

# Learning from Chinatown

by  
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# Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

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# Abstract

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour approach the city without preconceived opinions because they believe there is something to be learned from every aspect of the built environment. Inspired by their research methods, I walked around Toronto's Chinatown and observed its unique spatial character, paying particular attention to how it was formed by the nature of its bottom-up socio-cultural and economic patterns.

Toronto's Chinatown first emerged 150 years ago as a place of convergence for the Chinese diaspora. In response to the struggles faced by new immigrants in becoming established in a foreign context, kinship systems of support and exchange emerged, bridging old- and new-world cultures. The resilience and tenacity of their desire to establish a foothold in a new city and build for future generations is the foundation for the unique characteristics of today's Chinatown—both in how it is enmeshed in the local context within the urban core, and also how it is a distinct space with its own internal set of social and economic networks.

The core of this study consists of extensive field research, visualized through maps, photographs, diagrams, and illustrations based on personal experience. A key lesson to be learned from Chinatown concerns the intelligence and innovation of immigrants who adapted their cultural habits to a different environment in order to maintain a self-sustainable, affordable, and resilient neighbourhood.



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To my family



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Fig 0.01



Fig.0.02



Fig 0.03





# Chapter 1: Introduction

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

*“A specter haunts the world and it is the specter of migration.”*

ANTONIO NEGRI & MICHAEL HARDT <sup>1</sup>

*“The large Western city of today concentrates diversity. Its spaces are inscribed with the dominant corporate culture but also with a multiplicity of other cultures and identities...An immense array of cultures from around the world, each rooted in a particular country, town, or village, now is reterritorialized in a few single places, places as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, and most recently Tokyo.”*

SASKIA SASSEN <sup>2</sup>

# Introduction

## The Story of Chop Suey

“Chop suey,” which means “mixed bits”, is a stir-fry made from chicken giblets, bean sprouts, bamboo shoots, onions, tripe, dried seafood, and whatever else is at hand.<sup>3</sup> The origin myth of chop suey is that it was invented by a San Francisco boarding-house chef who arrived with a wave of Chinese immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, drawn to the California gold fields.<sup>4</sup> In America, Chinese immigrants were legally discriminated against and socially isolated, and thus developed a high degree of tolerance for hardship—and, being poor, maintained an efficient Chinese lifestyle. As the story goes, chop suey was invented when the chef was forced to cook for his work team in an empty kitchen and made use of leftovers from the garbage, creating a new dish to serve his co-workers.<sup>5</sup> The dish was a success, and surprisingly chop suey became more and more popular as Americans started to visit Chinese restaurants in large numbers.<sup>6</sup> With a little resourcefulness, Chinese immigrants had been forced to create a new meal that was neither authentically Chinese nor American. Chop suey - together with other Americanized Chinese



CHOP SUEY (Served with Rice)	
Plain Chop Suey .....	.40
Shrimp Chop Suey .....	.50
Beef Chop Suey .....	.45
Tomato Chop Suey .....	.45
Green Pepper Chop Suey .....	.45
Mushroom Chop Suey .....	.55
Pineapple Chop Suey .....	.45
Chinese Vegetable Chop Suey .....	.55
Fine Cut Chop Suey .....	.55
Chicago Chop Suey .....	.60
Subgum Chop Suey .....	.60
Chicken Chop Suey .....	.60
Tomato Chicken Chop Suey.....	.70
Green Pepper Chicken Chop Suey	.70
Mushroom Chicken Chop Suey ....	.75
Subgum Chicken Chop Suey .....	.80
Chicken Chop Suey with Mushroom and Pineapple .....	.90
Chicken Chop Suey with Mushroom and Almond .....	.90

Fig 1.01: Menu of Chop Suey from a Chinatown restaurant, in 1960s.

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foods such as chow mein and fortune cookies - symbolizes the Chinese immigrant experience and its unique culture. These hybrid dishes reflect the intelligence and innovation of immigrants adapting to a different environment.

The chop suey story was told to me by an old immigrant who has lived in Toronto's Chinatown for more than forty years. He told the story one day when I was shopping for dried seafood in the Dragon City shopping mall at Dundas Street and Spadina Avenue. Deeply inspired by this story, I decided to walk around Chinatown and explore the neighbourhood's hidden layers covered by the vibrant, colourful façades and signage visible everywhere. Stepping into the Dundas and Spadina area, the curious are transported into a mysterious and complex world.

Fig 1.02: This Chop Suey dish is a mix of onion, celery, bean sprout, carrots and red pepper, on top of rice.



## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

Globalization is a phenomenon manifested across multiple sites, processes, and structures within cities around the world. The increased movement of people, money, and information has engendered a new migration phenomenon, including new settlement patterns in the global city. Saskia Sassen, one of the world's leading urban sociologists, argues that "global cities concentrate both the leading sectors of global capital and a growing share of disadvantaged population,"<sup>7</sup> such as immigrant work forces. The spatial concentration together of these two deeply divided economic factions has led to increased social tension,<sup>8</sup> as well as problems in architecture and planning—problems like urban sprawl, segregation, lack of social cohesion, and the privatization of public spaces.

Powerful global actors have reshaped large parts of the contemporary city into homogeneous spaces that reflect the needs of the global economy. Architects and engineers around the world have aided this by building office districts and other infrastructure projects that are disconnected from more local cultural codes.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the disadvantaged populations (i.e. mostly migrant workers) have formed many alternative cultures and identities hidden in the niches of global cities. Often ignored by mainstream corporate culture, members from such disadvantaged groups have "localized" their diverse cultures in cities and have settled in population clusters.<sup>10</sup> It is in these hidden and socially and politically underrepresented neighbourhoods that some of the most interesting social and economic structures have begun to emerge.

