

Chinatown Character and Advice to Developers and Architects

Summary Notes of a Discussion in Chinatown

The Chinatown HA 1 Design Guidelines adopted by Council in April of 2011 have had their first practical test in actual development proposals for 611 and 633 Main Street. The 633 Main Street proposal was the subject of a recent open house in Chinatown and has come before the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Advisory Committee and the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee. Although both these proposals followed the letter of the Design Guidelines, the committees were disappointed in the proposals. The buildings did not reflect Chinatown and, especially in the case of 633, promised to overwhelm it. On June 26th, 2012 twenty individuals, many of whom are active in one or both of the committees, met to discuss why buildings meeting the Design Guidelines could fail in this way. Two questions were discussed: What is “Chinatown’s character?” and “How can developers and architects be helped to better reflect Chinatown Character in their proposals?”

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

Chinatown is Chinatown because of the particular historical and cultural context in which it was created and continues to evolve. That context is complex but needs to be understood if Chinatown is to prosper as a vital Vancouver neighbourhood and be safeguarded as an important world heritage site.

While volumes could be written on the context of Chinatown we can make a short list for the purpose of guiding new physical development:

- Chinatown is culturally Chinese, but its “Chineseness” was asserted from the beginning within a setting surrounded by colonial European interests.
- The heritage architecture of Chinatown is a locally achieved synthesis of South China and European aesthetics and technology.
- The urban grain of Chinatown is greatly influenced by the narrow 25’ lots that are neither particularly European nor Chinese in origin. That grain is now a defining characteristic of Chinatown.
- As noted in the preamble to Vancouver’s existing HA1 and 1A zoning schedule, Chinatown’s land use has been remarkably diverse. (This reflects both its function as a self-contained Chinese enclave and the traditional financing model of the building societies. The societies relied on retail and commercial revenues from lower floors to subsidize social and residential spaces above). It has been a model pedestrian-focused live-work village within the city for well over a century.

This context is made tangible in the historic buildings of Chinatown but that is not all that defines the neighbourhood. The sense of being in Chinatown comes more immediately from 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 tangible and intangible elements. New buildings must be as respectful of these intangibles as they must be of the physical heritage buildings.

1.1. Culturally Chinese

Chinatown was traditionally a completely 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. New development must be in harmony with the old. Signage is important. Maintaining the Chinatown tradition of highly mixed usage and small businesses is much more important than the decoration of new buildings with “Chinese” motifs -- that sort of gesture is insulting. Respecting Chinese culture does not require the buildings imitate the century-old heritage stock – that turns design into taxidermy. Rather it means that if the City wants a district that is unique and rare and continues to be valued world-wide it will see that no new development detracts from the rich mix of tangible and intangible qualities that we identify as “Chinatown” and by definition these will always retain their “Chineseness.”

1.2. Architectural Heritage

Anyone with an enquiring mind looking west from Pender and Main must ask “what happened here that this came to be?” There are no buildings like these in Vancouver except in Chinatown. Their balconies and columns are immediately obvious but the uniqueness is more than skin deep. These buildings predate cheap energy. Their use of natural light and air circulation; courtyards, and the layering uses floor-by- floor from the street to the top storey are unique in the city. Long before green architecture, these buildings worked with nature out of necessity.

While there are many economic and building code reasons these buildings cannot be built today, their best features and the uses to which they were traditionally put can inform new structures. The architecture of the neighbourhood can change, but it needs to change within the historic context. The ways in which the old architecture can inform the new include how the street level is broken up, the uses to which the two or three lowest floors are put and how the buildings relate to the street and to the urban grain of Chinatown.

1.3. The Urban Grain of Chinatown

Although we often focus on the historic buildings, it is the scale of the existing buildings on the subdivision pattern that set the rhythm that let us know we are in Chinatown. Ultimately it is our experience amongst the lower few storeys that establishes the rhythm of the street and lets us know where we are. In this regard it is the handling of the base of new buildings that will determine their successful integration into Chinatown, notwithstanding that a clumsy treatment in the higher levels can ruin everything. In this regard the typical Vancouver podium and tower structure is anathema to the character and spirit of Chinatown. New buildings need to follow the old with verticality, fine grain, repetition of doorways, and suitability for small business. The typical modern podium creates a strong horizontality at 6 storeys that stretches half a block or more in length. This is at odds with Chinatown Character. If all non-heritage properties in Chinatown were developed this way Chinatown could not be differentiated from Yaletown.

