

Chinatown Retail Character
Prepared by
The Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee
March 19 2013

In June 2012 The Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee prepared a short paper describing “Chinatown Character” for the purpose of assisting architects and developers in interpreting The Chinatown HA 1 Design Guidelines adopted by Council in April of 2011, following several years of community consultation. In February 2013 the Vancouver Economic Commission asked the VCRC to prepare a similar paper that would identify Chinatown retail character in a similar way. This paper would inform the Retail Mix Strategy currently being prepared by the VEC and Vancouver Chinatown Business Improvement Association.

1. What role does the retail character of Chinatown serve?

The value of historic Chinatown to Vancouver and Canada has now been recognized through its designation as a National Historic Site. The City’s adoption of the Chinatown Plan and its associated bylaws and guidelines in 2012 brought guidance to the preservation of the historic buildings and to the harmonious redevelopment of non-heritage building sites in the district.

A distinctive historic area, however, involves activities as well as buildings. And in the long run, without compatible activities the physical character of Chinatown will be threatened and lost.

Why does this matter? Because:

- Chinatown is an important heritage site in the history of Canada and has survived better than any other Chinatown on the Pacific Coast – a UNESCO world heritage designation is in planned to follow the district’s existing designation as a National Historic Site.
- Chinatown was the cultural epicenter of the Vancouver Chinese community for more than a century and can be that again.
- Chinatown is once again offering exceptional mixed-income residential opportunities close to downtown Vancouver.
- Chinatown holds unrealized economic value as an international tourism destination.

The VCRC vision is that retail will play a key role in making Chinatown a great place to live and a stronger tourist attraction and in doing so will generate revenues that will support Chinese cultural activities and maintain the heritage values of the historic buildings.

2. What is “Chinatown Retail Character” and how can it be sustained as Chinatown evolves?

Given this vision, the question arises: *What retail activities combine with the historic buildings and streetscape to make “Chinatown?”*

In 2012 the VCRC began its definition of the built “Chinatown Character” with the understanding that while Chinatown is culturally Chinese, its “Chineseness” was initially asserted in a city dominated by colonial European interests. The specific conditions that gave rise to Chinatown have passed. Today most of the region’s population of Chinese descent does not have family roots in

Chinatown. Excellent Chinese products and restaurants can be found everywhere in the region. The new shops and restaurants throughout the region cater to the tastes and preferences of more recent Chinese immigrants – coming directly from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland. Chinatown retail will always be different from other regional Chinese retail because of the historic physical setting in which it takes place.

From its beginning Chinatown's land use has been remarkably diverse, allowing many people to meet all their needs of living and working within its streets and alleys. And while the uses that made up that diversity changed over the years, they always contributed to the bustling street life we think of as Chinatown. The components of this street life were central to the 2012 Chinatown Character discussion. They were characterized as "the intangibles": The smells, sounds, hustle and bustle, the open store fronts, vegetable stands spilling into the street, the blurring of public and private space. The spirit of Chinatown is found in the integration of these intangible elements with historic buildings and streetscape created by the buildings.

Just as new buildings must respect the historic buildings and the culturally central intangibles, so should the mix of new retail activities. But this mix has never and will never be static. It cannot be legislated in the way general land use and building form can be. The challenge is to continue Chinatown's flexibility without losing the identity that makes it culturally significant.

3. Culturally Chinese

Chinatown functioned historically as a nearly self-contained local economy. But it has also been an entrepreneurial place, with innovators willing to take risks in response to opportunities and often drawing on non-Chinese customers for their success. There is never consensus in these matters: Innovative new Chinese restaurants might be dismissed by old-timers, but to the innovator, they are simply the evolved form of a traditional function.

Still, Chinese culture must be apparent if Chinatown is to be Chinatown. Chinatown Retail Character can be maintained and enhanced from 2013 forward if:

- Chinese culture is apparent in the overall retail mix, without precluding a wide range of other ethnic and non-ethnic businesses. The ethnicity of the vendors and customers is not material.
- Signage plays on the traditional buildings and historical precedents of Chinatown.
- Shopping opportunities are attractive to Chinese – and other – regional residents, creating a purpose for people to come into Chinatown on a frequent basis.
- Cultural opportunities are maintained and enhanced to complement the commercial attraction to Chinatown – Chinatown once again fills its role as the soul of the regional Chinese community.

4. Limits of the Built Form

The society heritage buildings of Chinatown are unlike any other buildings in Vancouver. Their balconies and columns are immediately obvious but the uniqueness is more than skin deep. These buildings predate cheap energy. They use natural light and air circulation; courtyards, and they layer uses floor-by-floor from the street to the top storey. Long before green architecture, these buildings worked with nature out of necessity.

But while they are of great architectural and historical interest, they pose significant limits to retail use. When municipal regulations are fully applied, the street level commercial spaces of any of these buildings can accommodate no food service larger than a coffee shop. They dictate a small scale of commerce. Attempts to upgrade and expand between floors or buildings invoke challenging regulatory hurdles. Newer non-heritage buildings offer larger, more flexible spaces but many of these also pose physical barriers to many businesses.

One of the greatest intangible characteristics of Chinatown is the spilling of small businesses onto the sidewalk. This blurring of the margin of public and private space is a tradition that lends great vitality to the street and could be further encouraged by the City to further differentiate the Chinatown shopping experience from other districts in the City and increase the space available for retail tenants.

5. Appropriate Retail Mix

What businesses are appropriate in Chinatown?

- Chinatown has never been high-end. Chinatown retail character is defined by its non-exclusive traditions. But it needs to be clean and bright and safe to attract trade today.
- Historically Chinatown was a place of safety for its residents and shoppers. In the last few decades this sense of security has been challenged and many merchants would cite lack of safety and cleanliness on the streets as the greatest deterrent to trade. In this regard the Chinatown retail mix should not include businesses at odds with the family-friendly traditions of Chinatown.
- Chinatown is a small scale retail area. The historic spaces cannot accommodate big stores. The activity that makes the street exciting and safe requires that the blocks not be overly consolidated to deaden the street. There is a need for larger businesses – large restaurants, for instance – but these should be cleverly executed to keep the street-front active.
- The growing population of Chinatown will provide a consumer base to support additional small retail businesses that will be able to grow to serve regional residents and tourists. There are businesses that are naturally associated with Chinese culture: restaurants and a wide array of food stores from vegetables to barbeque like New Town and Kam Gok Yuen, cookware stores like Ming Wo and Tinland, specialty Chinese goods stores like the famous Pearl River of New York. But there is also a place for skateboard shops, bike shops, barbers and other businesses required by the neighbourhood and wider market.

The discussion of the VCRC in no small way mirrored the report referenced below. This should be no surprise given the central task of the VCRC since its formation and the advice it provided to AECOM when the firm prepared its report in 2011.

AECOM Economics, [Vancouver Chinatown Economic Revitalization Action Plan](http://vancouver.ca/docs/planning/chinatown-economic-revitalization-action-plan.pdf), Prepared for City of Vancouver, Planning Department November 28, 2011. (<http://vancouver.ca/docs/planning/chinatown-economic-revitalization-action-plan.pdf>)

Time and Place

508 Taylor Street (Vancouver Chinatown Merchants Association Office)

Tuesday, March 19, 2013

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