Toronto's Chinatown, an ethnic enclave that was initially formed 150 years ago,<sup>11</sup> still attracts newcomers from China and other Asian countries. It is commonplace in most global cities to find a Chinatown, and sometimes satellite Chinatowns in suburban areas. Though many were formed before the current period of globalization, Toronto's has a completely different form compared to the stereotypical residential immigrant enclave.

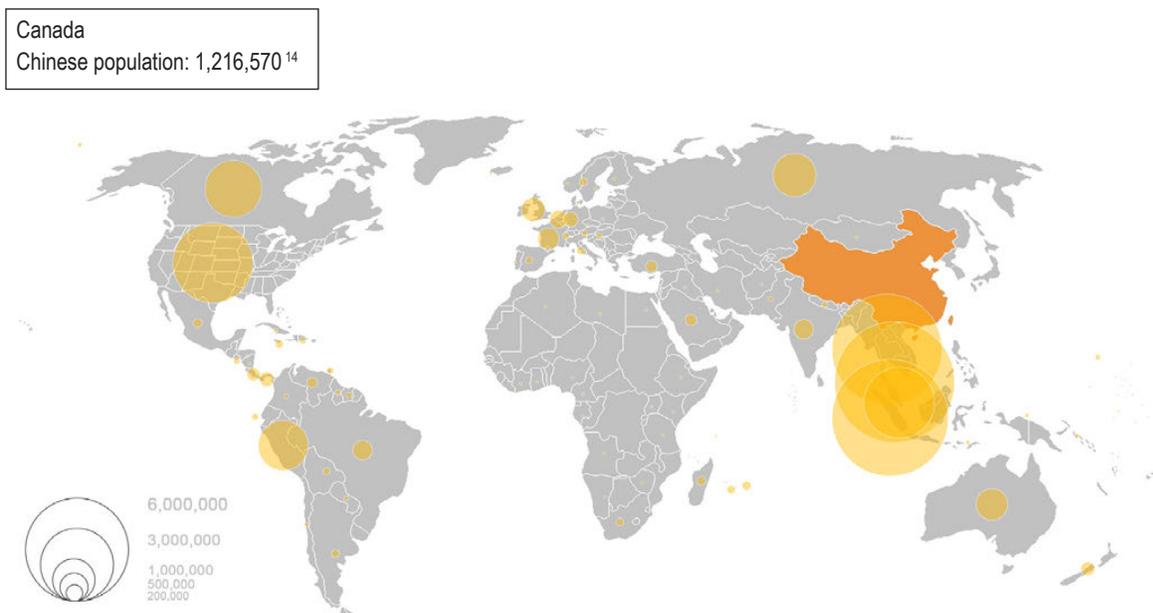
The goal of this thesis is to unravel Chinatown's internal social and economic dynamics and its urban structure in downtown Toronto by observing its unique spatial character, and by paying particular attention

## INTRODUCTION

to how its bottom-up socio-cultural and economic patterns have shaped its formation. Spaces in the community have been adapted and adjusted to the needs of Chinese immigrants, and an analysis of them can help to develop a greater understanding of the overall multitude of particular adaptations in this urban setting.

The spatial character found in Toronto's Chinatown, and others as well, often evokes the intelligence and wisdom rooted in the informal architecture practiced by non-architects. In *Architecture without Architects*, Bernard Rudofsky breaks down the "narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of the nonpedigreed architecture."<sup>12</sup> His work has successfully revealed the talent of untutored builders who fit their buildings into the natural surroundings. Instead of conquering nature, they "welcomed the vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, this thesis seeks to research and analyze the vernacular, anonymous, and spontaneous architecture produced by the residents of Chinatown. The final part of this analysis features design proposals sensitive to this architecture and the processes that created it.

Fig 1.03: Distribution of the Chinese population in the world. In North America, Canada has the second largest Chinese population, after the USA.



## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

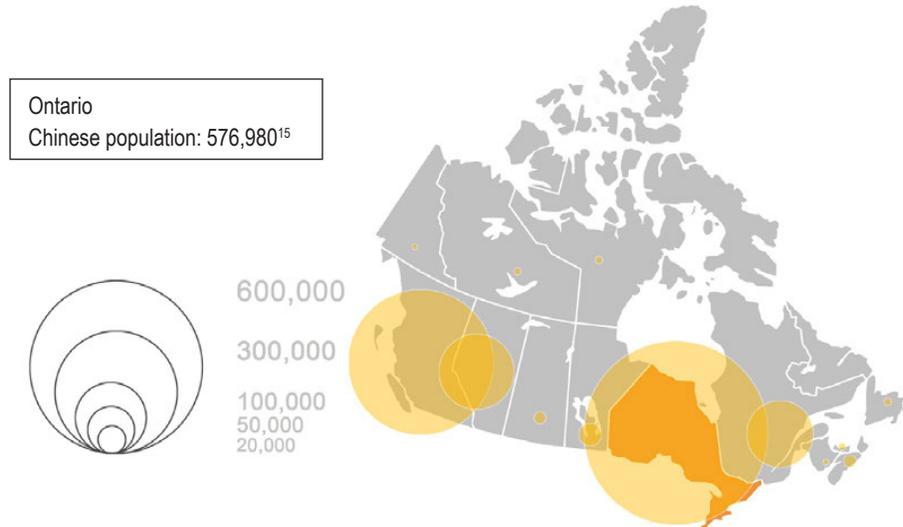


Fig 1.04: Distribution of Overseas Chinese in Canada. Ontario and British Columbia have the largest Chinese populations.

