

Chinatown 2017: Continuity and Change

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In Memory
Philip P. Choy
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Introduction

This essay examines continuity and change in San Francisco Chinatown from the early 1980s to through 2017. San Francisco Chinatown is arguably the oldest existing immigrant based ethnic community in North America, as well as one of the largest. First formed in the optimism of the 1850s Gold Rush, then maintained in the face of years of racism both legal and extra-legal, Chinatown boomed following the end of discriminatory immigration laws in the 1960s. Its continued presence since the 1850s is a testament to the determination of the many generations of its members.

What is occurring in San Francisco Chinatown today is of more than idle interest. In recent years, press reports elsewhere in North America have highlighted what journalists have seen as the “death,” or at least the major decline, of many older Chinatowns, leading some to see similar trends here. Others have contested the application of these claims locally. The issue is not abstract; policy decisions both public and private are and will be shaped by perceptions of the situation.

As will be seen, San Francisco Chinatown is not “dying.” Indeed, it has exhibited remarkable stability, even growth, during the past thirty-five years and remains a vibrant and important community for its residents and the region. However, it IS now under attack, threatened by externally driven economic factors, income disparities, rising housing costs, and speculator/developer interests that see it as a place to exploit rather than a community to maintain.

My purpose is an exploration of what has changed, what has maintained, and what may happen going forward. While focused on Chinatown, attention is also paid to surrounding neighborhoods, especially North Beach, as well as parts of Nob Hill, Russian Hill, and Telegraph Hills, because population shifts in those areas have impacted Chinatown in the past and appear to be doing so again in the present.



Old sign on Clay Street. (Photo by M. Collier)

The essay is largely descriptive. It is based primarily on analysis of an extensive photographic record of Chinatown streets from 1983 onward together with direct observation and supplementary sources in the present. A section with key demographic and economic information from US Census sources is also included, together with discussion of housing issues. Because the research is primarily based on photographs, this report is as much photographic as written. A final section attempts to

interpret the significance of the descriptive findings.

I have attempted to keep text clear and simple, with definition of terms, and more detailed information on methods and other matters relegated to end notes and appendices. (1) A web version of an associated photographic exhibit with additional images and information is available at: < http://online.sfsu.edu/mcollier/community_locale/SF_Chinatown/page6a.2.html>

Chinatown rooftops and the Financial District from the top of 990 Pacific in 2014, with construction of a new Chinese Hospital in progress. External forces and desires have often threatened Chinatown, held off by zoning, political advocacy, and – above all – by the stubborn tenacity the Chinatown community, past and present. (Photo by M. Collier)



Part I: Street level

This section looks at street level Chinatown, based primarily on examination of photographic records of streets and store fronts made between 1983 and the present, supplemented by direct observation, and by reference to Google Street Views. The photographic records take the form of both detailed "photo maps" and various forms of documentary photographic surveys. Collectively, these records contain information on buildings, businesses, people, traffic, and the general visual character of Chinatown and surrounding areas.

The focus is on Chinatown proper, defined as the area encompassed by the Chinatown Plan.⁽²⁾ A map is included in the appendices of this report. (See Appendix 3) Additional material covers North Beach and the areas west of Powell Street, as these sections are those most impacted by the decline in Asian American population since 1990.

A detailed comparative study was made of Stockton Street from the tunnel to Columbus and of Grant Avenue from California Street to Broadway, using photographs from the early 1980s through to present, roughly covering the time the Chinatown Plan has been in force. This comparative analysis was supplemented with a statistical analysis that looked at over thirty different categories of function, both commercial and non-commercial.⁽³⁾



Above: Looking south on Grant during Lunar New Year, 2005. How may this view change in years to come? (Photo by M. Collier)

A similar comparative analysis was made of Broadway, Powell and Kearny Streets and a less detailed study made of cross streets and alleys, as well as portions of neighborhoods surrounding Chinatown to the west and north. A more detailed study of these areas is in progress and may be reported at a later date.

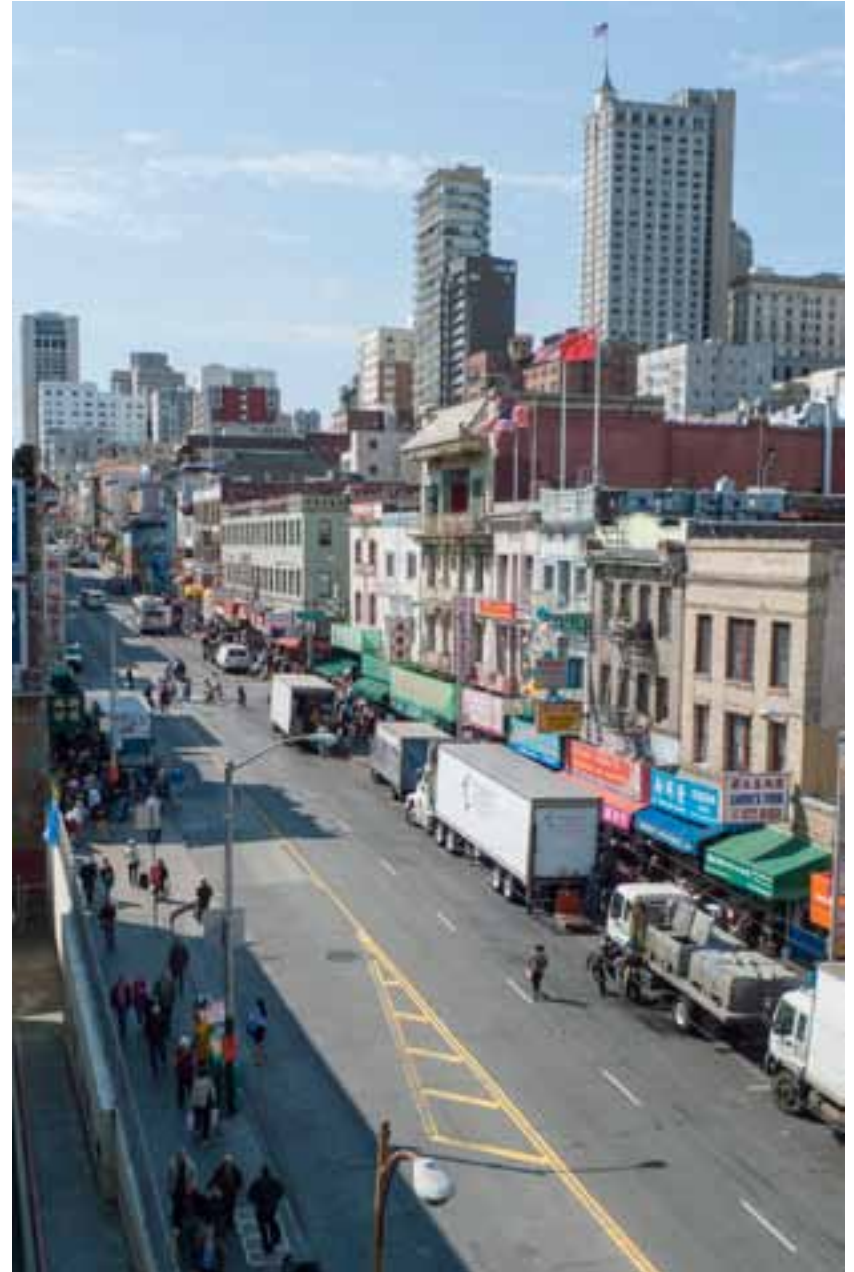
This section does not, with one or two exceptions, examine second floor commercial activity or the all important residential housing functions of upper floors of most buildings in Chinatown.



Stockton Street looking south from Pacific, 1985. (Photo by M. Collier)

Stockton Street between the tunnel and Columbus Avenue

Looking at the crowded sidewalks of Stockton Street today, it is easy to assume it has always been so. The construction of the Ping Yuen apartment buildings in the early 1950s began to shift the population center of Chinatown toward Pacific and Stockton, a shift accelerated by the later construction of the North Ping Yuen in 1962. The intense retail activity found today took off with the rapid population expansion of Chinatown following the change of immigration laws in 1965.



Same view in 2013, looking much the same. But notice the change in signage – the flat face signs of 1985 and earlier have been largely replaced with painted canvas awnings. Similar changes in signage has occurred throughout Chinatown. Not everyone likes these new signs. (Photo by M. Collier)

Prior to that Stockton Street was much quieter; with community institutions, churches, schools and low intensity retail south of Pacific, while the block north of Pacific had bars, furniture stores, a second run movie theater, a Basque SRO/restaurant, and was something of a transition zone to North Beach. (Irene Dea Collier, private communication) The section north of Broadway was not part of Chinatown at all. Indeed the City saw Stockton as transit corridor after the opening of the Broadway tunnel in 1952 and widened the street by narrowing the sidewalks south of Broadway to provide two lanes southbound. Before that the sidewalks were wider, as they are still north of Broadway. (Lelandy Dong, private communication)

Changes came in the 1960s and by the 1970s Stockton Street was the community commercial core of Chinatown, with further expansion north of Broadway. by the 1983, when this study begins. Retail food sales dominated commercial activity and many community institutions were to be found south of Jackson, as they are today. North of Broadway the street was in transition, with Chinese American businesses moving in. When the Chinatown Plan was put in place in the mid 1980s, it classified Stockton Street from the tunnel to Stark Alley (south of Broadway) as "Chinatown Residential Neighborhood Commercial" and the section from there to the north side of Broadway as "Chinatown Community Business." The remainder of the street to Columbus is not covered by the Chinatown Plan. (Please see end notes and appendices for more information on the Chinatown Plan.)

By the late 1980s, the street was a fully developed neighborhood business district. Photo maps of the street in the late 1980s and early 1990s show a complex mix of small to medium sized retail businesses, with over 130 storefronts. Sidewalks were often crowded to the point that people had to walk on the streets.



Right: Narrow side walks made for congested pedestrian space from 1970s onward. Here, merchants have been allowed to temporarily expand onto the street for Lunar New Year but congestion is still evident. (Photo by M. Collier)



Food dominated. In 1992 there were at least nine bakeries/cafes, nine deli/*suk sung* outlets, 24 grocery/produce stores, eight stand alone meat/fish/poultry stores, 16 restaurants, and a number of herb stores.

There were also eleven banks, 33 locations selling dry goods (clothing, hardware, housewares, books etc), over 20 locations offering various services (medical offices, hair salons, real estate, other professional services), and approximately 16 different institutional locations including churches, temples, schools, social services, government offices, and associations. None of these counts includes activities on second floors or above, where there were also more professional offices and additional associations, although housing was by far the primary function above street level.

The mix of businesses and functions seen in the 1980s and 1990s are still there today. However, there have been some changes and trends.

Details shots from photo maps of Stockton Street in 1983 (above left) and 1996 (above.) While food still dominates today, there are fewer newspaper and magazine vendors now than twenty years ago. (All photos: AAS308)

Commercial activity on Stockton Street expanded from 1983 onward. There is no evidence in the photographs that the 1989 earthquake and subsequent demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway had any lasting impact on Stockton Street businesses. In fact, even with loss of some business spaces to Central Subway construction, there are more (141+) active store fronts on Stockton Street in 2016 than in the early 1990s.

For example, there has been an expansion of retail activity in the 800 block between Clay and Sacramento. Some of this results from long time community institutions opening up new retail spaces in their street fronts but the entire area is distinctly more vibrant than in the early or mid 1980s.

Another change that produced more retail activity along the southern section of Stockton Street was the closure of the St. Mary's School after the 1989 earthquake and its sale to a private owner in the 1990s. The ground floor has been divided into small retail



spaces and the Holy Family Catholic Church, with its Chinese Holy Family, is gone as well, also replaced with retail space. The construction of the new subway station between Clay and Washington eliminated some retail space but overall there is more business activity south of Broadway today than thirty years ago.

North of Broadway, by the 1990s Chinese American business had largely taken over the 1300 block and subsequently expanded north into the 1400 block between Vallejo and Columbus as a number of long time Italian American and other businesses closed. Today, some of these businesses may be living on borrowed time, as the Chinese American population of North Beach declines.

Above: New small retail space in Sun Yat-Sen Building, 836 Stockton Street. Left: Old St. Marys School building, showing more new retail space. (Photos by M. Collier)

Food continues to be the dominant retail function of Stockton Street but changes are taking place. There has been a slight decline in the number of stores offering fresh produce and an increase in the number of what might termed “dry groceries” - stores that sell canned food, dried noodles, dried fish, and so forth but not fresh produce. They require less staff and inventory does not need daily restocking, as compared to produce stores and meat/poultry/fish markets. There has also been a small decline in the number of stand alone fish/meat/poultry markets, but several larger grocery stores are now offering these items inside their stores, and all these changes may be simply the normal churning of small business activity.



Right: 1248 Stockton St., 2016. This dry grocery previously sold produce as well as dried and canned goods. (Photo by M. Collier)



There has been a significant increase in stores that specialize in dried foods, largely imported, which often blur the line between food store and herb store. Some of these stores are quite large and their shelving and displays more spacious and neater than most older markets. They appear less dependent on daily purchases by a local clientele, draw customers from a wider region than simply Chinatown and North Beach, and like the dry groceries, require less frequent restocking as well as smaller staffs.

Left: 1252-1254 Stockton Street, 2016 . This medium sized dried foods store had been a jewelry store in 1980s, then sub divided into a jewelry store and a children's clothing store, then a small dried foods store and the clothing store, before being recombined into the single store seen here. Other new dried foods stores, like this but larger are now to be found elsewhere on Stockton Street as well as on Grant Avenue. (Photo by M. Collier)

Right: These two new stores are located in spaces that for many years housed traditional Chinese jewelry stores (Photo by M. Collier)

While the actual number of jewelry stores has not changed much, there are fewer stores selling traditional 24K gold and jade Chinese jewelry. Several long time jewelry stores on Stockton have closed or moved away and those that remain are generally smaller, with more limited inventory. This trend can be seen on some of



the cross streets below Stockton as well. Some other types of businesses have also shown declines. Small photo processing shops have closed with the arrival of digital photography or have expanded operations to include cell phone and related items and there has been a significant decline in the number of news/magazine vendors, not only on Stockton but throughout Chinatown.

