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Title
The Visual Character of Chinatowns [Vision, Culture and Landscape]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6km8h5m3

Journal
Places, 7(1)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
1990-10-01

Peer reviewed

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David Chuenyan Lai

The Visual Character of Chinatowns

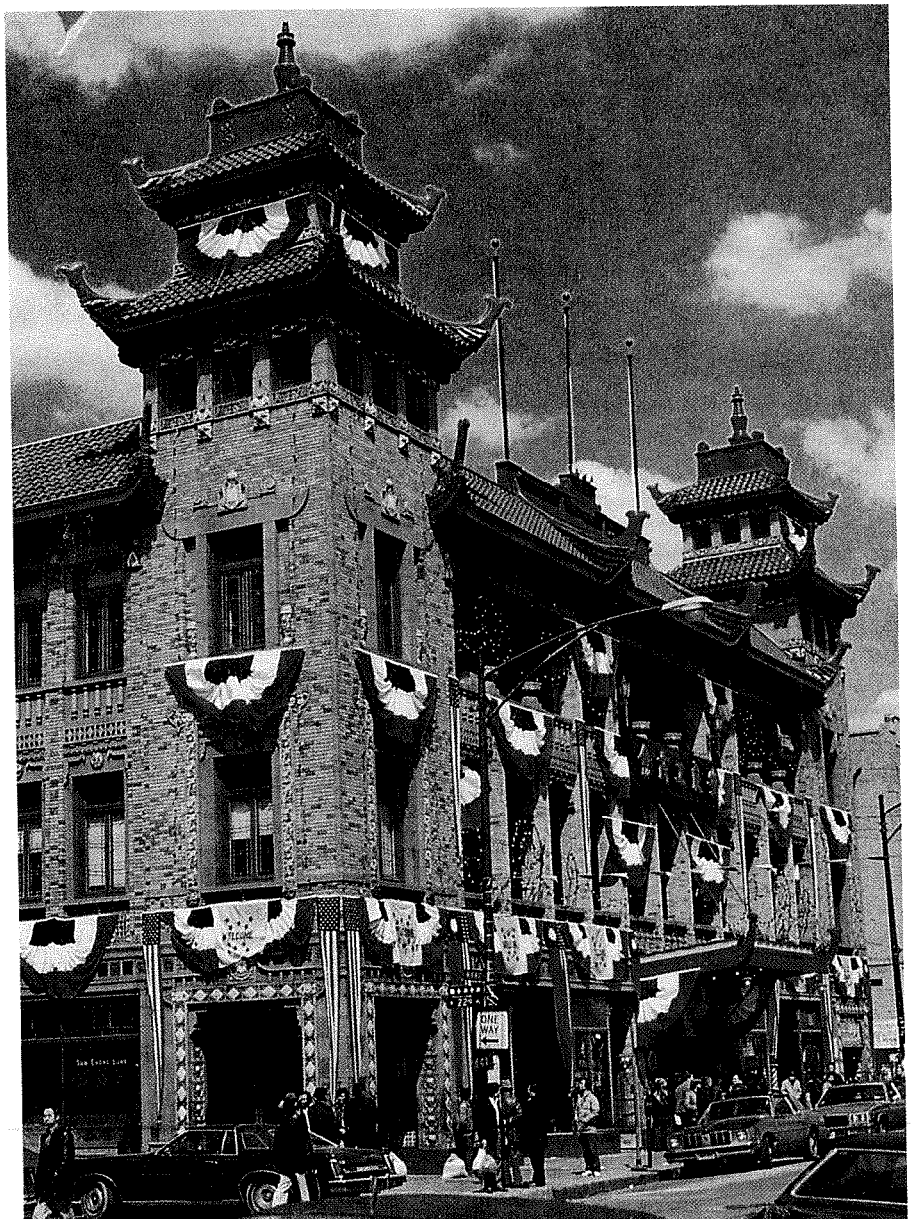
"Chinatown" means different things to different people at different times and in different cities. Chinatown may be conceived of as a social community, an inner city neighborhood, a suburban shopping plaza, a skid row district, a historic district, a tourist attraction, a place of mysterious evil, or a cultural hearth. Although our perception of Chinatown may be shaped by our knowledge of it as a social entity, our perception is also influenced by the act of seeing.