### A Brief Outline of the Thesis

The thesis **introduction** prepares the reader for an exploration of Toronto's downtown Chinatown by outlining the area's history and describing its current condition. It also encompasses a review of relevant literature and the research methodology.

Part Two, **Chinatown**, is an assemblage of visual and textual material, including large photographs, axonometric drawings, diagrams, maps, and text to explain the spatial considerations at play. From this analysis, readers can see, for example, how fire exits are used as places for commercial exchange, how exterior balconies are used as storage spaces, and how a vegetable wholesaler for surrounding business operates in a garage tucked in an alleyway. These hidden moments of unique social and commercial activity help reveal the intrinsic interiority of Chinatown. Accompanying maps and axonometric drawings demonstrate the locations and spatiality of these moments. Such an agglomerate study of Chinatown's unique spatial phenomenon can be a powerful tool to help architects and urban planners obtain a better understanding of immigrant culture and the local neighbourhood fabric.

Part Three, **Chinatown Rules**, summarizes and conceptualizes the spatial strategies learned from Chinatown. Immigrants have occupied and transformed the urban space to suit their needs by both adding

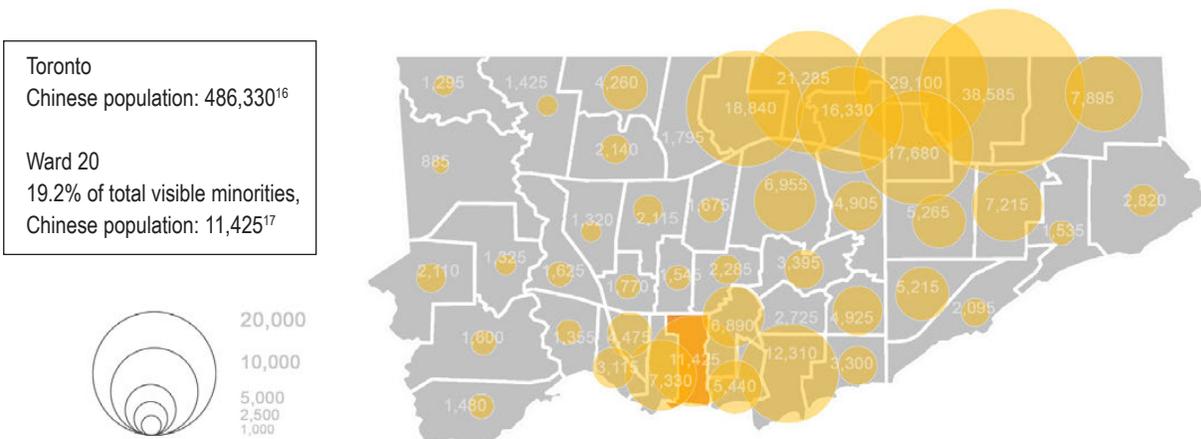
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spaces to the exterior of buildings and by partitioning interior spaces in unexpected ways. Based on these two methods, various spatial typologies are derived to fit the programs and locations of projects. This section links the previous section to the design projects and interventions proposed in the following section by articulating the three pertinent design concepts learned from the study of Chinatown: Building as a Process, Hybridization and Microcapitalism, and Encroachment on Shared or Public Space and Infrastructure.

Part Four, **Interventions**, applies the theoretical design concepts from the previous section to a set of selected sites in Chinatown, these include a multi-family dwelling, a clan association revitalization plan, and a public square on Huron St. All the projects are on different scales in different stages of development, and focus on various aspects of the existing Chinatown urban environment. The interventions do not provide a complete set of answers for design in Chinatown. Rather, they pose possible architectural strategies that would help maintain and support a self-sustaining community and expand the repertoire of design solutions.

The **Conclusion** is the final chapter and comprises a summary of the above material and proposals for possible future studies.

Fig 1.05: Distribution of the Chinese population in Toronto. Markham has the largest Chinese population.



## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### **Migration, Diaspora and Ethnopolis**

Throughout history, human beings have always moved in search of more opportunities, or for a better life. Migration is nothing new to humanity. However, it has taken a different form in the recent period of globalization, where greater spatial mobility has generated new global patterns of settlement and an increased level of connection between homeland and hostland. The recent surge in the amount of academic literature on these new forms of community reflects how significantly international migration has affected the world stage.

Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, who edited the volume *The Age of Migration*<sup>18</sup>, have provided a comprehensive analysis of the movement of migration across the globe. They pointed out that we are experiencing the largest scale of migration in human history. This is a result of the increasing mobility of people, the large scale of information and communication carried by the Internet and the erosion of state boundaries. “The movement, migration, and spread of a people away from an original homeland forms a diaspora,”<sup>19</sup> which Laurence Ma in *The Chinese Diaspora* defines as a “geographical expression of human interaction across global space.”<sup>20</sup> This geographic expression does not always refer to physical location; rather, it is a spatial and place-based process of population dispersion. A diasporic space is further characterized by flows of people, capital, goods, and information among places where the diasporic population settles.<sup>21</sup> It is what Manuel Castells has called a “space of flow”<sup>22</sup> that links up distant people in real time.