The obvious new development on Stockton Street is the Central Subway station between Washington and Clay. Many people and organizations in Chinatown pushed for the subway but it may bring unforeseen changes. Property owners and some businesses are likely to benefit, others may not, and the impact on residential and business rents may be a problem. There are reports of developers eyeing properties in the vicinity and at least one residential building nearby on Clay Street has been making improvements that appear to be aimed at a new clientele drawn to the area by the future subway.

Above left: The Hogan and Vest building was demolished for construction of the Central Subway Station (below) displacing eight businesses as well as the residents on the second floor. Chinatown CDC was able to find places for the residents and some of the businesses. (Photo by M. Collier)



Several specific changes on Stockton deserve noting here for historical reasons, although some will also be discussed later in this report. National Dollar Stores, a venerable Chinese American business chain selling general merchandise in working class neighborhoods throughout California, operated a store for many years on Stockton Street north of Broadway. By 1983 it had moved to Broadway before closing for good in the early 1990s. Next to them on Stockton was a Woolworths store, this was still in operation in 1988 but it had closed by 1990. Their closings, while linked to the larger economic woes of both companies, also reflect the changing class structure of the population in San Francisco. Farther north on Stockton, the 2003 closing of the Florence Italian Delicatessen and Ravioli Factory, preceded by the closing of Panelli Bros. Deli across the street, left Molinari's Deli on Columbus as the last old time Italian deli in North Beach. Both delis were replaced by Chinatown businesses. At 1208 Stockton, the Obrero



May Shu replaced the Florence Italian Deli, but is in a now marginal location for a Chinatown business because of changing demographics in North Beach. (Photo by M. Collier)



Hotel, originally a Basque rooming house and restaurant and still hotel in the 1990s, is now gone.

On the whole, Stockton Street has been a remarkably stable community commercial and institutional district for the past thirty years. Vacancies are still rare on Stockton, there were four in 1985, three in 1992 and 2008, and four in 2016, for a stable vacancy rate that is less than 3%.(4) Because most Stockton Street business are directed at a Chinese American clientele, it remains to be seen what will happen with continued changes and declines in Chinese and Asian American population of the Chinatown/ North Beach region.

Left: Proposed demolition of the Orangeland building at Stockton and Jackson, seen here in 2008, was the focus of intense community debate regarding development and displacement in the early 1980s which reached the highest levels of city government and helped spur the development of the Chinatown Plan. (Photo by M. Collier)

Grant Avenue

This section examines Grant Avenue between Bush and Broadway. Grant Avenue has been the tourist serving section of Chinatown for a very long time but through the 1960s it also was the location of many community serving businesses. These declined significantly from 1970 onward and the demise of some well known community serving businesses on Grant helped provide support for the Chinatown Plan zoning controls in the 1980s. The Chinatown Plan designated Grant Avenue from Bush to California as a “Chinatown Community Business”

area, the section from California Street through the first structures on the north side of Jackson Street as a “Chinatown Visitor Retail” area, and the remaining section of Grant north to Broadway as “Chinatown Residential Neighborhood Commercial”, which basically reflected the business mix at the time the plan was adopted. Grant continues to be the tourist center of Chinatown but within that surface stability there is change and evidence of challenges to economic viability.

Below: Typical modern gift shops, offering generic tourist items, low end imports, and some clothing. Notice again the colorful painted canvas awnings, which have, since the 1980s, largely replaced the older flat face and neon signage throughout Chinatown. While sheltering areas below, they also make sidewalks feel more enclosed. (Photo by M. Collier)





Community serving businesses on Grant declined in number during the 1980s. In 1984, the venerable Italian Market at Jackson and Grant (left) was still a local food store and fresh produce could still be bought at various locations along Grant, including 921 Grant as seen below on the right. By 1990 there were no produce stores or Chinese delis south of Pacific Avenue; Italian Market had become a T-shirt store and 921 Grant a gift shop, as they still are today. Indeed, the proliferation of T-shirt stores and other generic tourist businesses started in the 1980s.

Below: 921 Grant in 1984. (AAS 308 photo)

Above: 966 Grant, in 1984. (AAS 308 photo) Below: 966 Grant in 2016. (Photo by M. Collier)





1100 Grant – Left & above in 1984, still the site of Dupont Market, which first opened in 1914. (AAS 308 photos) There was still a food market on this location in the 1990s under a different name. Below, same corner in 2016, now a tourist/lottery/cell phone store. (Photo by M. Collier)

After 1990 tourist oriented businesses continued to expand north on Grant past Jackson to Broadway, while neighborhood serving businesses have declined all along Grant. In 2016, only one produce market remains on Grant, while groceries and *suk sung* markets (Chinese delis) have declined in number by 50% since 1990. Only one category of food market has grown in number - dried food stores, that blur the distinction between herb and food store, have increased from 1 to 4, a pattern also seen on Stockton Street. As discussed earlier, these stores do not appear to be as dependent on a local clientele as other food stores.





1016 Grant in 2010

A notable closure of a long time community business is that of Ginn Wall Hardware at 1016 Grant, which was replaced by a gift shop/clothing store. There are still community serving hardware stores on Broadway and Stockton streets but no longer on Grant. Ginn Wall's closure also marks a final end of the one time dominance of Chinatown hardware stores by members of the Der clan (Irene Dea Collier, private communication) (Photo by M. Collier)



1016 Grant in 2016

Some new (and older) businesses in Chinatown blur the line between tourist and community serving stores. This is particularly true of clothing/gift stores like this one, which replaced Ginn Wall Hardware, that combine T-shirt and souvenir sales with clothing items aims at locale clientele, making a statistical count of different types of businesses more difficult. (Photo by M. Collier)



Above left: Grant Avenue 1984 – Typical mid range Chinatown tourist store display shows a mix of Asian items and costs. Stores of this type have declined in number since 1990. (AAS 308 photo)



Above right: Grant Avenue 2016 – Two types of tourist business – on the left a generic tourist store selling discount cameras and other items; on the right a small import store. (Photo by M. Collier)

Conversely, tourist serving businesses have increased in number. More significant has been a change in the mix of tourist oriented businesses. The analysis divided tourist businesses into two categories: a) "Chinatown tourist" businesses that primarily sell import items connected to Chinatown, China, or Asia; and b) "generic tourist" business whose primary merchandise has little connection to Chinatown and could just as well be located in Fisherman's Wharf or some other tourist location in the city. "Generic tourist" stores may sell some Asian import items but emphasis general souvenirs, T-shirts, cameras, low end jewelry, sweat shirts, luggage bags, etc.

In the early 1980s, most tourist related stores on Grant Avenue were Chinatown related tourist businesses, but by 1990 generic tourist business made up 20-25% of tourist stores. Excluding jewelry stores, Chinatown tourist businesses have dropped from 45 in 1990 to 32 in 2016. The trend is clear, stores primarily offering import items from Asia, both high end and low end, have declined in number. Conversely, generic tourist stores have increased in number from 21 in 1990 to 36 in 2016.(5)

There is evidence to suggest an increase in business closures; in 1990 there were no examples of stores advertising closing or retirement sales, instead there were a number of “grand openings.” In contrast, observations and photographs made in August and September 2016 show seven examples of stores announcing retirement and/or permanent closing sales on Grant between Bush and Broadway. Three involve tourist oriented jewelry stores and two others are large, long established import stores.

Of course, not all of these stores may actually close and some may be replaced with similar stores as part of the normal turnover of small business activity. Still, the situation on Grant Avenue does seem less stable than elsewhere in Chinatown.

Right: Tourist oriented jewelry store closure. This is example of a long established store going out of business. There was an increase in the number of this type of jewelry store from 9 in 1990 to 16 in 2015 but one has since closed and three more are now in the process of going out of business. What does this mean? (Photo by M. Collier)

Below: More closure sales. Are these real? Are they just to get sales? For example, the store (and building) seen below right is owned by a major Chinatown property owner. The photo was made in september 2016, by November the 2016 the closing sale signs were gone, as can be seen in the photograph of the China Trade Center later in this report. (Photos by M. Collier)





Above: This space has been vacant for some time.
(Photo by M. Collier)

Right: This large store front on Grant and California was previously vacant in late 2014, then housed an import antiques and fabrics store which closed at end of summer 2016, and was vacant again in October 2016, when this photo was made. A new store had opened by early 2017, selling high end cosmetics and totally unconnected to Chinatown. (Photo by M. Collier)

These closing sales are on top of an increase in the number of vacancies compared to 1990. Photo records of Grant Avenue between California and Broadway in spring of 1990 show only four vacant store fronts, a vacancy rate of approximately 3%. Examination of Google maps and on the ground observation at several dates in 2016 identified ten vacancies in the same blocks, which would be a vacancy rate of approximately 8%. There were additional vacancies between Bush and California. These numbers are, of course, volatile and may change if new stores open or additional ones close. But taken together, the increase in closings and in vacancies suggests that the traditional character of tourist related business on Grant is in flux.

Have tourist tastes changed? Is the availability of import goods in a wider range of other locales hurting such businesses in Chinatown? Are property owners raising rents beyond the point that such many merchants feel they can survive? Even when vacancies are filled by new business ventures, the character of those new businesses may themselves may reflect new pressures and directions in commercial activity both on Grant and elsewhere in Chinatown.



Two examples of change that raise larger questions for the future are the sale of the China Trade Center/Empress of China building (838 Grant) and recent conflicts over new business developments at 920 Grant. The closure of the Empress of China restaurant is part of a larger decline in large banquet venues and a general flux in the restaurant scene in Chinatown. Banquet restaurants, in particular, now have significant competition from newer businesses in the suburbs closer to where many Chinese Americans now live and more attractive to the younger generation with few ties to Chinatown. A bigger question is what will happen to the much larger China Trade building within which the Empress was located. The largest building on Grant Avenue, it not only housed the banquet restaurant but also several floors of office spaces and other businesses as well as street level retail space on Grant Avenue and on Portsmouth Square.



Above and right: The China Trade Center/Empress of China building. It is the tall building the center of the image on the right. What happens with this building will have major impact on Grant Avenue and potentially all of Chinatown. Please note that the Peking Bazaar seen in the right foreground is not part of the China Trade Center building. (Photos by M. Collier)





In 2014 and 2015 considerable controversy and conflict erupted over new developments at former site of the Grant Palace Restaurant at 920 Grant when new business owners attempted to create a “co-work space” facility on the second floor that was initially marketed to tech industry workers. Both the SF Planning Department and the Chinatown Community Development Center raised objections to the new business as being in violation of zoning adopted in the 1980s as part of the Chinatown Plan. The issues were further aggravated when marketing materials for the China Trade Center included plans for similar activity on a much larger scale.⁽⁶⁾

A key intent of zoning controls in the 1987 Chinatown Plan was protection of Chinatown from expansion of business activities from the Financial District and these new plans for “co-work” spaces were and are a new threat of a similar character because such uses would be able to pay higher rents than existing Chinatown businesses without either serving or employing Chinatown residents.

Proponents of the new business activity argued that business slowdowns in Chinatown required a more “flexible” approach to maintain the economic viability of Chinatown. A compromise of sorts was reached with regard to 920 Grant but the conflict over the larger issues continues. Much of this debate centers on second floor office spaces, which this report cannot evaluate, but the possible instability of Grant Avenue ground floor businesses described previously does feed the conflict, as do demographic, housing, and business shifts in the larger Chinatown/North Beach area.

Left: 920/950 Grant, fall 2016: Former site of a restaurant on first and second floors with residences on the third floor, the building was vacant until sold to new owners. A generic tourist business now occupies the street level with residential use on the third floor. Conversion of the second floor to unpermitted uses generated conflict. (Photo by M. Collier)



Above: Ning Yung Association building on Waverly. Institutional ownership has tended to assist the stability of SF Chinatown but perhaps should not be taken for granted. In some other Chinatowns, traditional associations and other institutions have reportedly sold long held properties. (Photo by M. Collier)



Above: Lower Clay Street – some cross streets are important transit avenues to and through Chinatown, the lower sections of which mark the abrupt transition between Chinatown and the Financial district. (Photo by M. Collier)

Chinatown cross streets and alleys

A detailed examination of these streets (Sacramento, Clay, Washington, Jackson, Pacific, and, as well as the many alleys) is still in progress, so the comments here represent a preliminary analysis which may be subject to later modification. That said, changes in street level commercial activity on these streets has been moderate over the past thirty years, except for a several very specific locations.

Institutional activity - churches, schools, and medical services dominate many sections between Stockton and Powell. Additional institutional presence, including churches and associations, continue to be found below Stockton Street, as are Chinese Playground and Portsmouth Square open spaces areas. Ping Yuen public housing units, now mamged by Chinatown CDC, take up

large sections of Pacific. This is consistent with the situation 30 years ago.

Retail activity on these streets was and still is dominated by small businesses serving residents of Chinatown and the immediate vicinity with some visitors from beyond the neighborhood. Tourist oriented businesses are relatively rare. Professional services, offices, and print shops are also found, especially toward the southern end of Chinatown. There has been a history of restaurant activity on some streets, most of which caters to a local clientele and others to a wider audience. In general, the mix of businesses seen today is similar to that seen twenty and thirty years ago.