The alleys of Chinatown were traditionally part of its commercial life – not as delivery and removal routes, but as active commercial spaces. They contributed to the walkability of the neighbourhood and, in spite of the current usurpation of these spaces for heavy vehicles delivering and removing goods and waste, they continue to be used by many as shortcuts in their daily activities. New development needs to strengthen this traditional use. To treat alleys as service entries is to detract from the Chinatown Character.

1.4. Land Use

Chinatown's diverse land use has allowed it to be both self-contained and entrepreneurial as times dictated and allowed. It has been a model pedestrian-focused live/work village within the city for well over a century. The South Chinese cultural tradition of Chinatown brings a special edge to this globally acknowledged quality. A high proportion of businesses spill their activities onto the street. The margin between private and public space is blurred. Signage has been bold, more so in the past than now. Street-level retail businesses tend to be small, adding to the rhythm of the street, with something interesting and new every 25' or so along one's walk. Above the street has always been a broad mixture of housing, business, social and cultural activities. Flexibility is required in new development. If one builds common Vancouver buildings in Chinatown, actual opportunities for everyone will be diminished. The question arises most acutely in the case of large developments: How can buildings with frontages of 132' and more be developed so that the village-like business scene of existing Chinatown will not be stifled? How can large developments best replicate the traditional mixed-use that gives Chinatown its vibrancy?

2. How can developers and architects be helped to reflect Chinatown Character in their proposals?

The problem of reflecting Chinatown Character in new development proposals has two sources:

- The regulations of the City.
- The interests and imagination of the developer and architect.

2.1. The regulations of the City

When many regulations that have been developed for application across the city are applied in Chinatown they sometimes inadvertently damage Chinatown Character because they fail to acknowledge the defining architecture, urban grain and land use of Chinatown. The list is significant:

- Regulations and 25' lots: Standard city parking requirements applied to new developments on 25' lots reduce viability of the ground floor for retail purposes. When parking requirements are combined with other regulatory requirements a building owner can be left with 400 square feet. This sort of space is useful for a small coffee shop or gift shop. It is not conducive to a restaurant or substantial small business.
- Awnings: Fixed awnings make it difficult if not impossible to install traditional signage perpendicular to the storefront. Fixed awnings on wide buildings – such as the currently proposed podium and tower developments -- destroy the rhythm of the street, making it difficult for designers to break up the façade to reflect existing Chinatown.

- Use of public sidewalks: 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 must not be impeded.
- Mixed uses: It is essential that the HA1 and 1A zoning schedule's acknowledgement of the importance of mixed use be interpreted liberally. Land use regulation should be eased.

2.2. Guidance to Developers and Architects

What can developers and architects do gain strong Chinatown support for their projects? There is no question Chinatown seeks renewal and new investment. Good projects will gain good support. Here are some ideas, especially applicable to podium and tower proponents:

- Understand the spirit of the Guidelines – don't consider them a check list.
- Understand the context of Chinatown and Chinatown Character as detailed in Section "1," above, especially the intangibles that bring the humanity to the historic buildings and street scene. This can be achieved by meeting with advisory groups such as the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee and the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee before design begins.
- Learn the specific built-space needs of Chinatown that are different than the Vancouver general needs. Think more broadly than the standard one and two bedroom condominium apartment tower. Chinatown currently needs live-work spaces for young people and housing for working families.
- Don't think just of the building and its immediate surroundings, think of the streetscape in the whole district.
- Chinatown is not to be a district dominated by towers. Only 8 sites are identified for this sort of development so they will stick out. The set back of the tower and its massing will matter. Developers who seeking a realistic FSR – one that will not result in a monolithic overbearing tower -- will encourage broad support for their project.
- Understand that the podium and tower form does not naturally align with the fine grain of Chinatown and needs to be conscientiously and innovatively reworked to suit the neighbourhood context. The podium especially needs to be broken up to reflect the rhythm of existing Chinatown streets.
- Consider the frontage of the podium as if it were composed of separate units of about 25 feet. For large businesses restrict the entrance to a width appropriate for Chinatown – 25' -- and wrap the space behind small shops repeating the 25 foot rhythm along the podium façade. Avoid dead frontages.
- Acknowledge the alleys in podium and tower developments. The podium form combined with city regulations treats them like service entries. Alleys in Chinatown need to be treated like a strength and made more -- rather than less – accessible through each development.