Such spaces of flow are, however, not placeless. Indeed, they are linked through nodes or hubs that are specific places with “well-defined social, cultural, physical and functional characteristics”<sup>23</sup>—these nodes and hubs are diasporic places. The original node is the homeland, while the secondary nodes are the hostlands.<sup>24</sup> These can be found in Chinatown and many other ethnic enclaves. The definition of ethnic enclave used in this work is in contrast to the common interpretation, a physically encapsulated community controlled by top-down forces. In this thesis, ethnic enclaves are rather socio-economic hubs that link the dias-

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poric population to the homeland and other diasporic sites. They serve as incubators that maintain the ethnic traditions and provide inter-ethnic interactions. As Laurence Ma states,

[A diasporic place] is a social incubator that contains the basic ingredients of networking, including people with a shared experience, local culture, family ties, home, landed property, social clubs, schools, workplaces and a common language, all playing a role in building individuals together and transforming them into kinsmen, co-villagers, neighbours, friends, classmates, alumni, colleagues and fellow club members.<sup>25</sup>

Michel Laguerre, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, analyzed three ethnic enclaves in his book *The Global Ethnopolis: Chinatown, Japantown and Manilatown in American Society*. According to him, ethnic enclaves are global ethnopolis, in which the diasporic population connect the host city to the rest of the world by border-crossing practices.<sup>26</sup> He emphasizes that the key of a global ethnopolis is that its residents maintain an ongoing relation between homeland and hostland. Through the study of the three ethnic communities, he identified how local strategies have created or sustained these global connections in relation to each other. He examines them using a bottom-up approach, including interviews and participant observation, which emphasizes the human activities of everyday life.<sup>27</sup>

A bottom-up analysis of Toronto's downtown Chinatown offered by this thesis similarly leads to the discovery of alternative ways that Chinese immigrants occupy the city. It focuses on the forms of a localized urban landscape and residents' connection to the social network that spans the globe. The ultimate goal of this research is to unveil the internal dynamics of Chinatown, paying particular attention to the different ways that immigrants have adopted and changed their urban environment.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### **Methodology**

The research process is comprised of three components: a four-month living and working experience in Toronto's downtown Chinatown, an extensive graphic analysis of the area's spatial character, and design proposals for the future of the community. Working generally with walking observation in the physical space of Toronto's downtown Chinatown, personal interaction with local residents, and secondary data, I aim to reveal how the local spatial strategies support meaningful social relations that stretch across the globe. The goal is to study the ways in which users appropriate space in culturally meaningful ways, as well as the ways in which these spaces interact with the users' everyday lives.

Because I embedded myself in the community, I was able to present aspects of the everyday life of Chinatown while at the same time addressing the internal social order hidden under the surface. As part of the Chinese community in Toronto, I made use of my personal knowledge of Chinese culture, language, and existing social connections with other members of the community. I am ethnically related and socially connected to the Chinese community in Toronto. Conversations and daily interactions with many Chinese immigrants—my friends, classmates, relatives, co-workers, and family friends—gave me a personal, yet comprehensive understanding of the community history and current circumstances of Chinatown. In addition, I spent four months volunteering at two local social agencies on weekly basis: the Alexandra Park Drop-In Centre and the Chinatown Business Improvement Area (CBIA). At the centre, I was responsible for teaching toddlers a handicraft class. The CBIA is a non-profit organization promoting business development in the area. There I participated in organizing the mid-autumn festival and proposing design solutions for the Huron Street revitalization project. Over the course of the research, I also spoke to many in the community as I walked around: storeowners, restaurant waiters, factory workers etc. Because I share the same language and cultural background, they quickly included me as part of their social group. Interacting with the existing social network and making new friends provided me with a large social ground, one that allowed

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me to discover the internal social structure of the community, as well as aspects of everyday life circulating within it.

While in Chinatown, I simultaneously observed, recorded, and mapped interesting spatial characteristics of the local urban culture. In order to capture such moments of everyday practice in the constantly changing social and physical fabric, I developed a series of graphic techniques, involving 3-D diagrams, large photographs, and a socio-spatial mapping system, as a form of research and analysis. The graphic techniques and representation methods used in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*, Steven Holl's *Rural & Urban House Types*, and Atelier Bow-Wow's *Made in Tokyo*, inspired the way I documented downtown Chinatown. All of these architectural publications share one common property: their focus is on the process of research, rather than on presenting a pre-conceived way of thinking. By using photography, film, analytical diagrams, and drawings with little commentary, the works above allow readers to better imagine and experience the place, and project individual points of view.

The first of the books, *Learning from Las Vegas*, was published in 1972 and was the pioneer in using photography and film as a methodology for studying urban forms. The architects and their students focused on photography, counting, and drawing, which described the Las Vegas urban fabric usually omitted from architectural study: signs, symbols, parking lots, casinos.<sup>28</sup> Their fresh way of looking at the city influenced my research of Chinatown, with some methodological differences where needed. For example, in order to experience the built form of Las Vegas, a car-based city, the group developed a set of graphic methods for analyzing and representing the site using automobiles. In the dense urban environment of Chinatown, I developed my research through walking and close observation in order to discover the spatial phenomena hidden behind the busy streets.

Five years after the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Steven Holl and William Stout started the *Pamphlet Architecture* series, dedicated to publishing "works, thoughts, and theory of a new generation

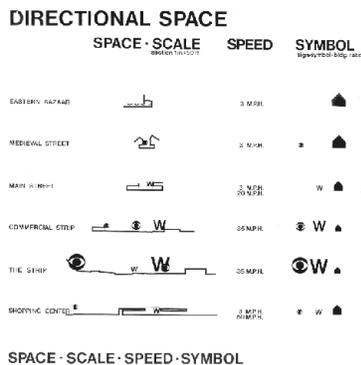


Fig 1.06: Illustration from *Learning from Las Vegas*. Speed is a factor, included in this research.