Right: Small produce store on Jackson below Stockton Street. Retail activity on the cross streets is, for the most part, noticeably less intense than on Stockton Street and businesses often smaller. (Photo by M. Collier)



A walk through in mid November of 2016 found 11 vacant store fronts on the major east west streets, perhaps a slight increase over what was seen in the 1980s but not dramatically so. The vacancy rate appears to be more similar to Stockton Street than to Grant Avenue. However, some vacancies are VERY long standing, suggesting a weakness in the rental market for retail space and there has been definite decline in commercial activity along Sacramento Street.

While the broad picture is one of continuity, several specific changes are significant. One is

Left: Washington Street below Stockton. Traditional jewelry stores have declined in number throughout Chinatown. Paul's Jewelry has been closed for some time and the store front has remained vacant for two years. Chat Hai is still open but often by appointment only. (Photo by M. Collier)

the disappearance of sewing factories, discussed later. In terms of scale, the most obvious are the construction of the Central Subway station on Washington and Stockton, the replacement of the old Chinese Hospital building on Jackson Street, and the transfer of the Ping Yuen Housing Projects to the Chinatown Community Development

Corporation. The impact of the subway and new hospital on Chinatown remains to be seen but the new management of the Ping Yuen Housing Projects may have significant impact because the maintenance of a strong residential community is essential to many Chinatown businesses and organizations.



Long troubled by mismanagement by the City, the Pings and 990 Pacific are a crucial part of the housing stock in Chinatown. Chinatown CDC faces major challenges taking over the management of these five buildings on Pacific, including the physical rehab of long neglected properties and, even more crucially, the organizing and management efforts needed to meet the long ignored social needs of the residents. (Photo by M. Collier)

There have been significant changes in the restaurant scene. In addition to the closure of the Empress of China on Grant described earlier, there has been a marked decline in large dim sum houses. New Asia, which was the site of first really large dim sum house, is now the last large dim sum and banquet venue. The large weekend crowds and lines for dim sum are gone, victims of

suburban competition, a declining local population, and to some extent, possibly, the loss of the Embarcadero Freeway. It seems unlikely that any new large venues will replace them. The new "China Live" development opening on Broadway plans caters to an entirely different clientele.



Above: There were once two large dim sum houses adjacent to each other here on Pacific above Stockton, with long lines and wait times on weekends. They are now used as service centers for Chinese Hospital and the Chinese Community Health Plan. (Photo by M. Collier)

Right: Smaller restaurants have also suffered – this location on lower Jackson was once the site of an old time Chinatown restaurant serving mainly a local clientele, especially Sze-yup speakers. Known for its leisurely dim sum service, it was replaced in 2014 by this "bistro" serving "cuisine indochine" which certainly is not trying to reach the previous clientele! There is evidence that some old time Chinatown restaurants are suffering, probably from the declining local Chinese American population, and that some operators, both old and new, are experimenting with new types of restaurants. This business is but one example. Note that the Tsung Tsin Ben. Association owns the building and is located on the second floor. (Photo by M. Collier)





Above, left: Spotford Alley after improvements. Above right: Stark Alley remains unimproved – In addition to delivery points for businesses, it houses a number of residential buildings with dark interiors and used to have sewing shops. (Photo by M. Collier)

Alleys are an important aspect of Chinatown, both for housing and often for of lower intensity small business activity, including print shops, fortune cookie bakeries, professional offices, book and magazine stores, and (in the past) many small sewing factories. Various associations and social clubs can also be found on some alleys. Alleys also serve as easy means of transit for pedestrians, away from the crowded sidewalks and vehicular traffic of Stockton and Grant.

The data on which this report is based does not contain enough information on past ground level functions on alleys, including businesses, from which a statement could be made about continuities and changes in the commercial functions of alleys nor was a count made of

vacant storefronts. That said, there is some sense that ground floor usage along many alleys and lesser streets has become less intense.

Changes have occurred with the physical condition and appearance of many of Chinatowns alleys. However, some alleys remain unimproved and all need ongoing maintenance.



Above: Looking north on Kearny in 1984, Manilatown block is empty and the Bella Union Theater is still open. (AAS 308 photo) Right: Same view in 2017, with new construction on the east side of the street. (Photo by M. Collier)



Kearny Street and Columbus to Broadway

Kearny and Columbus were, historically, an eastern boundary of Chinatown, separating it from the Barbary Coast and Produce District. Today, heavy, fast moving traffic on both streets is a barrier and makes even the Chinatown side of the streets less than friendly for many activities. For these and other reasons the area has been and remains a transition zone from the Chinatown perspective. The Chinatown Plan designated Kearny Street from Sacramento to Columbus as a "Chinatown Community Business District" for zoning purposes, with the exception of the then vacant I-Hotel lot, designated as "Chinatown Residential Neighborhood Commercial" and the Holiday Inn (now The Hilton) site, which was placed

outside the Chinatown plan. The Chinatown Plan extends approximately 3/4 of a block down Clay and Commercial below Kearny and also includes the triangular section bounded by Washington, Columbus and Kearny. The impact of the zoning is seen in the visually abrupt transition between Chinatown and the financial district, both along Kearny and on Clay Street.



Above: This building was red tagged after the 1989 earthquake, a detail of some of the damage is seen on the right. Below right: After purchase by Hung On Tong, the building was demolished and a new association building constructed. (Photos by M. Collier)

Kearny Street has seen both continuity and major change since the 1980s. The east side of Kearny from Sacramento to the Hilton Hotel continues to have an eclectic mix of small businesses, with some vacancies, most of which are expected to be filled soon. The Hilton, together with new structures including City College, St. Mary's School building, and the I-Hotel/Manilatown building dominate the eastern side toward Columbus. The mix of businesses on the western side from Sacramento to Columbus has remained much the same over the past 30 years, with two exceptions; the closure of the Bella Union theater and the replacement of four businesses by an new association building. The latter occurred when earthquake damage in 1989 led to the demolition of a building housing five businesses on the corner of Jackson and the construction of a new building for Hung On Tong Association on the site.





Above: New construction on Kearny; the I-Hotel/Manilatown center with St. Mary's Catholic School in the middle of the block and City College behind that. (Photo by M. Collier)

This continuity should not mask major changes on Kearny, which has seen more major construction on the one block between Jackson and Washington than the entire rest of Chinatown in the past thirty years. The filling of the long vacant Manilatown block with the new I-Hotel/Manilatown building, St. Mary's School, and the City College has changed the eastern skyline of Chinatown and, across the Kearny to the west, the previously mentioned earthquake related demolition that brought a new Hung On Tong Association building. Additionally, the Buddha's Universal Church is currently (2017) planning new construction in the middle of the block. A new office building, currently housing East West Bank on the ground floor, has also been built at 900 Kearny, across Jackson from the I-Hotel.

When making an analysis of Kearny Street, the expectation was there would be significant storefront vacancies in some sections. This was not the case, there were none in 1984 and, while there seems to have been a peak in vacancies around 2012 and 2013, there are relatively few today. Of those that are current in early 2017, several are expected to be filled soon with new tenants or new construction. There is, of course, one major "vacancy" - St. Mary's Catholic School did not survive its move to its new building on Kearny and the building is now used for other purposes.

As a transition zone between Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods to the east, the future of Kearny may be volatile. In 2013 co-work spaces were located on Kearny near Sacramento and on Clay Street below Kearny. It is not clear if they were permitted by the zoning and the Kearny Street one appears to have closed, but they may be one sign of things to come as new groups and interests look for space in and around Chinatown.

An visual research study of Columbus Avenue in the early 1980s by a San Francisco State anthropology student described it as a connector between Downtown and North Beach and concluded that it was unlikely that there would be a significant movement of more Chinatown related businesses onto Columbus. This prediction has proved to be correct. (Yaple, 1982)

The business mix on the west side of Columbus to Broadway has remained fairly constant over the years, although individual businesses have come and gone. While there are Chinatown related business between Pacific and Broadway, Columbus is dominated by other businesses and the street really belongs more to North Beach than to Chinatown.

The east side of Columbus has never had a Chinatown presence and the major change since the 1980s, from a Chinatown perspective, has been the closure of Clown Alley, where Chinatown old timers would go if they wanted burgers and fries. A walk though on Columbus in the fall of 2016 found no vacancies at street level on either the west or the east sides.



Right, above: Columbus Avenue between Pacific and Kerouac Alley, an eclectic mix of Asian and non-Asian businesses. Right, below: The former location of Clown Alley at Columbus and Jackson, formerly a burger joint sometimes patronized by Chinatown residents, is now a wine bar and "Basque" tapas restaurant with no relation to the old time Basque restaurants that used to found on Broadway and Stockton Streets. (Photo by M. Collier)

Broadway between Grant and Powell/Mason

Broadway was the traditional northern boundary of Chinatown and few Chinatown businesses were located on the north side of the street until the 1970s. By the 1980s Chinatown businesses dominated both sides of the street, a reality recognized by the Chinatown Plan in 1986, which included all of the south side of Broadway between Columbus and Powell, as well as most of the north side, within its boundaries as a "Chinatown Community Business" area. Broadway has shown considerable stability since 1990 but also significant evidence of possible changes to come, depending on which section is examined.

Photographs of the south side below Stockton Street in 1990 show that all but one or two businesses were Chinatown serving enterprises, especially retail food and restaurants. Almost half the block was and is taken up by the Pacific Court Motel and the Sam Wong Hotel, which also has retail space on its ground floor. Above Stockton Street to Mason Street all businesses were Chinatown related, including food, clothing, professional services, a laundry, and a childcare center. Much of the block between Stockton and Powell was and is dominated by the North Ping Yuen and its parking lot, on which in 1990 Chinatown CDC was building the Bayside Elderly Housing project. Buildings become totally residential shortly above Powell Street and at Mason Street the Chinatown Public Health Center had been built in the 1970s immediately above

New construction. Above right: Built in the air space over the Broadway Tunnel, Self Help for the Elderly opened Lady Shaw Senior Center in 1990. Below right: Bayside Elderly Housing with North Ping Yuen behind. What will the future bring now that Chinatown CDC operates the Pings, as well as Bayside apartments? (Photo by M. Collier)





Above: North side of Broadway below Stockton in 2009, with a mix of Chinatown businesses, in early 2017 it looks much the same. Below right: This building was new in 1990, housing Ocean City restaurant, a rebuilt World Theater, and offices above. It is now the location of an ambitious mix of upscale restaurants and entertainment industry businesses titled "China Live" (under construction in the photo) which spills over into adjacent 460 Broadway, once the final home of National Dollar Store. This project is another example of upscale development in the Chinatown area. If successful, what will its impact be on other developments in Chinatown? (Photo by M. Collier)

the Broadway Tunnel. Across the street from it is Self Help for the Elderly's Lady Shaw Senior Center, which had just been completed in 1990. There were no commercial vacancies on the south side of the street in 1990.

On the north side of Broadway, residential functions and Jean Parker Elementary School take up most of the block below Mason to Powell. In 1990, Chinatown businesses, including a sewing shop, dominated the block from Powell to Stockton, with the notable exception of Des Alpes Restaurant, a then venerable Basque institution which had originally included a





boarding house above, now an SRO. Below Stockton all the businesses were Chinese American, including not only restaurants and cafes but also National Dollar Store and House of Louie appliances. The newly completed Ocean City building in the middle of the block included theater space, in which World Theater was showing Chinese language movies in 1990. There was only one possible retail vacancy to be seen on the north side of Broadway in 1990, which may actually have been a sewing shop rather than a vacancy.

The mix of businesses and functions was much the same in 2009, with some notable specific changes on the north side. Jean Parker Elementary School had been totally rebuilt, Des Alpes, like Obrero Hotel on Stockton Street, was gone, House of Louie had become a large cafe, National

Left: The Sam Wong Hotel added a floor after 1990, providing an example of expansion with consideration for long term residents. The building has had repeated storefront vacancies recently. (Photo by M. Collier) Below: Retail food sales, south side of Broadway below Stockton in 2009, noticeably more active than the section closer to Grant, as seen in photo of Sam Wong Hotel. (AAS 308 photos)



Dollar had become a pet store, and World Theater was no more. On the south side, Sam Wong Hotel had added a fourth floor but the overall mix of businesses was much the same as in 1990 with 5~6 evenly distributed vacancies on the north side of Broadway and only one on the south side. This was a noticeable increase in vacancies from 1990, although a number of these were soon filled.

The situation in late 2016 is mixed. Chinatown businesses continue to be active and dominant on both sides of the street below Stockton. While there are more vacancies between Stockton and Grant than in 2009, at least three are being renovated for new stores. Additionally, the construction of two new low income housing complexes on lower Broadway may help maintain a flow of customers for stores below Stockton.

Right: Broadway/Sansome Apartments under construction in 2013. Chinatown CDC has built two new low income housing complexes on Broadway in recent years that may provide customers for Chinatown businesses, although they will not make up for the larger loss of Asian American population since 1990. Below: Kitchen area in a new apartment in 2015, just prior to rent up. (Photos by M. Collier)



Broadway above Stockton Street is less stable. This is especially true on the north side of Broadway where businesses appear to be suffering and storefront vacancies have climbed. Since 2013 as many as 8 out of 14 store fronts have been vacant at the same time, in late 2016 six were still vacant and several have been vacant for years. Chinatown businesses on this section of Broadway may be suffering from the decline of the Chinese American population in North Beach and Russian Hill areas. It is also possible that building owners, looking to capitalize on the up scaling of North Beach, are



Above: Vacancies have become common on the north side of Broadway below Powell. In 2015 approximately half the storefronts were empty. A new business has since opened at the space in the foreground but the storefront beyond remained vacant in early 2017, as do others further on.

