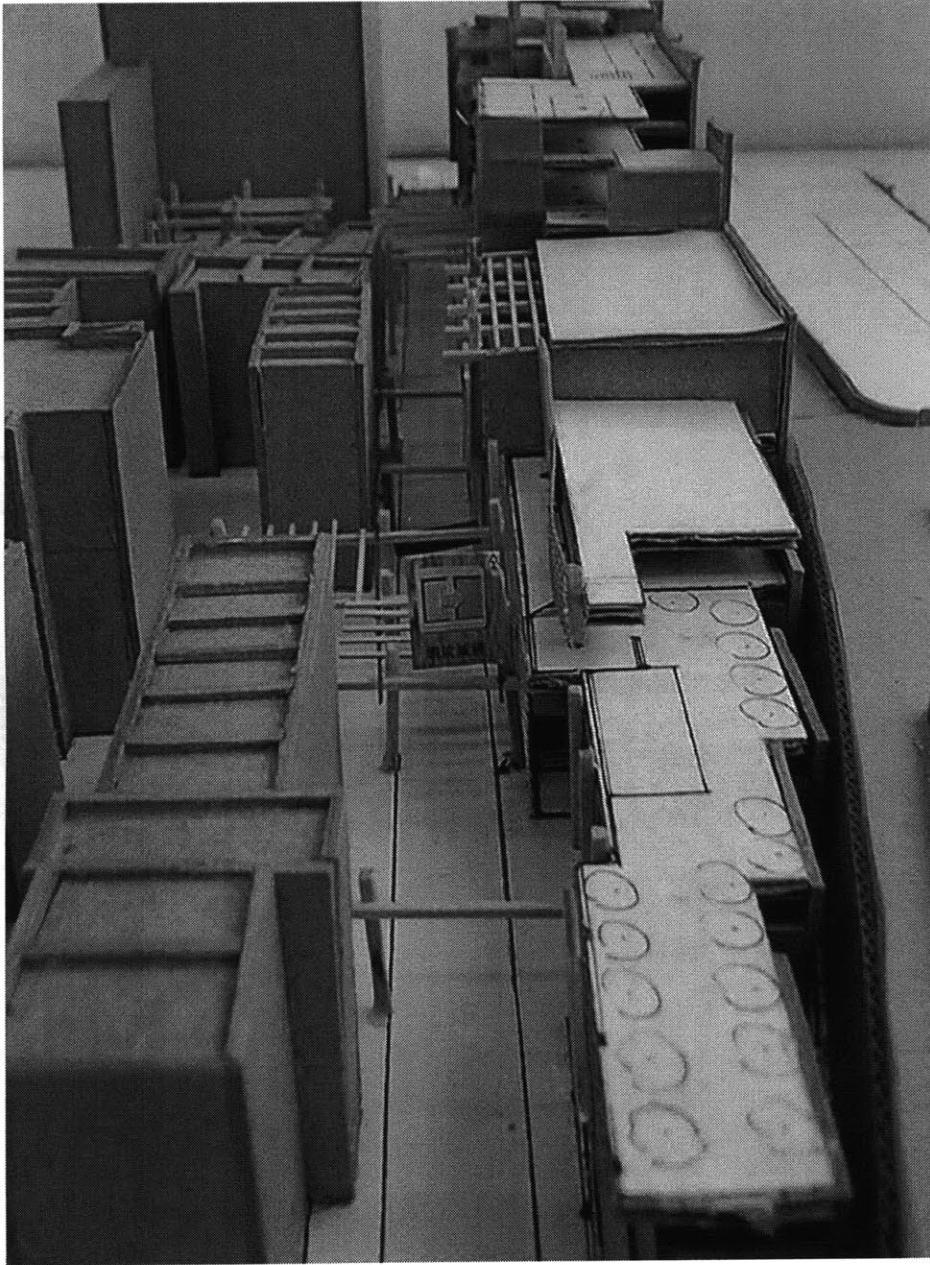
**Figure 5.34 (opposite lower right):**  
**Construction workers in Hong Kong**











*Figure 5.35 (above): Hong Kong Side Street*

*Figure 5.36 (left): Sketch model 1/32" = 1'-0"*

*Figure 5.37 (opposite right): Sketch model 1/32" = 1'-0"*

*Figure 5.38 (opposite left): Conceptual model*

Figure 5.36: Relief Model 1/32" - 1'-0"



## Culture & Architecture

Culture is a hard word to define, because it's so personal. Architects have been trying to represent cultural identities in architecture since there was architecture. It's a difficult endeavor, especially in today's world where globalization is the norm and unique identity is the novelty. A lot of time, traditional and vernacular architecture is used as a reference, then transformed to look "modern".