The diagram compares the relation of space/scale, speed and symbol in different types of streets.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

of architects.”<sup>29</sup> Their *Pamphlet #9, Rural and Urban Housing Types* is another precedent for the way I have documented immigrants’ everyday use of urban and architectural space. Houses introduced in this pamphlet are presented collectively, through plans, sections, axonometric drawings, and photographs, in order to elucidate the relationship between culture and architecture. The building types discovered were not used to generate a “universal theory for architecture, which could be applied to all buildings, in all places, for all times.”<sup>30</sup> Instead, each example expresses an individual situation, and an accumulation of these examples implies an embedded culture within the community, which may not be visible at first glance.

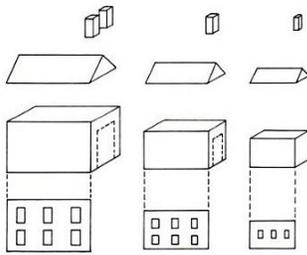


Fig 1.07: Axonometric diagram of a suburban house, by Steven Holl.

Similarly, Atelier Bow-Wow’s book *Made in Tokyo* presents in the form of a catalogue seventy examples of local structures that are “anonymous buildings, not beautiful, and not accepted in architectural culture to date.”<sup>31</sup> However, these buildings are authentic to Tokyo, and go a long way in explaining that city. The authors presented their work in the form of a guidebook to encourage the reader to consider the buildings as examples of interesting architecture. Every building is described through axonometric drawings, photographs, and texts. Again, each offers an independent situation, and their collection begins to form an understanding of Tokyo’s urban nature and existing styles.<sup>32</sup>

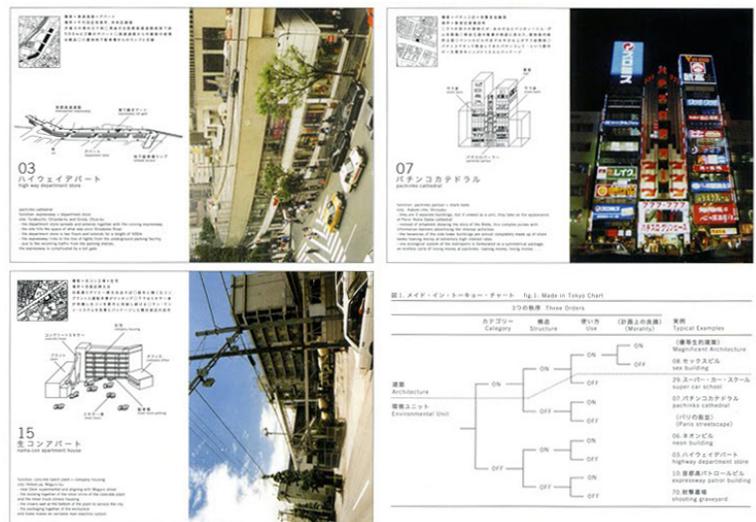


Fig 1.08: Example pages from *Made in Tokyo*, showing the page layout and graphic techniques.

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The work of all three precedents is visually appealing and theoretically engaging. Besides the various graphic methods they developed, it is important to note the ways these architects used research as a method for making frameworks that easily fold into the next step of design. All three studies explore a specific pattern that in turn creates an organizational framework for assembling projects. In *Rural and Urban Housing Types*, for example, Steven Holl explores the patterns of folk architecture in both rural and urban settings, offering a framework for thinking about alternatives to suburban tract housing. The building artifacts in *Made in Tokyo* exhibit a pattern of authentic local development, suggesting building designs that are responsive to both local circumstances and the programmatic requirements of the occupants.

When I began my thesis study at Waterloo, I chose sixteen examples that demonstrate various spatial characteristics found in Chinatown. Each example can be categorized into one of four social categories, based either on clan/kinship, region, family, or an individual. An assemblage of these examples forms a better understanding of the local neighbourhood culture and its physical fabric. Reflecting on these examples, I focused on how immigrants have incrementally retrofitted spaces according to their own cultural habits. Immigrants' patterns of spatial modification and customization thus serve as a framework for alternative methods of design in culturally diverse neighbourhoods.

I found a few locations in Chinatown that can be used as case study sites for design research that focuses on developing new programs and architectural forms responsive to the ethnicity and everyday life of immigrants. Three design concepts are generated for the projects and interventions proposed in Chinatown: Building as a Process, Hybridization and Microcapitalism, and Encroachment on Public Space. Each concept is applied to an existing situation in Chinatown to promote the idea of social sustainability and affordability, and ultimately provide immigrants with both flexible spaces and integrated programs.