Left: The Des Alpes building, former home of a Basque boarding house and restaurant. The storefronts have been largely vacant for in recent years and there is an SRO on the upper floors. The building has been sold to what appears to be an investment group and its future is unknown. (Photos by M. Collier)

raising rents above which Chinatown merchants can afford. At least one building on this block has been sold recently, apparently to be an investment firm, part of a pattern of real estate speculators becoming active in and around Chinatown. This section of Broadway looks to be very much in transition but to what?

Another change is planned beautification and safety work on Broadway. Chinatown CDC has been working with the City on plans to improve Broadway as a street, with attention to both appearance and safety. Work below Columbus has been completed and the work on the Chinatown section is to begin soon.



Powell Street and the northwestern boundaries of Chinatown

While historically something of a western boundary of Chinatown, Powell Street between Washington and Broadway it has been firmly part of Chinatown for a long time, south of Washington it begins to transition out into Nob Hill and north of Broadway it transitions into North Beach. As Chinese Americans expanded their residential presence up and over the hill toward Polk street in the 1970s, Chinatown businesses increased in number along Powell Street, especially between Pacific and Broadway, where a small retail food center had developed by 1980 and the Chinatown Plan included Powell from the south side of Washington to the north side of Broadway within its boundaries. In the 1980s Chinatown businesses expanded both south and north into the transition areas, as well as west up Pacific and along Mason Street. Today that expansion shows signs of retreat, as the residential areas west and northwest of Powell have seen some of the largest declines in Chinese American population.

Photographic records of Powell Street south of Washington are incomplete, so the comparison presented here is of Powell Street between Washington and Union in 1984/85 compared to what could be seen in the fall of 2016. In the mid 1980s there were approximately 38 Chinatown related businesses in this section, with the most common being retail food outlets, including a Chinatown produce store as far north as Green Street. There were also hair salons, professionals services, a gas station, dry goods, clothing stores, import stores, and sewing machine repair services.

Above: West side of Powell at Pacific, 1985. Groceries, produce, two delis, bakery, and more. Even a traffic jam. Notice the many flat signs, painted awnings had just started to become common.

Below: A pioneer too far? The most northerly Chinatown grocery/produce store at Green Street in 1984. It did not last and is now a laundromat. (AAS 308 photos)





A sign of Chinatown expansion, 1985. A Chinatown seafood restaurant co-opts the fleur de lis of the former Mirabelle French Restaurant, next to the fire station. (AAS 308 photos)

Of particular note, when comparing to 2016, there were at least 8 storefronts believed to house sewing factories. Not counted in these totals were a number of community institutions and Cathay Mortuary. All of the businesses south of Green Street could be classified as Chinatown related by 1985, while north of Green there were only two Chinatown businesses as compared to seven other businesses. Not included in these counts were a number of parking garages, at least two with repair services as well.

There were only two clearly identified vacancies, the most notable in 1984 being the just closed Elu's Basque Restaurant, located in the Hotel du Midi Building, another former Basque boarding house which in the 1950s also housed a Mexican bakery on the corner of Broadway. (Irene Dea Collier, private communication) By 1985, Elu's had become a Chinese seafood restaurant. In 1984, photographs show the Mirabelle French Restaurant still in operation next to the fire station but by 1985 it was replaced by a Chinese restaurant. The Korean Methodist Church still operated next to the Library and Cathay Mortuary was still in operation between Jackson and Pacific.

In late 2016 a total of 40 Chinatown businesses were identified on Powell, more than in 1985, although none now are located north of Green Street. As before, retail food remains important but the number of stores selling produce has declined. The seafood restaurant that replaced Elu's is gone, and is now a bar. The sewing factories are all gone and with them, the sewing machine repair service.



Left: No more produce. This store used to sell produce, now only dry groceries. (Photo by M. Collier)

Doomed? One of two remaining produce stores on Powell, this building on the corner of Vallejo has been deteriorating structurally for years despite the new paint job in 2014. It is probably headed for demolition at some point. The store displays noticeably less produce than in the past.

Quong Ming Jade Emperor Palace has taken over the Korean Methodist Church and Cathay Mortuary has been replaced by Woh Hei Yuen Park, both these changes to be discussed separately. Overall, Powell Street south of Broadway looks more lively today than in 1985, in part because active retail businesses have taken over some of the former sewing shop spaces, but also because the shift to painted awning signs has made for brighter signage. North of Broadway the situation is more complex, with some evidence of contraction and more vacancies. Overall, in the fall of 2016 there five clearly identified vacancies (about 9% of available storefronts) as compared to two in 1984 and one in 1985. A number of these are former sewing shop locations.

There is evidence of gentrification, a number of former Chinatown business sites have been taken over by more tony enterprises further up Pacific and along Mason Street, where a Chinatown business presence was never very strong anyway. The new businesses include an upscale restaurant/bar that replaced a long time Chinese fast food place, fancy clothing boutiques, and an antique store, while on Powell itself, a co-work space has opened between Jackson and Pacific in another building that has been sold recently.

This building at 1224 Powell, which was sold in 2014, now houses a co-work space on the ground floor which advertises online as “White Space Studio” – its selling point being close to North Beach, Union Square, Nob Hill. No mention that it is in Chinatown! (Photos by M. Collier)



Part II: Other changes and continuities

Loma Prieta Earthquake

A number of changes in Chinatown and vicinity flow directly from the 1989 quake, some of which have already been described. These include: a) the closing of St. Mary's Catholic School on Stockton and the eventual building of a new St. Mary's School on Kearny, b) the demolition of a building on Kearny and Jackson and its replacement with the new Hung On Tong Association Building, c) the total rebuilding of Jean Parker Elementary School and, d) the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway and later building of two Chinatown CDC low income housing projects on the former on and off ramps locations.

Although already in development prior to the quake, new city requirements for retrofitting of unreinforced masonry buildings (UMBs) were adopted in 1992 which affected many buildings in Chinatown. Most buildings were retrofitted by 2000, often visible in soft story reinforcement and evidence of wall to joists connectors on upper floors.

Less visible and more contested are the impacts of the demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway on Chinatown businesses. Many Chinatown merchants reported declines in business after the earthquake closed the freeway and they vigorously opposed its demolition.

This investigation found no visible impact to businesses on Stockton Street but some changes elsewhere may be partially related to the removal of the freeway. The decline of large dim sum houses and larger banquet restaurants was probably accelerated by loss of more direct auto access to Chinatown but that change had already begun even before the earthquake as these businesses faced increasing competition from new businesses in the suburbs.



Above: Cracks in wall of building on Broadway, October 20th 1989. A few more seconds of shaking and this building would probably have been red-tagged. (Photo by M. Collier)

Changes in the mix of businesses and vacancies on Grant, described earlier, may also be partially triggered by the loss of the freeway. However, Chinatown remains one of the most visited tourist destinations in San Francisco and most of the changes identified here occurred more recently, so the connection to the freeway demolition is not clear. Of course, the photographic record does not contain information regarding merchants' cash flow and the visible impact may be gradual rather than dramatic.

Chinatown was very lucky that there was not more damage in 1989 and remains at significant risk for future earthquakes. The housing stock of Chinatown is particularly vulnerable as much of it is in UMBs which, even with retrofitting, are likely to be uninhabitable following any nearby major earthquake.(7)



Portsmouth Square, left and above in 1982, below in 1985. Chinatown's core open space, a center of socializing and relaxation for residents of small crowded SROs and apartments, it has been redone many times. In 1985 it had game tables, seen below, these were taken out in the late 1980s, forcing players to sit uncomfortably on benches, as can be seen every day. (AAS 308 photos)

Open Space

Public open space is at a premium in Chinatown. The past thirty years have seen the addition of one new park and the rehab/redesign of two others. At the same time some private open space has been lost and other semi private ones remain under developed.

Portsmouth Square is the primary open space in Chinatown and used far beyond capacity. A location for political activity as well as relaxation, it is also under stress from the homeless and transients.

It has undergone various redesigns over the years, the most recent major redesign being implemented in stages between 1987 and 2001. The elevators were moved, the children's area was expanded onto the upper level, the game tables were removed, and indoor space was added below the bridge. More recently, work has been done on the bridge to the hotel and the City in is





Problematic change – The always dubious “bridge to Chinatown” now has gates, presumably to deal with the homeless, but they also make the space much less inviting to everyone else as well, even when open. (Photo by M. Collier)



Chinese Playground in 1989. Play structures like these were once popular but maintenance and safety concerns have led to their replacement here and elsewhere. (AAS 308 photo)



the process of making a new redesign for the park as a whole. What form will its latest incarnation take?

Chinese Playground has also gone through rehab and redesign during the past thirty years and there is current discussion of future work here as well. As with Portsmouth Square, intense use in a small footprint makes for major re-design challenges.

The big change in Chinatown open space since the 1980s is a new park. After a long struggle, Woh Hei Yuen Park was opened on Powell and John Alley in 1993, following take over of the Cathay Mortuary property. Although small, the park includes both open space and a rec center and is the first new open space in Chinatown in a very long time.

Woh Hei Yuen Park, 2010. As a totally new park, the designers had a free hand to make a quiet and coherent space. It now increasingly serves White families. (Photo by M. Collier)

When the Ping Yuen public housing projects were built, they included a fair amount of surrounding open space, which remains under utilized to this day. One reason is that the spaces are unconducive to use by residents, let alone the public due to isolation from public view, with many dead corners and other characteristics that create both perceived and real security problems. Even the more friendly plaza space associated with the North Ping Yuen on Pacific had to be partially closed off for security reasons and remains under used today. One of the challenges facing Chinatown CDC as the new operator of Ping Yuen will be to see if there are ways to make better use of the spaces around the building, for the residents at least if not for the general public.

On literally another level, Chinatown has gradually lost once more common open space. In the past there was much more use of roof tops, both as locations for cloths lines and also as places that building residents could go to for open air and relaxation. Family photo albums from long time Chinatown families almost inevitably include photographs made on roof tops and oral histories include accounts of time spent there. Residents of the long gone Obrero Hotel used to sit on their roof top in folding lounge chairs while the staff brought them snacks and drinks! (Irene Dea Collier, private communication) The City has gradually eliminated most of these roof top spaces in the name of safety and lack of permits, but any reasonable examination of both Chinatown and North



Above: Stockton Street roof top in 1986 – a space for drying laundry, with views of Chinatown, North Beach, the Embarcadero, and the Bay Bridge. Later ordered removed by the City, spaces like this were once common in Chinatown and North Beach and there is no real reason why they could not be open space for residents again. (Photo by M. Collier)

Beach would conclude that roof tops remain a potentially important form of open space that could again, with some creativity and flexibility, be important for residents who otherwise lack access to light, sky, and views, not to mention places to dry laundry.



Transportation and safety

Dense pedestrian and vehicular traffic makes movement around Chinatown challenging and often perilous, especially with the large elderly population. Walking is the most used form of transportation but dangerous interactions with vehicles are common, leading to numerous injuries and a number of fatalities. Community pressure, especially from Chinatown TRIP, Chinatown CDC, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, has produced a number of changes intended to improve both transportation and safety, as seen in these photographs here and on the next two pages.

Above left: Chinatown TRIP successfully pushed for bus service on Pacific in 1979. Service was later extended to South of Market, with connections to 3rd Street light rail and the Chinese American populations in the SE sector of the city. Chinatown CDC tenant groups, like the Notre Dame Tenants Council (above right) have helped pressure Muni to maintain and improve services. Below left: Beginning in the 1980s, the City has built a number of bulb outs at Muni stops on Stockton Street to lessen congestion on the too narrow sidewalks and to speed up bus service. (Photos by M. Collier)



Right: Crowding was often very intense on Stockton Street sidewalks, as seen in this 1985 shot. This situation persisted for many years but sidewalks do not feel as crowded today, although that is strictly a subjective assessment. (AAS 308 photo)



Below left: In addition to addition of bulb outs at several Muni stops, there is this one added at Stockton and Pacific as seen in 2017 and from above in 2013 (below right.) It serves to reduce crowding on one of the most congested coners in Chinatown. Merchants sometimes frustrate this intent by using the additional sidewalk space to temporarily store their goods, although that is not an issue on the days these images were made, when pedestrian traffic was sparse. (Photos by M. Collier)



Right: Broadway, with its four lanes of rapidly moving traffic, is a particularly dangerous street for pedestrians. TRIP and Chinatown CDC had early success with a better crossing system at Grant, but the crossings at Stockton and Powell remain perilous.(Photo by M. Collier)



Below left: Installation of scramble crossing systems/lights on Stockton Street and, more recently on Kearny Street, are intended to make crossing safer for pedestrians. Unfortunately, it took pedestrian injuries and fatalities before intense pressure from Chinatown TRIP, Chinatown CDC, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was able to get these systems installed.

Below right: As discussed previously, the biggest transportation change coming to Chinatown is the Central Subway, with its station at Washington and Stockton, seen here in early construction in 2014. (Photos by M. Collier)



Lost to History: Theaters, Sewing Factories, and Other Echoes of the Past

The past thirty years has seen the passing of the last vestiges of a number of historically important aspects of Chinatown and its immediate vicinity. These include theaters, sewing shops, Basque boarding houses, and a number of ethnic community churches.

In 1970, there were seven theaters operating in or adjacent to the Chinatown core, these included Sun Sing on Grant, Grand View at 756 Jackson, Dai Ming Sing (Great Star) at 636 Jackson, World Theater (formerly Verdi Theater) on Broadway, the Bella Union (formerly the Shanghai, the Kearny and the Rex) at 825 Kearny, and the Times (formerly Acme Theater) on Stockton south of Broadway.⁽⁸⁾

The Times (sometimes referred to as the “flea bitten theater”) showed second run American films to a mixed clientele. The Bella Union had a variety of earlier names and products, but from the late 1940s onward showed primarily Chinese language films. The others primarily served a Chinese American audience with Chinese movies and occasionally Cantonese Opera productions. Additionally, in 1967 the Palace Theater on Powell and Columbus became the Pagoda Theater and started showing Chinese language films, making for a total of seven theaters. These theaters were important cultural institutions as well as businesses, as nicely depicted in Ruby Yang’s 2009 documentary, *A Moment In Time*.