It is the facades of the buildings in Chinatown that constitute the most striking visual component of place character. Western architects or contractors built most of the old Chinatown buildings, but they tried to create "chinoiserie" or "exotica" by modifying or manipulating standard Western architectural forms. In Victoria's and Vancouver's Chinatowns in British Columbia, for example, buildings exhibit both Chinese decorative details and Western facades constructed in the prevailing commercial Italianate and Queen Anne fashions of the day.[1] Other Chinatowns, such as those in San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver and Montreal, still have cohesive groupings of similar nineteenth-century buildings. These blend features of both Chinese and Western architectural styles.

Although a homogenous style of Chinatown architecture has never developed, Chinatown structures usually contain several architectural features rarely found on other downtown buildings. The most common elements are recessed or projecting balconies, upturned eaves and roof corners, extended eaves covering the main balconies, sloping tiled roofs, smooth or carved columns topped with cantilevered clusters of beams, flagpoles and parapet walls bearing Chinese inscriptions.

A series of narrow, tightly grouped entrances to retail and service establishments, common along the commercial streets of the Flushing, New York, Chinatown. Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

Decorative features such as green or yellow tiled roofs, circular moon-shaped entrances and Chinese inscriptions transform these three Western-style buildings in Washington, D.C. into typical Chinatown structures. Photos courtesy David Chuenyan Lai.



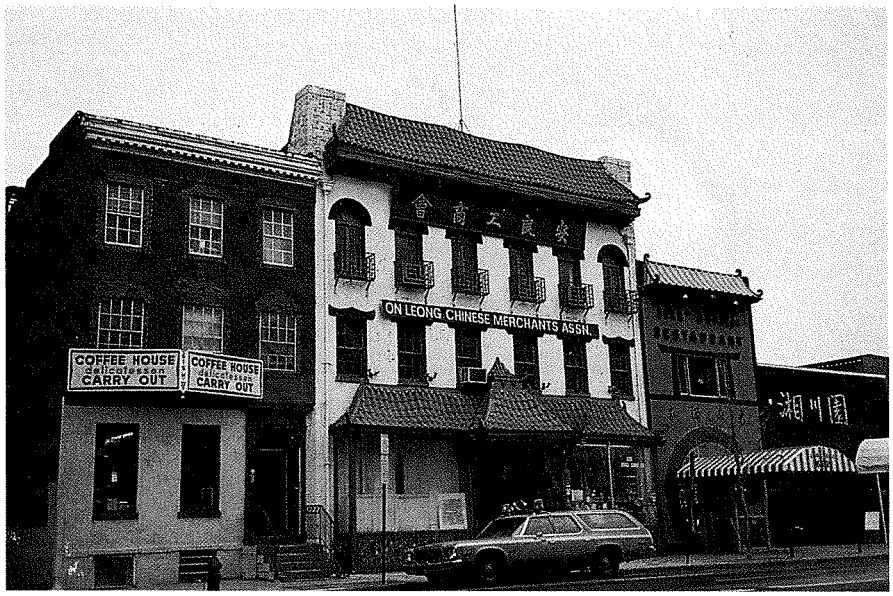
Recessed balconies dominate the upper stories of many Chinatown buildings. This element may be a duplication of practices in Hong Kong, Macao, Canton and other cities in South China, where the facade of a building is set back at each level and the facade plane is met by a wrought iron balcony. Recessed balconies are common in South China because they help keep building interiors cool in the summer and warm in the winter. On rainy days, residents will dry their clothes on bamboo poles hung in the recessed balcony.

A recessed balcony also provides an open space for children to play and for households to worship the heavens during the Chinese New Year and other festivals. In Chinatowns, most Chinese association buildings have recessed balconies, which are useful when the interior assembly hall is too crowded during a festival celebration or when there is a street parade.