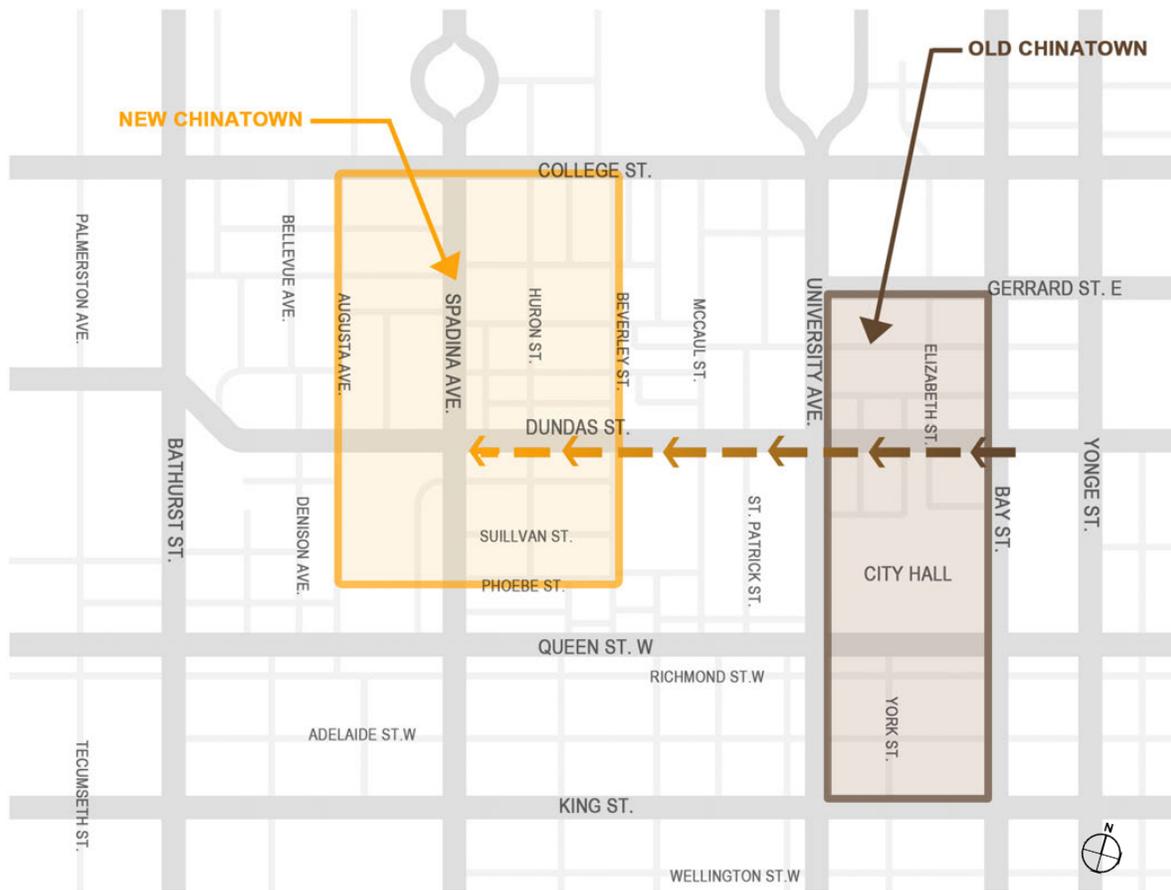
## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Toronto's Chinatown

"Canada has the highest per capita immigration rate in the world,"<sup>33</sup> and its multicultural policies have led to Toronto witnessing a wide and unexpected variety of urban forms. As in many other cities, the city's spatial order is made of "mainstream neighbourhoods, neighbourhoods currently undergoing major ethnic demographic shifts and gentrification, and visibly distinct ethnic neighbourhoods."<sup>34</sup> Chinatown is one of latter, and the ethnic enclave with the longest history in the city.

This historic neighbourhood, one of three Chinatowns within Toronto's boundaries, is centered on the intersection of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street, and extends outward from this point along both streets. It is adjacent to several of the city's most well-known neighbour-

Fig 1.09: Toronto's first Chinatown (outlined in brown) and Downtown Chinatown (outlined in orange). In the 1950s, the construction of the new city hall forced many early Chinese shops along Elizabeth and York Street to move westward along Dundas St. to Spadina Ave. Gradually, the contemporary Chinatown was formed, which has lasted until today.<sup>35</sup>



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Fig 1.10: The Lung Kong Tin Yi Association's original property, 24 Elizabeth Street, 1957

hoods, including Kensington Market to the west, Queen Street West to the south, the University of Toronto to the north, and Grange Park to the east. The present location of Chinatown was originally the centre of Toronto's Jewish community until the mid-1950s, when that community migrated north.<sup>36</sup> With the redevelopment of Toronto's new City Hall in 1950s, many Chinese immigrants were displaced from their original area of settlement of York and Elizabeth Streets between Queen Street and Dundas Street, and relocated west along Dundas towards Spadina Avenue.<sup>37</sup> The boundary of the new Chinatown area under study in this thesis is College Street to the north, Augusta Avenue to the west, Phoebe Street to the south, and Beverley Street to the east.

New Chinatown has expanded enormously with the influx of Chinese immigration since the lifting of Canada's racial exclusion policies in the 1960s. Nowadays, the area has more than fifty restaurants, plus many grocery stores, stores selling consumer goods, linens, wooden carvings, herbal medications, and multiple services for both the Chinese and non-Chinese markets. The 2006 federal census shows that Chinese is the primary language spoken in the Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood.<sup>38</sup>

Some observers argue, however, that the downtown Chinatown is declining because the suburbs have drawn the wealthier and more professional Chinese residents away. Younger and higher-income new immigrants seem generally to prefer settling down in the Greater Toronto Area's suburban Chinese communities in Markham and Richmond Hill, as well as in Mississauga and Scarborough. Those in the downtown Chinatown typically come from older generations or are less well-off newer immigrants. Fig. 1.13 shows that the average household income in the Kensington-Chinatown Area is below \$40,000, which is \$10,000 lower than Toronto's overall average.