They were not to last. The Times Theater closed in 1976, swallowed by the then rapidly expanding retail food district on Stockton Street. Grand View and Sun Sing both closed in the mid 1980s, their locations then used for retail sales. World Theater closed in the mid 1980s when its building was



Above: Sun Sing Theater in 1984 with regular Chinese movies. (AAS 308 photo)
Below: Great Star Theater in 2016 with a young, hip non-Chinatown crowd, no Chinese movies. The long term future of the theater is uncertain. (Photo by M. Collier)

demolished, but then re-opened when the new building included a theater. It closed for good in the early 2000s. The Pagoda closed in 1992, leaving a long vacant building until demolished for the recent removal of the central subway equipment. It is now the construction site of yet more high end condos. The sole surviving theater is Great Star but it has not regularly scheduled Chinese movies

since the late 1990s, with some opera productions into the 2000s. It is now operated by a non-Asian American non-profit, with a variety of movies and other productions for a wider audience, although it has sometimes been available for use by Chinatown groups.

The theaters problems began in the 1970s and 1980s, and largely predate the demographic changes

discussed later in this report. The causes of their decline are several. VCRs and video rentals made Chinese language productions readily available in homes, as did the later development of Chinese language cable TV. Upheaval in the Hong Kong movie industry also disrupted some of the distributions chains as well as changing the character of some productions. The Chinatown theaters could not make it with shrinking audiences and occasional theatrical productions.

While the loss of the theaters was a highly visible and culturally significant change, the demise of the *gai chongs* - sewing factories - may be even more significant. It is probably impossible to overstate the long time economic and social importance of the sewing factories in Chinatown. My own surveys of students in Asian American Studies classes from the early 1980s into the early 1990s showed sewing factories as the most commonly reported type of present or past employment for Chinese American students' families.

Such work was often gateway employment for new immigrants but even when parents and relatives might

Above: 1029 Grant – Sun Sing Theater building in 2010. The very busy Golden Gate Bakery occupies the far end of the building, the old theater space was a mini mall until march 2017, and the left hand side was vacant in 2010 and still remains vacant today. The entire building, which includes eight one bedroom apartments, sold for approximately \$5 million in 2016. (Photo by M. Collier)



no longer work in the textile industry, many had done so in the past. This was true of both immigrant and American born students. While low paid, the shops provided employment for many, especially women, in Chinatown. The full economic impact of the shops is hard to measure but was important.

Most Chinatown shops, as compared to those south of Market Street, were small operations, so many were places where the workers would share information (and misinformation) regarding life in America as they worked; schools, best produce prices, employment, as well as gossip about family,



Above: Small shop in the 1980s, located in just off Grant in North Beach. This one had about eight employees, most of whom, it was reported, had been working there for more than five years. Left: 1400 block of Powell Street, 1984. The two storefronts to the left both housed sewing factories. (AAS 308 photos)

friends, recipes, and Chinatown in general. The shops were some women's primary contact with the community beyond their own families and friendships might be made that lasted for years. Given human nature and the sometimes complete social character of Chinatown, not all of this activity was positive but the social importance cannot be ignored.

Identifying sewing factories in street photographs is difficult, as none carried signage and most kept street side doors shut and windows obscured. Sewing shops were generally located in less intense commercial areas like Powell Street, portions of North Beach, and along the east west streets and the alleys in



Chinatown. In the 1980s there was an increase in shops south of Market and into the SE sectors of the city. These shops tended to be larger, with a very different social atmosphere but they could be reached by transit from Chinatown.

Sewing shops in Chinatown started to go into decline in the mid 1980s, losing business to both the larger shops elsewhere in the city and to overseas manufacturers. Unfortunately, this occurred just as the unions finally started to use approaches to organizing that actually made sense in the Chinatown setting.

The decline and passing of the Chinatown sewing factories, like all else in their history, took place mainly out of the public eye. It is an interesting question which shop was the last one and when did it close? Also unclear is what the economic impact has been,

1123 Powell Street: On the left in 1985, still the Korean Methodist Church.
AAS 308 photo)

Right: In 2010 as the Quong Ming Jade Emperor Palace. (Photo by M. Collier)



but given the number of shops and the absence of alternative employment for many sewing shop workers and even owners, the impact must have been significant, especially for immigrant adults with limited English skills and schooling. A future, more fine grained, analysis of economic data might provide insight into these questions.

Two historically important churches have also become only memories. At 1123 Powell Street, next to the library, the San Francisco Korean United Methodist Church was home to the oldest Korean American congregation in the United States. Built in 1928, the church served not only religious functions but also wider Korean American community needs, both culturally and politically. Still active in the 1980s, the congregation had moved by the 1990s and the building was sold to Quong Ming Buddhism and Taoist Society in 1995.



Farther up, at 910 Broadway just above Mason Street, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Church, built in 1912 to serve what was then the Mexican American center of San Francisco. Recognized as historic building by the city, it was closed by the church in 1991, then used by St. Mary's School from the mid 1990s until the completion of the new St. Mary's School building on Kearny in 2011. It sold to private owners in 2011, despite protests from the San Francisco Latino community. Sold again in 2016, it is now a Russian financed tech institute with vague functions, including co-work and co-living spaces titled the Hack Temple.(Hack 2017)

Also representing an earlier era in San Francisco was the Obrero Hotel at 1208 Stockton, for many years a rooming house for Basque men dating to a time when this part of Chinatown/North Beach was on the edge of what was sometimes called the "Latin Quarter." Other Basque

establishments included the Hotel du Midi/Elu's on Powell, which closed its operations in 1983, and the Des Alpes Restaurant and boarding house on Broadway.(Zurbi)

The Obrero Hotel also operated a restaurant serving Basque family style meals to the public until around 1993 when the hotel was sold. The space was then operated as a bed and breakfast by a South Asian family until sometime after the year 2000. The current status of the hotel space is not clear but it not longer operates as a transient hotel.



Right: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Church, now in private hands, is a visible reminder that the Mexican American center of San Francisco was once along Broadway, Mason and Powell. There were Mexican bakeries on Powell into the late 1950s and Sinaloa Restaurant operated on Powell before becoming Lichee Garden in the early 1980s.

Left: Entrance to the Obrero Horel on Stockton Street in 2008, by this time it was no longer a transient hotel, although the sign was still up. (Photos by M. Collier)





The character of Chinatown as a community is, ultimately, defined by people. As they change, so does Chinatown. (Photo by M. Collier)

Part III: Demographics, housing, income

Demographics

Major demographic change has occurred in the greater Chinatown/North Beach area, which includes core Chinatown, North Beach, and large portions of Telegraph Hill, Nob Hill, and Russian Hill. Please see the appendices for maps of different areas referred to in this report.(9)

Asian American population in the Chinatown/North Beach area dropped by over 4,000 people in the Chinatown/North Beach area between 1990 and 2010, with the largest drop in the areas outside of the Chinatown core. The only census tract in which Asian American population increased was Tract 101, located along Bay Street in the Fisherman’s

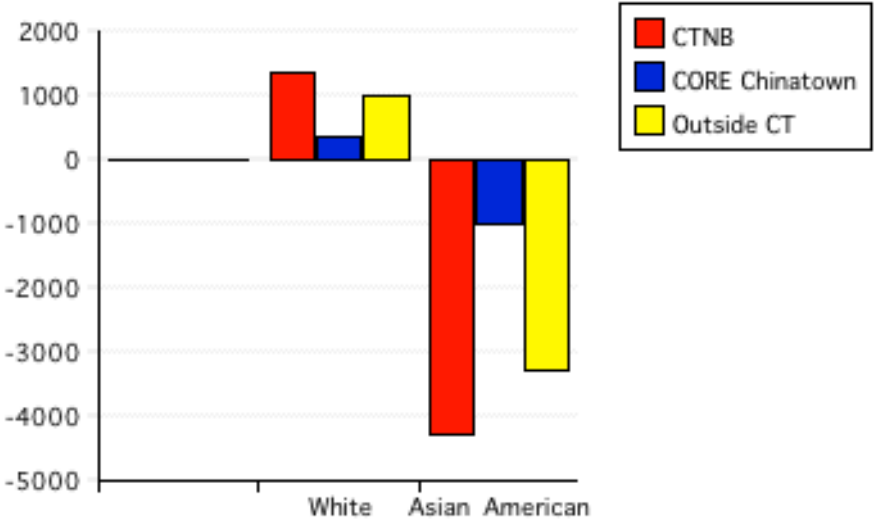
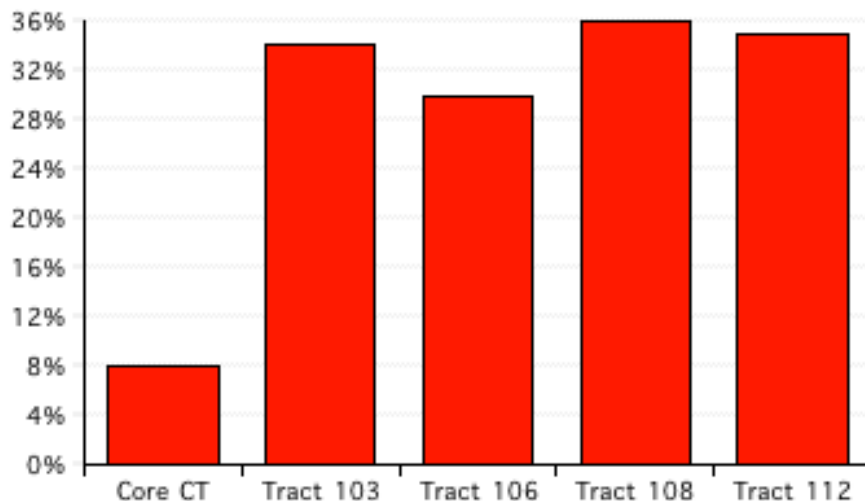


Table 1: Increase/decrease in White and Asian American population in the Chinatown/North Beach region from 1990 to 2010.

Wharf area. This growth is directly related to an increase in the number of dedicated low income units along Bay Street in Tract 101 between 1990 and 2010.(Tan Chow, private communication)

The 2010 census data predates the current tech boom; so it can be assumed that the declines noted in the period of 1990-2010 have continued or accelerated since 2010. A very conservative estimate would be that the decline in

Below, Table 2: Percentage decline in Asian American population, 1990-2010



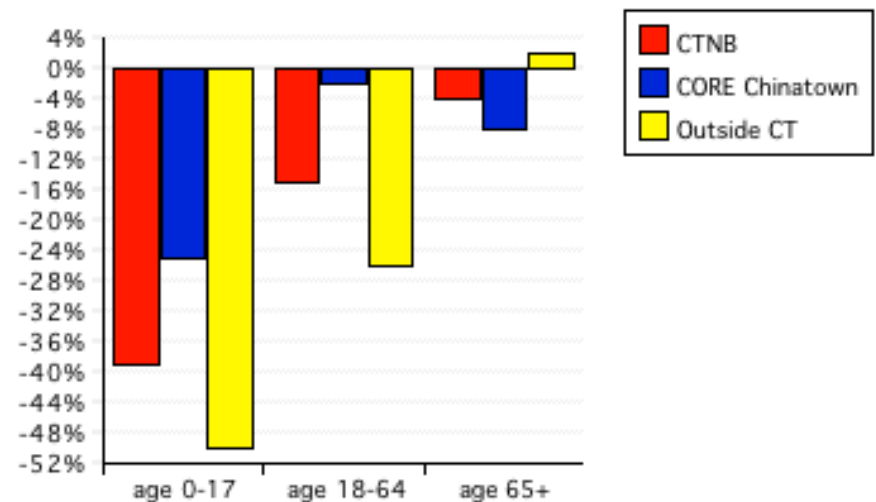
Asian American population for the CTNB region from 1990 to 2016 easily exceeds 5000 persons.

Asian American population dropped by 8% in the core Chinatown area and by 26% to 36% in census tracts outside of Chinatown, except for Tract 101, where it increased. The increase in Tract 101 is a clear example of the impact of lack low income housing on Asian Americans in the greater Chinatown/North Beach area.

Most of the decrease in Asian American population is a decline in the number of children and working age adults - families. The school age population of Asian Americans in



Pacific and Mason Street, 2014. This up-scale bar/restaurant replaced a long time Chinese fast food place, part of ongoing gentrification in the greater Chinatown/North Beach area.(Photo by M. Collier)



Above, Table 3: Increase/decline AA population 1990-2010 by age and locale.

the combined CTNB area has declined by over 38% and by 50% in the area outside of the Chinatown core. This is a dramatic change. There was also a significant drop of 25% in school age population in the CT Core area.