Again, a difficult task. What to keep? Which element to transform? How?

Chinatowns across the U.S. are full of architecture like that, transformed traditional. Does it signify the neighborhoods as Chinatowns? Yes. Does it attract visitors? Yes. Does it represent the Chinese culture? Yes? No? That's when it gets personal.

In my approach, I decided to define my own culture as I know it. Like many other immigrants that arrive in the U.S. each year, I came from a metropolitan Asian city. Did I live in a courtyard house? No. Did I see buildings with flying eaves, dragons, and pagoda roofs in the city? No. Therefore, I decided not to reference traditional Chinese architecture in this project. Palaces, temples, and courtyard houses are all irrelevant in the context and program of this project. What is relevant is the daily life of an immigrant group trying to cope with life in a foreign country, and at the same time, to hold on to the lives they once had.

My design ends up looking a lot like a contemporary Asian city street, with shops, restaurants, limited open space and mobile vendors. That is my visualization of the Chinatown culture. Sure the design approach is debatable, but at the end, it's still my own cultural identity.



## 6 . R e f e r e n c e

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## End notes

1. **The Boston 200 Corporation**, *Chinatown Boston 200 Neighborhood History Series* p.3.

2. **ibid**, p.3.

3. **ibid**, p.2.

4. **ibid**, p.6.

5. **ibid**, p.8.

6. **Charles Sullivan and Kathlyn Hatch**, *The Chinese in Boston, 1970* p. 20.

7. **Chinatown/South Cove Neighborhood Council (CCNC)**, *Chinatown Community Plan: A Plan to Manage Growth* p.68.

8. **The Boston 200 Corporation**, 8.

9. **ibid**, 12.

10. **BRA**, *Chinatown-South Cove District Profile & Proposed 1978-1980 Neighborhood Improvement Program* p.9.

11. **The Chinatown Coalition**, *The Chinatown Community Assessment Report*. p.25.

12. **ibid**, p.13.

13. **ibid**, p.29-30.

14. **Chinatown/South Cove Neighborhood Council (CCNC)**, p.10.

15. **Tom Ashbrook**, *Going the Way of All Flesh* Boston Globe 08.02.88.

16. **ibid**.

17. **Jessica Pineo** in a community meeting, *Development Opportunities and Challenges for*

*Chinatown Oak Terrace Community Room 02.14.97.*

18. **Shirin Karanfiloglu**, *Development Opportunities and Challenges for Chinatown.*
19. **Brook Larmer**, *“Boston’s Chinatown Views Growth on its Fringes with a Wary Eye* The Christian Science Monitor 11.14.85.
20. **The Total Studio**, *Chinatown* MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning p.22.
21. **Diego Ribadeneira**, *BRA Wins Land Dispute with N.E. Medical Center* Boston Globe 11.23.88.
22. **BRA**, *Chinatown Community Plan (Draft)* p.2-4.
23. **Chinatown Housing Improvement Program (CHIP)**, *Request for Proposal*, p.9.
24. **Meng Howe Lim**, *Molding the Unshapely Structure: Rebuilding Boston Chinatown* p.49-50.
25. **Boston 2000**, *Handout from Public Meeting.* 03.97.

## Noted Figures

**1.1 Welcome to our Virtual Journey into San Francisco's Chinatown.** *www.hbschool.com.*  
Harcourt Brace School.

**1.2** *ibid.*

**1.5 Chicago Chinatown.** *www.chicago-chinatown.com.*

**2.1 Boston Chinatown Web Site.** *www.bostonchinatown.com.*

**2.2 The Total Studio, Chinatown.** *MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning.*

**2.3 Chinatown/South Cove Neighborhood Council.** *Chinatown Community Plan: A Plan to  
Manage Growth.*

**2.4 Boston Chinatown Web Site.**

**2.5 ERA-Maptec Ltd,** *In Boston City Guide.*

**2.6 Chinatown Community Plan.**

**2.7a,b Boston Chinatown Web Site.**

**2.8** *ibid.*

**2.9 Chinatown Community Plan.**

**2.10 Flyer from a Chinatown community meeting,** *2.14.97*

**2.11 MIT Rotch Visual Collection**

**2.12 Meng Howe Lim,** *Molding the Unshapely Structure: Rebuilding Boston's Chinatown.*

**3.2 Boston 2000 Flyer.**

**3.3** *ibid.*

**3.4 Rotch Visual Collection, MIT.**

**3.5 ibid.**

**5.21 [www.asahi-net.or.jp](http://www.asahi-net.or.jp)**

**5.24 Taiwan's Metropolitan Landscape. *Space Design* 02.94.**

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