Despite these trends, one cannot deny that the downtown Chinatown is still an important socio-economic hub for the Chinese diaspora in Toronto, especially for new immigrants with limited social and financial capital. Throughout its long history, the area has served as a base for various Chinese social networks in which individuals come together as

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Top five non-official home languages in the Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood:

1. Chinese (34%)
2. Vietnamese (2.72%)
3. Portuguese (1.37%)
4. Arabic (1.07%)
5. Spanish (0.45%)<sup>39</sup>

This diagram shows that the population of people who speak no official language is relatively high. The language barrier is a common issue in this neighbourhood.

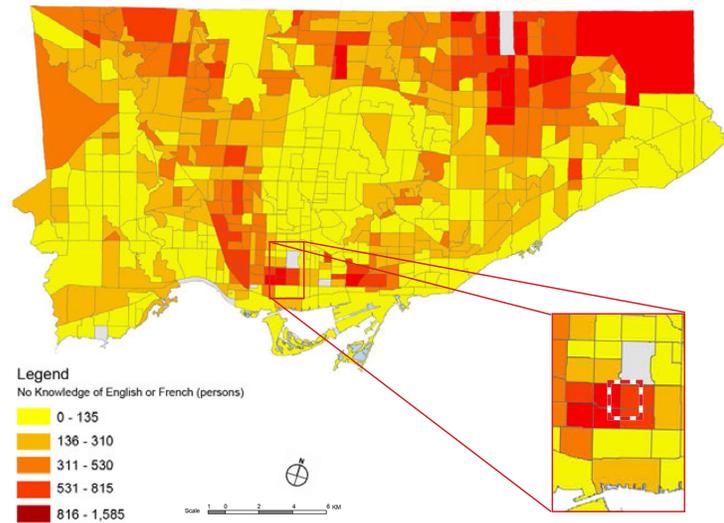


Fig 1.11: No Knowledge of English or French 2006, By Census Tract.

Population by Age Group in the Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood:

- 0 - 14: 8%
- 15 - 24: 19.7%
- 25 - 64: 58.1%
- 65+ : 13.9%<sup>40</sup>

The population of working age adults is lower than in other neighbourhoods in downtown Toronto. Comparing the census data between 2006 and 2011, the populations of youth and working age adults have increased by 20% and 9%, respectively. The increase of the senior population has been minimal. However, the population of children aged 0 to 14 has dropped by 15%.<sup>41</sup>

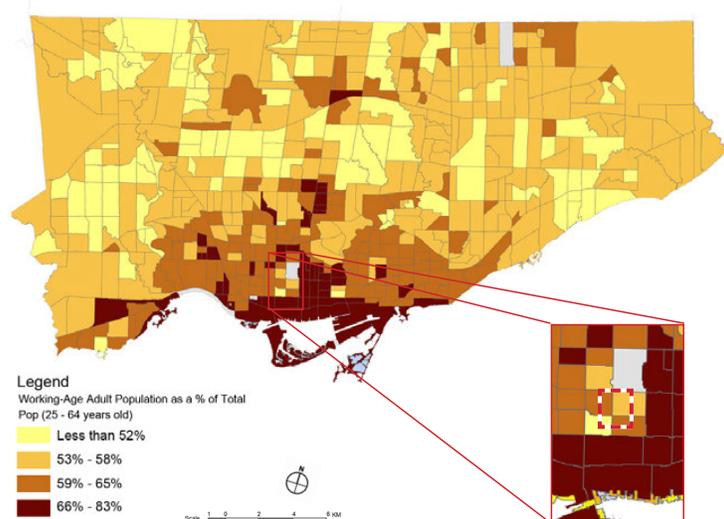


Fig 1.12: Population of Working-Age Adults 2006, By Census Tract.

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Family structure in Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood:

1. Married couples	2,130
a. no children	955
b. 1 child	570
c. 2 children	380
d. 3 or more	220
2. Common-Law couples	465
a. no children	405
b. 1 child	40
c. 2 children	10
d. 3 or more	0
3. Single-parent families	1,005 <sup>42</sup>

Most families in this neighbourhood are married couples with no children. The average household income of Kensington-Chinatown area is lower than the Toronto's median household income (\$49,345), though it is above the low-income line (\$22,500).<sup>43</sup>

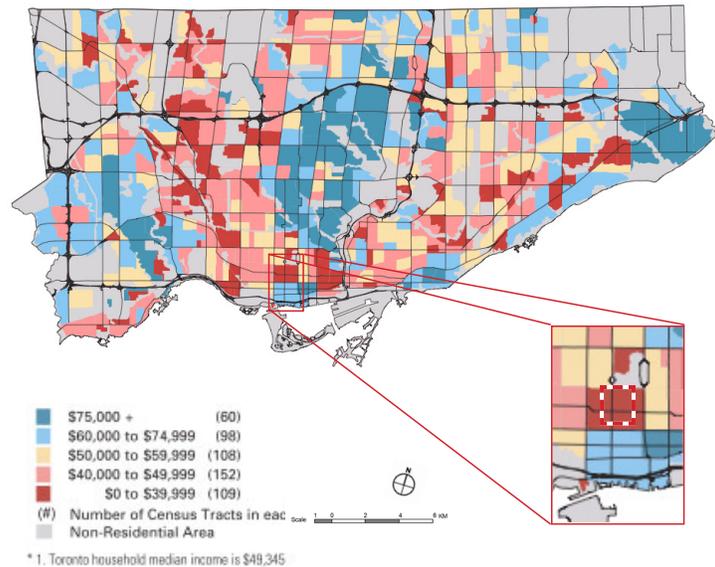


Fig 1.13: Median Household Income, 2000.

kinsmen, neighbours, clan members, business partners, classmates, colleagues, alumni, and friends.<sup>44</sup> The dense downtown urban fabric has also stimulated these relationships within the highly layered and dynamic social ground, as co-workers become neighbours, clan members become business partners, and co-villagers become local storeowners and workers.