Housing

What is driving this decline? While a number of factors are at work, the primary cause is the rising cost of housing and the income disparities between White and Asian American populations. Put simply, Asian American families have been priced out as the areas surrounding Chinatown have become popular with Whites whose incomes far exceed those of Asian Americans. Property owners and developers have seen this situation as an opportunity to maximize profits through higher rents and/or the eviction of existing tenants followed by remodeling, higher priced



Right: Old sign on exterior wall on Clay Street. It is a long time since rooms in residential hotels were \$1.50/week! Residential hotels are commonly referred to as “SROs” which stands for “Single Room Occupancy.” Some SRO owners now list rooms on Craigslist at \$1,250 and up, more than double what rents were a few years ago. (Photo by M. Collier)

Left: Contrasting apartment buildings on Vallejo Street. The one on the right houses Chinese American families, the one to the left was newly remodeled in 2014 and shows no Chinese names on the mail boxes. Apartments in buildings like this can now list for rents of \$5,000, well beyond the means of Chinese American families. (Photo by M. Collier)



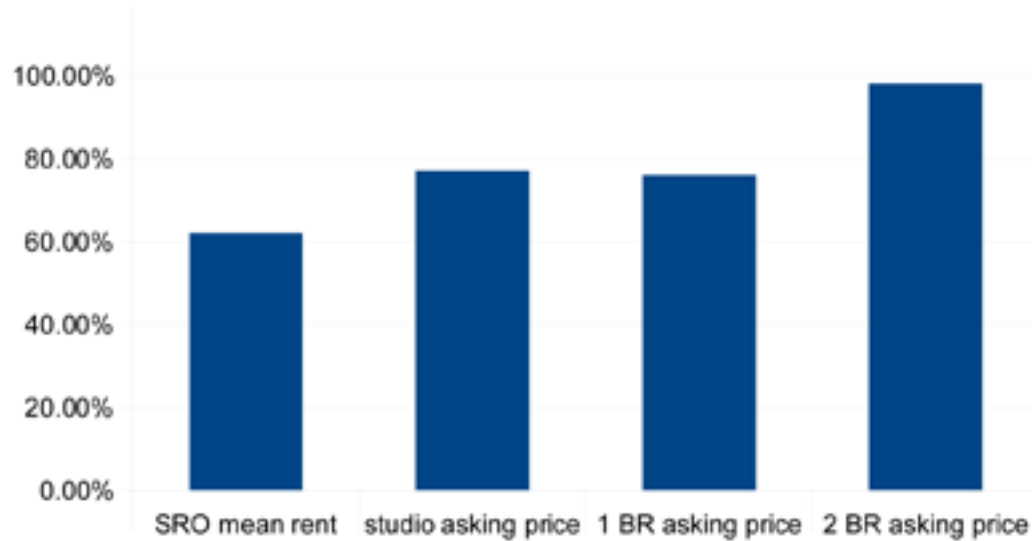
rentals, or sales of high priced condominiums or tenancy in commons (TICs).

While some displacement has occurred in the 1990s, it has exploded since 2010. Previously, housing in Chinatown seemed exempt from the gentrification occurring in the surrounding neighborhoods but that is no longer true. A Chinatown CDC staff investigation found changes taking place in the rental of SRO units in Chinatown. They found that asking prices for an SRO room had risen from an average of \$610 in 2013 to \$970 in 2015, a rise of almost 60%. They also reported that many landlords had shifted to English language ads and Craigslist to find new tenants, sometimes abandoning Chinese language ads altogether,



Above: In 2015, the new owner of this SRO on Vallejo Street attempted to evict Chinese American residents for hanging clothing to dry in their windows and placing New Years posters on their doors. At the same time he was advertising rooms to a more up-scale clientele. He backed off after pressure from the community and the Mayor's Office but similar behavior has continued at other locations since then.(Photo by M. Collier)

Left: Laundry drying in 1999 outside an SRO room in the alley behind the building seen above. Many SRO residents have no place to dry clothing, especially since The City has eliminated many of the old time drying spaces on roof tops.(AAS 308 photo)



Above, Table 4: Percent increase in mean rent for SRO rooms in Chinatown 2013–2015 and increase in asking price for units in one apartment building in Chinatown 2012–2015. Please note that prices were already elevated in 2012/13.

which eliminated many monolingual Chinatown residents and immigrants.(Chinatown CDC, 2015)

Some owners were refusing to rent to Chinatown families and seniors, preferring students, tech workers, and younger singles. Not surprisingly, there was an increase in non-Chinese SRO residents.(Chinatown CDC 2015) More recently, some observers have reported evidence of SRO rooms being used for short term rentals, in violation of city regulations.(T. Chow, private communication) These observations are supported by my own direct observation of what appeared to be tourists exiting an SRO on Stockton Street in early 2017. It should be noted that SROs on the edges of Chinatown (Kearney Street, Broadway, North Beach, etc) have always had some non Chinese residents. What is new is the re-marketing of SROs to students and tech workers rather than the traditional clientele of immigrant families, seniors, and other low income people.

Investment groups are now acquiring large buildings, including SROs, adjacent to and even in Chinatown itself. Concurrently, because SROs are protected from Ellis Act evictions, some SRO owners have actively tried to displace existing SRO tenants either directly, through frivolous “for cause” evictions, or indirectly through harassment, denial of needed services, and other means.



Stairs like these lead to apartments and SRO rooms throughout Chinatown, where residential functions dominate upper floors of most buildings. The brass colored step protectors had just been installed when this photo was made, leading an arriving middle school aged resident to exclaim: “Way cool! All gold steps!” (Photo by M. Collier)

Similar changes are occurring with some Chinatown apartment buildings. Records of one Chinatown building were examined as a case study for this report. There was a generational change in ownership in 2012, following which rents for vacant units rose as follows: studio apartments increased 77% from \$757 to \$1345, one bedroom units rose 76% from \$1047 to \$1845, and 2 bedroom units rose 98% from \$1258 to \$2500. Because of rent controls, long term residents pay less, \$700 to \$940 for one bedroom units and \$900 for a studio unit.

There were delays in filling vacancies at these levels using word of mouth and Chinese language listings, suggesting that the rents were too high for the population previously served by the building. English language ads were then placed, including on Craigslist, and the new tenants included a number of non-Chinese Americans and no new Chinatown families. Several of the new tenants moved out within one to two years, leaving new vacancies. An interesting feature of this case is that higher rents were against the advice of the North Beach management firm that had handled the building for at least a generation, who preferred lower rents with less turnover, with explicit preference for tenants with roots in Chinatown.

Impact of changes in ownership

Housing costs, and even commercial rentals, have become more expensive with changes in ownership. It has long been clear that developers and speculators have seen residential neighborhoods surrounding Chinatown as prime areas for investment. For example,

Left: Residential Hotels (SROs) form a crucial component of housing in and around Chinatown. While often small, with proper care and management, SROs can provide good places to live but only if rents remain at levels low income members of the community can afford. (CCDC photo)



most major conflicts over Ellis Act evictions during the past twenty years have involved owners attempting to oust long term tenants from newly purchased building.

Now investors are reaching into the Chinatown and its immediate periphery, with increased interest in large buildings. Many new purchases appear to involve purchase by investment groups, often with no connections to Chinatown. Similar investment activities occurred in the late 1970s and 80s and one of the goals of the Chinatown Plan was to discourage such trends with zoning limitations on land use.(2)

Changes in ownership are significant. There are inherent competing interests between property owners and tenants. Tenants, both commercial and residential, benefit from low and stable rents while owners benefit most from higher rents. Additionally, most commercial tenants in Chinatown depend on a large Chinese American and immigrant resident population for their customer base.

Historically, about half of the properties in Chinatown proper have been owned by family associations, religious institutions, non-profits, and other Chinatown community organizations. This institutional ownership long served to help stabilize and maintain Chinatown as a community in a way that has not operated in other ethnic communities in San Francisco. It may be wise not to take this institutional stability for granted in the future.

Meanwhile, changes are occurring among private owners in Chinatown. In the past, many had personal connections to the community (broadly defined) either living in or participating in the community or both. Because most older Chinatown properties carried low debt loads, owners were under less financial pressure to raise rents, both commercial and residential. As a practical matter,



Above: This large SRO at 937 Clay came under new ownership about the time this photograph was made in 2014. Since then the new owners have pulled in excess of \$300,000 in permits for renovations, most clearly aimed at a different clientele than the existing tenants.(3) Units have been advertised on Craigslist with rooms going for \$1,100. More recently, 55 long term tenants have organized and filed suit against the owners, charging harassment and mistreatment by the owners.
(Photo by M. Collier)

most properties in Chinatown previously operated in a closed rental market, with information regarding vacancies passed by word of mouth, through Chinese language notices, or in the Chinese language press. Consequently, Chinatown was somewhat insulated from the rental trends of surrounding neighborhoods. That is no longer true.

As the older generation of owners have passed away, their properties have passed to their heirs, who now commonly live outside Chinatown or even San Francisco and usually have fewer connection to the community. Their main goals may simply to maximize income. Even if they do have wider concerns with the community, the complications of dividing estates may force them to sell their properties or otherwise take steps to further capitalize their holdings. One of the surprises of this investigation was the number of large properties in and immediately adjacent to Chinatown that have changed hands in recent years, in most cases, apparently, to settle estates. Increasingly, these sales appear to take place on the larger market rather than within the community of Chinatown, as was formerly more common. Outside investment groups are now taking a clear interest in Chinatown.⁽¹⁰⁾

New owners, even if they are tied to the Chinatown community, usually carry large debt loads, debts made larger by the escalation of property values in San



Above: The loss of the I-Hotel and adjacent buildings to investors in the 1970s should be a warning to the present as a new set of investment interests take aim on Chinatown. (CCDC photo)

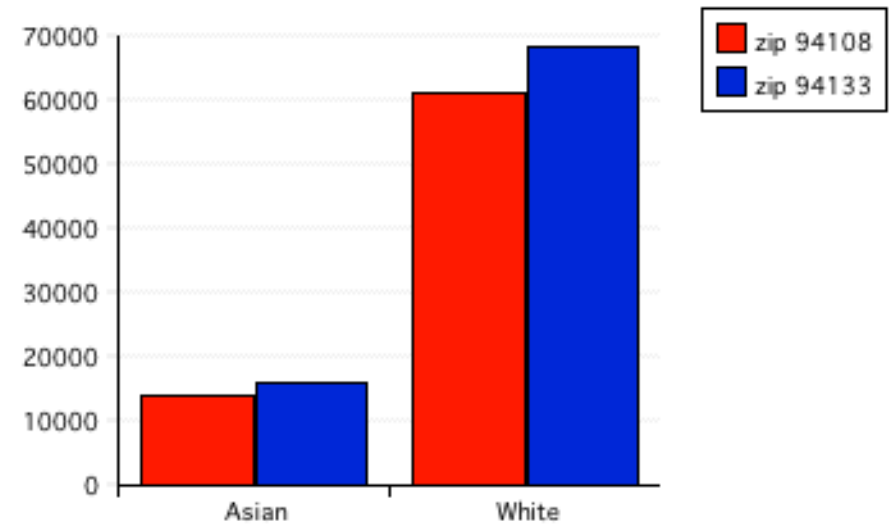
Francisco. In addition to desire for profits, they are under financial pressures to maximize income. The consequences have been evident repeatedly as long time businesses face escalating commercial rents, and residential tenants are subject to pressures both legal and extra-legal to vacate. Almost all of the Chinatown land use conflicts in recent years have involved new property owners.

Income disparities

The ability of Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans to compete for housing in this rapidly changing housing market is restricted by their lower levels of income. While it is often difficult to pull dependable income figures out of census data for the Chinatown/North Beach area, it is clear that Asian Americans have consistently had less income than whites in the CT/North Beach during the period 1990 to 2016. In the 2000 census, the latest year for which really accurate figures are easily available, per capita income for Asian Americans and Whites for zip code areas 94133 and 94108, which encompass much of the greater CTNB area, showed major disparities. (See Table 5)

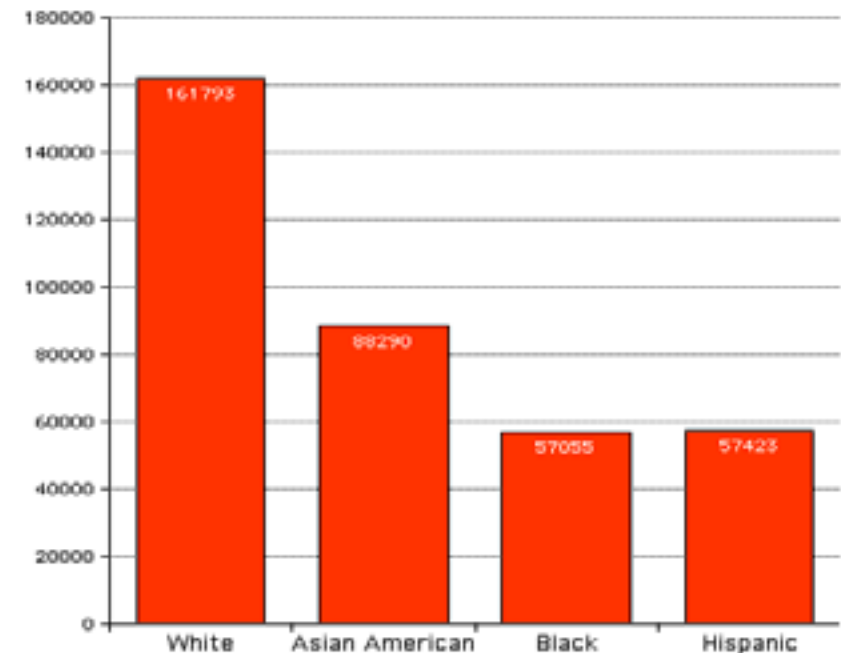
Similar discrepancies existed in 1990 and continue today. A 2015 estimate of median family incomes for the entire city of San Francisco shows Asian Americans families earn barely 50% of White median family earnings even though Asian American families typically have more workers per family. (See table 6) The gap would be larger in the Chinatown/North Beach area, where a 2014 study commissioned by the San Francisco API Council found that the poverty rate for Asian Americans in Chinatown was 30% and only slightly lower in North Beach at 27%. (Ja, Davis, et. al., 2014:4)