I have not come across any building with a recessed balcony outside Chinatown except one in Portland: The Waldo Block, a three-story building at the corner of Washington Street and S.W. Second Avenue, has a recessed balcony, but is four city blocks south of Portland's Chinatown. Even so, a search of the history of the block reveals that it was owned by the Gee How Oak Tin (Zhi Xiao Du Qin) Association during the late 1880s, when Chinatown included that block.[2]

The facades of Chinatown buildings are usually covered with Chinese decorative details.[3] The major decorative elements include schemes of gold, red, green, yellow and other brilliant colors; animal motifs, including dragons, phoenixs, or lions; plant motifs, including pine, bamboo, plum and crimson; other motifs, including pagodas, lanterns, bowls and chopsticks; inscriptions of stylish Chinese characters such as *fu* (happiness or blessings) and *shou* (longevity); signboards inscribed in Chinese characters; hanging lanterns; doors, windows, or archways that are circular, moonshaped and overlain with ornate lattice work; and decorative balustrades adorned with frets.

In traditional Chinese architecture, the colors and animal motifs are believed to influence the fortune and destiny of a building's occupants. Red signifies happiness, gold is linked with prosperity, yellow is the imperial color, blue is associated with peace and green



The On Leong Chinese Merchant's Association Building, Chicago, is a good example of a Chinatown building with many decorative and structural components.

is associated with fertility. Certain mystic animals such as dragons and phoenixes are believed to be auspicious and are commonly carved or painted on walls, columns and shop signs.

Chinatown also is visibly different from other city neighborhoods because of other Chinese structures, such as the Chinese pavilion in Seattle, the Chinese pagoda in Montreal and the Chinese gardens in Vancouver and Winnepeg. There are also Chinese decorative features, such as telephone booths and bilingual street signs in Chinese characters and English letters. Chinese fittings such as pagodas, lanterns and other objects are used as decorative features on many restaurants and gift shops in Chinatown.

Lavishly decorated Chinese arches or gateways are prominent landmarks of many Chinatowns across North America. For example, Chinese arches serve as a symbolic entrance to Chinatowns in Boston, Chicago, Edmonton and Winnepeg. Two Chinese arches in Los Angeles function as entrances to a shopping plaza. A Chinese arch is a symbolic entrance to the Chinese Cultural Center in Vancouver. In Victoria, the Gate of Harmonious Interest was built to commemorate cooperation of the Chinese and non-Chinese citizens of the city in the rehabilitation of Chinatown as well as the harmony of the city's multicultural society.

The way our serial views of Chinatown are linked may cause our minds to mold the chaotic images of Chinatown into a perceived coherent precinct. In Victoria, for example, intricate networks of picturesque arcades, narrow alleys and enclosed courtyards are still found behind the commercial facades of the old buildings. The architectural components relate harmoniously to the scale of people passing through the street: We see a large impressive gateway, then details of its design, then facades of the three-story buildings, then the street, sidewalks, people and vehicles, and finally the alleys and courtyards. The scales of the various parts of Chinatown integrate hierarchically so we have a sense of complexity, coherence and satisfaction.

Also, we are keenly conscious of objects and the intervals between one object and another—the signboards, the merchandise, telephone booths, sidewalk benches and street lamps. They are closely spaced and make us visually aware of the densely populated and overcrowed streetscape — and community — of Chinatown.

Notes

1. Alastair W. Kerr, "The Architecture of Victoria's Chinatown," *Datum* (Summer 1989, Vol. 4, No. 1).

2. Nelson Chia-Chi Ho, *Portland's Chinatown* (Portland, OR: Bureau of Planning, City of Portland, 1978).

3.David Chuenyan Lai, "Chinese Imprints in British Columbia," *BC Studies* (Autumn 1978, No. 39), and Christopher L. Salter, *San Francisco's Chinatown: How Chinese a Town?* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1978).