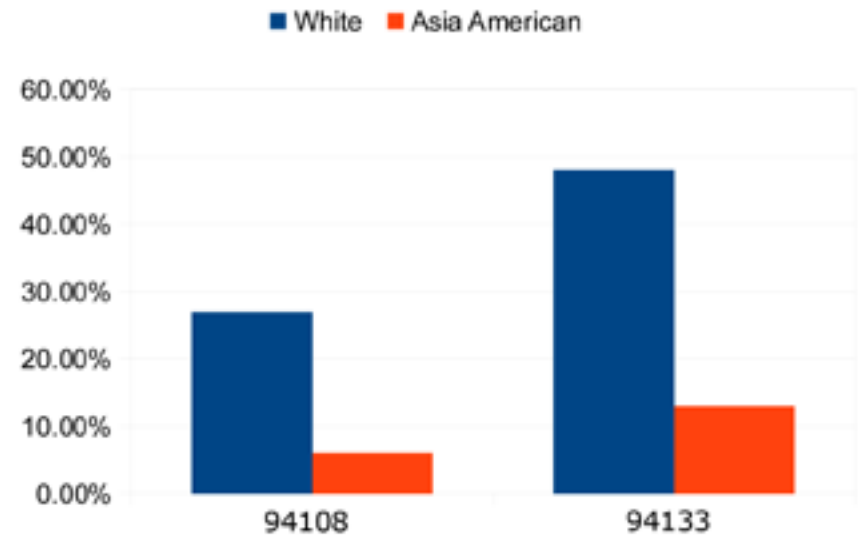
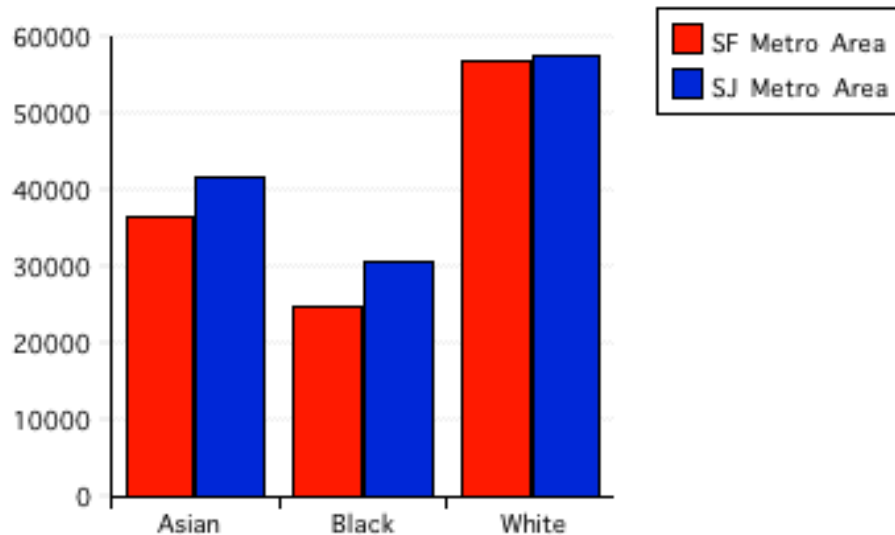
National media routinely release reports saying that Asian American income is on a par with or above that of Whites but this is almost never the case when comparisons are made in the same geographical region. For example, in 2012 the Census Bureau released estimated figures showing Asian Americans in the Bay Area earning significantly less than Whites, with per capita income levels actually closer to that of Blacks, despite the region having a large middle and upper class Asian American population. (See Table 7) Furthermore, between 2000 and 2012 White income in the CT/NB region rose more than twice as much as that of Asian Americans in the greater Chinatown/North Beach region. (See Table 8)



Above, Table 5: Comparison of AA and White Per Capita income in year 2000 for zip code areas 94133 and 94108.

Below, Table 6: Comparison of estimated 2015 Median Family Incomes for the City and County of San Francisco





Above left, Table 7: Estimated 2012 Per Capita Income for Asian Americans, Blacks, and Whites in the San Francisco and San Jose metropolitan areas.

Above right, Table 8: Estimated percentage increase in median household income for zip code areas 94108 & 94133 for period 2000 to 2012.

Given these income gaps, when housing prices rise, Asian Americans are poorly placed to compete for housing in the greater Chinatown/North Beach region and now their ability to do so in Chinatown itself is becoming threatened. These changes in housing costs, ownerships patterns, and continued income disparities mean that the ability of Chinatown to hold onto a large and age diverse residential population of Chinese Americans now faces new as well as old challenges, with no easy answers.

Closing comments

The decline in Chinese American population is not the same as the earlier decline of an Italian American population in North Beach, which reflected a generational transition in that community and a decline in immigration from



Left: A typical story: This blue building on Wetmore sold for \$988,000 in 2013. The new owners Ellis Act evicted the existing tenants and invested approximately \$400,000 in renovations. Two of the three units are now (2017) for sale as TIC (tenancy in common) flats at 1,345,000 to \$1,599,00 each! The third unit is not listed at this time. (SF Assessor Office and online real estate ads)

Italy. It is true that from the late 1950s onward there has been out movement of Chinese American families from Chinatown and later North Beach to the western part of the City and elsewhere but this migration did not produce a decline in Chinese American population prior to 1990 because new families replaced those that moved out. After 1990, this changed because the cost of housing rose faster than the ability of many Chinese Americans to pay for it, producing what might be termed "indirect" displacement in the neighborhoods surrounding

the Chinatown core area. Rising housing prices have also encouraged owners and speculators to use evictions, a "direct" displacement, to make housing available to a new population with more income. Meanwhile, Chinese immigration continues to be high and, even as many new immigrants must seek out other locales to settle in, there is no shortage of Chinese Americans who would like to live in the Chinatown/North Beach region, witness the long waiting lists for low income housing.



Above: Fire in February, 2017, displaced seven stores with 11 businesses and numerous low income residents in this building on Stockton and Pacific. The impact of fires even in small buildings like this one can be considerable. What will happen now? (Photo by M. Collier)

Part IV: Change beyond Chinatown/North Beach

Chinatown was once the unquestioned center of Chinese America in San Francisco and the Bay Area; that is no longer the case. By the 1980s, the Chinese American population of the Bay Area was becoming increasingly suburban, a trend that has continued to accelerate.

Even in 1980, only about 30% of the Chinese American population of San Francisco lived in the NE sector of the City and that figure has fallen to about 10% today, most live in the western and SE sectors of the City. By the late 1980s, fully developed secondary Chinatowns in the Richmond and Sunset Districts made travel to Chinatown unnecessary for most purposes.

Elsewhere in the region, shopping plazas with large Asian food stores proliferated and large Chinese restaurants began to appear in places like Emeryville, Daly City, and other suburban locales. They competed with the large dim sum and banquet restaurants in Chinatown, drawing customers with easier access from the suburbs in which many now lived. The demolition of the Embaradero Freeway accelerated this trend.



Above: Pioneers, Kwong Shing market, a typically Hoiping style store dating to the late 1960s, was possibly the first Chinese Deli on Clement Street. It closed in 2006. By 1990, when these images were made, Inner Clement was a full service "New Chinatown."

Below: Lion Plaza, San Jose, 1995. Large suburban Asian markets started to appear in the 1980s, followed by entire malls – Lion Plaza being the first in the region. (AAS 308 photos)





Hom Toon Village, Hoiping (Kaiping) 2006. Emigrants from Sze-yup villages like this one long dominated Chinatown's population and shaped its character. But not today, now villagers commonly move to urban centers in Guangdong Province as opportunities increase there and emigration to the US becomes both more difficult and less attractive. (Photo by M. Collier)

Chinatown remains a center of many community civic, political, cultural, and social service organizations but many Chinese Americans in the larger region have few connections to these institutions. This disconnect is driven by increased acculturation, even assimilation, and by changes in immigration patterns. The population of the Chinatown/NB area during the 60s, 70s, and into the 1990s was significantly fed by arrivals from Hong Kong and Guangdong province. For these immigrants, who often had historical and family connections to Chinatown, it was very much an entry point to San Francisco and the Bay Area, even if they did not live there. That situation is changing. As people moved into suburban areas of San Francisco and the greater Bay Area, new immigrants increasingly bypassed Chinatown and moved directly into locales where their relatives had settled. New financial requirements for sponsors in the 1990s made it more difficult for poorer immigrants, those most likely to live in Chinatown, to bring relatives to join them. Concurrently, economic development in Guangdong Province provided more opportunities there, reducing the pressure to emigrate. Consequently, many new immigrants now come with few, if any, historical or family connections to Chinatown, often from other regions in China and Asia, sometimes speaking completely different Chinese

languages than those once common. New Chinese American institutions, especially religious ones, can now be found throughout the region and, as most Chinese Americans in the region can now obtain familiar foods and other goods without coming to Chinatown and have no particular connections to its institutions, they have fewer reasons to come at all.

The impact of such changes on Chinatown has been moderated by continued immigration and growth of the regional Chinese American population and by (until recently) relatively lower housing costs in Chinatown, so the demand for living space in Chinatown did not decline. While some Chinatown restaurants and businesses suffered from the growth of Chinese American businesses elsewhere, the economic core of Chinatown has always depended largely on customers and clientele living within walking distance. As long as that population was maintained then Chinatown remained on a firm commercial footing. However, that population has dropped and is now lower than in 1980, so the declining regional importance of Chinatown becomes more significant. That said, some of the "new Chinatowns," most notably in the Richmond District, are now themselves showing signs of contraction, how may this affect Chinatown?

Part V: Conclusion

All communities change. In the context of the larger city of San Francisco, Chinatown has been remarkable stable; no other community in "The City" has maintained itself in the same general local for over 150 years. So one way to look at the situation is to focus on the stability, to note that on many levels things appear much as they did in the 1980s, indeed that there has been an increase in business activity in some sections, that the sidewalks are still crowded on Stockton Street, if not quite as densely,

that individuals and partnerships still take risks to open new enterprises, that community organizations continue to offer services, indeed have expanded their reach with a new hospital, with new housing developments, and the take over of long mismanaged public housing units.

Conversely, demographic changes have been and continue to be substantial. The Asian American population of the NE sector of San Francisco peaked in the late 1980s and has since declined to levels below those in 1980. All

evidence is that this decline will continue and now affects the Chinatown core as well as the surrounding neighborhoods, with the decrease almost certain to be above 6,000 people by 2020. Vibrant communities need population stability and they need a mix of ages. No community can lose 6000 members, largely from its working age adult and youth population, without consequences.

This population decline stems directly from housing costs and associated income discrepancies between whites and Asian Americans, both in the City and regionally. Changes in the housing situation continue, with fresh dangers of further population displacement. Stabilizing the Chinese American population of the Chinatown/North Beach region is essential to maintenance of Chinatown as complete community

Unfortunately, although the take over of Ping Yuen Housing by Chinatown CDC will, it is hoped, much improve the quality of life for their residents, it is not clear that it will help many



Above: This Lego model of Chinatown by Chinatown CDC youth uses color to indication land use. Green represents residential functions, seen dominating the upper floors here and highlighting the importance of housing to Chinatown. If that housing is lost or no longer occupied by large numbers of Chinese Americans, then the foudation of Chinatown will be lost. (Photo by M. Collier)

Chinese American families. Federal and City policies and practices often make it difficult for new Chinese American families to move into this housing, although recent negotiations with the city may partially address this issue. It is likely that the residents of Ping Yuen Housing will become increasingly diverse with time. It follows that "small site" stabilizing of existing privately owned low income housing is likely to be a crucial element in helping to maintain a Chinese American population in Chinatown.

The apparent stability of Chinatown serving businesses, especially along Stockton Street, probably derives from a time lag relative to demographic change and the continued effectiveness of controls put in place by the Chinatown Plan in the 1980s. Within that stability are indicators of likely changes to come. While commercial vacancy rates in Chinatown remain lower than many other neighborhoods in San Francisco, it is probable that a more fine grained analysis would produce a more nuanced finding.

The evidence suggests that, while vacancies remain low in core community business areas, there are troubling signs elsewhere. Chinatown businesses located closer to census tracts that have suffered major drops in CA population show evidence of stress, as reflected by the increase in vacancies on the north side of Broadway above Stockton and the declining numbers of food stores selling produce along Powell Street. Long term commercial vacancies on east west streets in the Chinatown core, especially along Sacramento Street, indicate probable economic difficulties there as well. Generational change among owners will also bring changes in the business mix. The growing numbers of gentrifying small businesses near and



Above: Northernmost Chinatown stores on Stockton, one has closed, how long will the other last? (Photo by M. Collier)

Below: In common with most food stores in Chinatown, signage here is in Chinese. Owners would be wise to include English labels, not only to reach non-Chinese customers but also the many Chinese Americans that do not read Chinese. A possible project for the Chinese Chamber of Commerce? (CCDC photo)



even in Chinatown that are totally unconnected to it are also significant indicators of changes in progress.

Economic realities are likely to lead to contraction of Chinatown serving business along Pacific, Jackson, and Stockton Street north of Broadway. Given demographic changes in Chinatown and its surroundings, Chinatown businesses that currently serve primarily Chinese American immigrant residents will have a more diverse clientele, both Asian and non-Asian.

Grant Avenue presents questions regarding the future of the tourist/visitor sector of the Chinatown economy. Long term trends, including increases in commercial vacancies, suggests that the old model of Asian import stores as the foundation of that sector is open to serious re-thinking. Some such re-thinking may be reflected in the new up-scale restaurants opened or soon to open in and around Chinatown. While these new enterprises may benefit their owners and land lords, it is not at all clear they will do much for Chinatown as a whole.

There have been reports of vacancy issues related to second floor commercial spaces, especially on the southern end of Chinatown.(Amy Chung, private communication) Second floor offices have housed businesses largely dependent on the local Chinese American population and much of the recent conflict on land use in Chinatown has centered on second floor activity. It is unfortunate that accurate information on second floor commercial vacancies and trends is lacking, as this would provide a basis for more informed decisions.

The impact of the new Central Subway will bring new variables to play. Advocates for the subway, most notably the late Rose Pak of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, argued that the subway would help bring visitors to Chinatown and help compensate for loss of transportation access resulting from the 1991 demolition of the Embarcadero Freeway. It was, and is,

also hoped that it will provide better access to Chinatown for members of Chinese American communities living elsewhere in San Francisco. The degree to which these hopes may be met remains to be seen; will the subway help revitalize Chinatown businesses or will it further speed the gentrification processes already changing and threatening the community? There are indications that property investment in and around Chinatown is already shaped by expectations regarding the subway as well as by other changes. Clearly, a growing number of people, with little or no interest in or connection to Chinatown as a community now see it as a place to exploit. The Chinatown Plan may be even more important now than in the 1980s but its power to moderate change may be weaker than in the past.

Below: Renown Chinatown historian Philip P. Choy leading teachers on a tour of Chinatown in 2007. What will future historians say about Chinatown?
(Photo by M. Collier)





The decline of Chinese American families in the Chinatown/North Beach area during the past twenty-five years has been significant. (AAS308 1983)

Chinatown's modern foundation has been a strong Chinese American residential presence, with both families and seniors. Can this presence be stabilized? Are there opportunities for retaining and increasing low-income housing for immigrants in and around Chinatown?

Chinatown has been and is a living community of people and the institutions, economic, social, and cultural, which serve them. How can its unique economic and socio/cultural identity be sustained for the benefit of both its residents and visitors? How can community



Most Chinatown merchants have historically targeted Chinese immigrant customers, largely local. How may population changes in Chinatown/North Beach affect them in the future? (M. Collier 2016)

serving businesses and institutions be supported and maintained?

Above all, current trends in the Chinatown/North Beach region raise crucial questions regarding rising income disparities and their consequences, both local and regional. These trends also highlight the vanishing balance between the rights of property owners to maximize their profits on one hand and the rights of ordinary people to decent housing and a community that meets their social, cultural, and economic needs on the



What will this view be in 2050? (Photo by M. Collier)

other. At what point does this lack of balance become intolerable in a just society? And what are the public policy actions that might restore more balance? Short of broader social/political responses, what steps can Chinatown as a community take to deal with these issues and their impact on a local level?

Chinatown is NOT “dying” - IT IS UNDER ATTACK, which is not the same thing. “Dying” suggests internal decay and decline, implying that Chinatown is fading away of its own accord, that it no longer serves any

important purpose. That is not the case, San Francisco Chinatown is still very much alive, still meets crucial needs and functions, but now faces perhaps its greatest existential threats since the 1906 earthquake, as external economic forces and interests threaten key components of the community. When faced with such threats in the past, the different interest groups within Chinatown have periodically worked together to maintain the community, can that happen again?

Notes

- 1) The essay is designed for viewing on a computer screen, which provides the best means of viewing the combination of text and images. Please see Appendix 1 for information on the origins of the photographs in this report.
- 2) The Chinatown Plan is a set of zoning regulations and planning guidelines adopted by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1987. It defines what kinds of development are allowed in Chinatown, with the goal of maintaining a viable Chinatown community. It did so by restricting displacement of housing on upper floors, restricted the type of commercial activity permitted in second floor commercial spaces, place height limits on buildings in Chinatown, and instituted a number of other regulations that sought to maintain the existing commercial and land use mix of Chinatown. The actual text of the Chinatown Plan may be viewed online at <<http://generalplan.sfplanning.org/Chinatown.html>> A detailed discussion of the origins and politics of the Chinatown Plan can be read in Gordon Chin's *Building Community: A Half Century of Leadership in San Francisco Chinatown*. (Chin, 2016) See Appendix 3 for a map of the Chinatown Plan.
- 3) See Appendix 1 for more information on sources and methodology.
- 4) Vacancy counts/rates in Chinatown are moving targets, subject to change from day to day. For this investigation, vacancies are defined as store fronts not in visible use. Long term vacancies are defined as those that show up for more than one year. The system is not fool proof and there is some margin of error in the figures.
- 5) The distinction is somewhat arbitrary - many stores have elements of both. For purposes of this investigation, the distinction was made on the basis of the nature of the storefront displays, if these emphasized generic items, then the store was counted as generic tourist, if displays emphasised Asian/Chinese goods and imports, then it was counted as a "Chinatown tourist" store. Jewelry stores were counted separately, but most jewelry stores on Grant offer fairly generic items.
- 6) Basically, the Chinatown Plan permits second floor offices that provide services to walk-in clients, these would include medical offices, CPAs, lawyers, real estate agents, and the like. Offices for non-profit organizations are also permitted. Other administrative offices, to which clients/customers do not come, are not permitted. The intent was to preserve office spaces in Chinatown for businesses that served local residents.
- 7) More information, including photos of damage to buildings in 1989, can be found at the following web link: <http://online.sfsu.edu/mcollier/community_locale/SF_Chinatown/earthquake/index.html>

8) Information on theaters comes from several sources: a) Irene Dea Collier, private communication, b) *A Moment in Time*, a film by Ruby Yang, and c) The web site *Cinema Treasures* at <<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/>>

9) Please see Appendix 2 for census maps, including what is defined as “Core Chinatown”, and Appendix 3 for map of the area covered by the Chinatown Plan. Unless otherwise noted in text or later in this note, all statistics are from decennial US Census Bureau data. This means that the latest information, in most cases, is from the 2010 census. I have made limited use data from the yearly community estimates for population provided by the Census Bureau because the sampling methods used do not provide reliable information on Asian American and Chinese American population in the greater Chinatown/North Beach Area. Some economic data from the estimates has been used, as such information appears to have been suppressed or hidden in the 2010 online data for census tracts and zip code areas.

10) Assessors Records, City and County of San Francisco. No attempt was made to look at records of all properties, but even a spot check revealed many recent transfers.

References

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Appendix 1 - Photographic sources and methods

The core of this report is based on analysis of photographic records of Chinatown and vicinity made from 1982 through to the present. The primary photographs are in the form of “photo maps” and photo essays of Chinatown made by students in an Asian American Studies course taught by Malcolm Collier between 1982 and 2009. The course was AAS 308 - “Photographic Exploration of Asian America” and a core assignment most semesters was making photographic records of Asian American communities throughout the Bay Area, including but not limited to SF Chinatown. The Associated Students of San Francisco State University provided supportive funding for students in the course, with the express provision that the resulting records of Asian American communities would be retained as archival records regarding Asian American communities. The photo maps and essays are temporarily housed in a faculty office at San Francisco State University, pending a more permanent home. Photographs from the archive are credited as “AAS 308 photos” because it is usually impossible to identify individual photographers in what were team projects.

A portion of a larger photo map of Broadway in 1990. Only some of the associated detail photographs are shown. (AAS 308 photo)



This investigation also used photo maps and additional images of Chinatown made by the author during the past forty years, photographs of Stockton Street made by Chinatown CDC's Urban Institute in 2015, and a number of images from Chinatown CDC's photo archive. All these materials were supplemented by direct observations and reference to Google Street maps of Chinatown in 2016.

Photo maps are, ideally, continuous interconnected photographs of every block in the area recorded, supplemented by additional selected close-up shots of details of store fronts, goods, displays, people, and activities. Photo essays of communities are photographic explorations of particular themes or subjects within the community in question, organized not as a "map" but rather as a visual narrative, in most cases with associated written text. As student products, not all the photo maps provide perfect continuous coverages but they are still very detailed records of street level Chinatown.

With the photo maps it is possible to make detailed comparisons of commercial and other public street activity in Chinatown at various dates over the past thirty plus years. The basic methodology is to look at images of the same

The same section of Broadway in 2009. (Mapping photos by M. Collier, close-ups are AAS 308 photos)

BROADWAY - 2009
600 BLOCK SOUTH, WEST END



locations from different dates and see what has changed and what has not. Because the photo maps generally provide records of every building and store front, these comparisons can be quite informative. They can also be used to generate statistical information on the numbers and types of commercial and other activity at street level. For this investigation, over thirty different categories of activity/land use were counted and statistical comparisons made of the over time. While these statistics are useful in painting some of the larger patterns of continuity and change, it is the more specific comparisons of particular locations over time that have often provided the most insight.

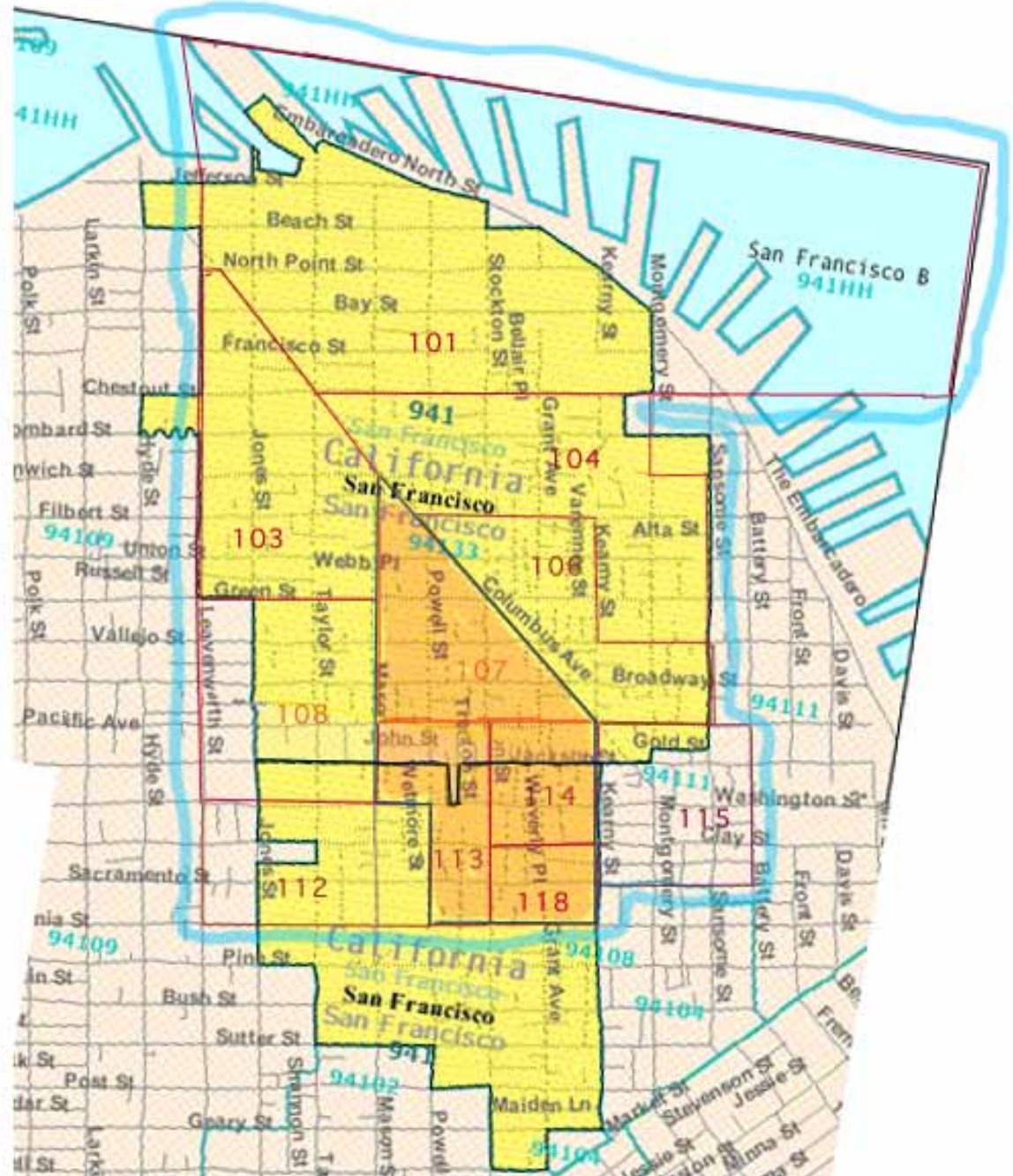


These three photograph 1201 Stockton provide examples of comparisons. The top image to the left was made 2009, when the store was a typical large produce/grocery market. The lower left image shows the same location in 2016, with a detail of its interior to the right. Now it is one of the new large, dried food stores, with a bright, spacious interior, representing a new kind of food store in Chinatown. (Photos by M. Collier)






Appendix 2: Census Map

1. The blue line encloses the area defined as the "greater Chinatown/North Beach" region for purposes of this report.
2. The area in yellow encompasses the zip code areas 94133 and 94108. Please note that 94108 extends into sections of Downtown. Neither zip code includes Tract 115, that tract is included in the "Chinatown Core" figures for this report.
3. The orange area plus tract 115 constitute the Chinatown "core" for census purposes. This is not exactly the same as the Chinatown core defined by the Chinatown Plan - see appendix 3.
4. Census tracts referenced in this report are listed in red. Please note that census tracts 114 and 115 were combined in the 2010 census and renamed Tract 611. For purposes of this report these have been referred to simply as "Tract 611."



Appendix 3 - Chinatown Plan Map

CHINATOWN LAND USE AND DENSITY PLAN

	PREDOMINANT COMMERCIAL USE TYPE	BUILDING COMMERCIAL INTENSITY DENSITY	APPROPRIATE ZONING DISTRICT
	Chinatown Residential Neighborhood Commercial	FAR 1.0 : 1	CRNC
	Chinatown Community Business	2.8 : 1	CCB
	Chinatown Visitor Retail	2.0 : 1	CVR

MAP TO BE EDITED

- Remove the land use designation for Lots 011 & 012 in Assessor's Block 0241 from CVR (Note: Property has been added to the Downtown Plan as C-3-C).