These social relationships generate a particular form of social capital, which helps immigrants overcome disadvantages and raises them socio-economically. For instance, garment factory workers from Guangdong have formed a social subgroup because they speak the same dialect and they have the same cultural background. Based on my observations, they often make friends at the workplace and help their co-villagers get

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jobs there. Even though employers sometimes pay them low wages or offer poor working conditions, these workers view a workplace with social connections as a good option because they are provided with a familiar environment where they can obtain first-hand information on other employment and business opportunities.<sup>45</sup> Chinatown is indeed a social incubator, consisting of a wide range of businesses and a sufficiently large pool of social capital. Similar relationships can certainly be found in suburban Chinatowns, but because the urban form is more spread-out there, social networks and encounters may not be as rich and overlapping as downtown.

### **Demographics**

Until the late 1960s, most Chinese immigrants in the study area came from Tai Shan, in Guangdong Province, and were primarily descendants of the railway workers who built the Canadian Pacific Railway across Canada. Toronto's Chinese population in 1951 was about 3,000, and 10 years later the number had increased to 6,700, primarily as a result of the arrival of the wives and children of the early immigrants.<sup>46</sup>

Over the next 50 years, Chinatown's demographics changed rapidly due to the shifting political situation in China and the changes in Canadian immigration policies. In 1967, the new immigrant act introduced the 100-point system, which allowed Chinese to enter with the same criteria as other applicants from Europe. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, many Vietnamese immigrants began arriving in large numbers as impoverished refugees and settled in Chinatown as a sub-ethnic group.<sup>47</sup> The government's agreement on the increase of the immigrant population in 1985 promoted the arrival of wealthy entrepreneurs from Hong Kong, especially during the Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong. It was found in 1990 that nearly half of the business-category immigrants came from Hong Kong or Taiwan, though most of them settled in suburban Markham and Richmond Hill.<sup>48</sup>

When the influx of Hong Kong immigrants declined after 1995, immigration from Mainland China rose. The government lowered the gen-

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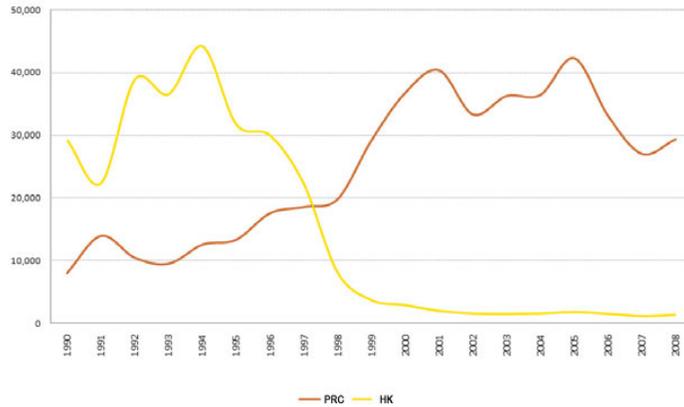


Fig 1.14: Immigration to Canada from the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong during the years of 1990 to 2008.

eral standards for skilled workers, and immigration from China reached a peak of 42,292 in 2005.<sup>49</sup> Immigrants from Fujian Province have become a new major population group in downtown Chinatown, while those from other parts of Mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan also reside in Chinatown as significant subgroups.

Hailing mainly from the city of Fuzhou and its vicinity, the Fujianese are arguably one of the most disadvantaged but most mobile transnational groups. With little exposure to western culture, they often come to Canada with one overriding motive: making money by working as hard as they can in order to support the next generation through education. Despite the fact that the Fujianese have garnered an unfair reputation as smuggled illegal immigrants,<sup>50</sup> they have worked hard to gain legal citizenship, often by operating Chinese grocery stores; indeed, many Fujianese immigrants use the supermarket business as a tool to legally bring over others from their villages to North America. By 2009, 40 out of 50 Chinese supermarkets in the Greater Toronto Area were owned by Fujianese immigrants, and most workers in these stores come from Fujian as well.<sup>51</sup>

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Fig 1.15: Map of current demographics on Spadina Ave.

Map from the place of origin of store-owners along Spadina Ave. Immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong provinces comprise the majority of Chinese immigrants in Chinatown. Vietnamese immigrants also reside in Chinatown as a large subgroup.<sup>52</sup>

Given the above general background, it is useful in the next part of this thesis to focus in on the particularities of the downtown Chinatown. The distribution map on page 35 shows sixteen scenarios of the unique spatial character of Toronto's Chinatown. The studies are centered on the Spadina and Dundas area, from College to the north, to Queen to the south. The accompanying aerial photos indicate the location of each scenario. They are mainly located near the main Spadina/Dundas intersection, where most of the commercial activity is. Restaurants, supermarkets, dollar stores, Chinese malls, banks, and small retail stores are clustered there at street level, while salons, medical offices, garment factories, travel agencies, and other small-scale businesses tend to occupy the basement and upper levels. Business seems to get less busy on the upper stretch of Spadina, and a lot of trading companies have recently closed down due the decline of that industry. Institutional and cultural agencies, such as clan associations, schools, churches, and temples, are scattered within the area's residential blocks. The sixteen scenarios were chosen to represent the different types of Chinatown's social and economic activity in order to reveal the full scope of the interwoven lives of local immigrants.

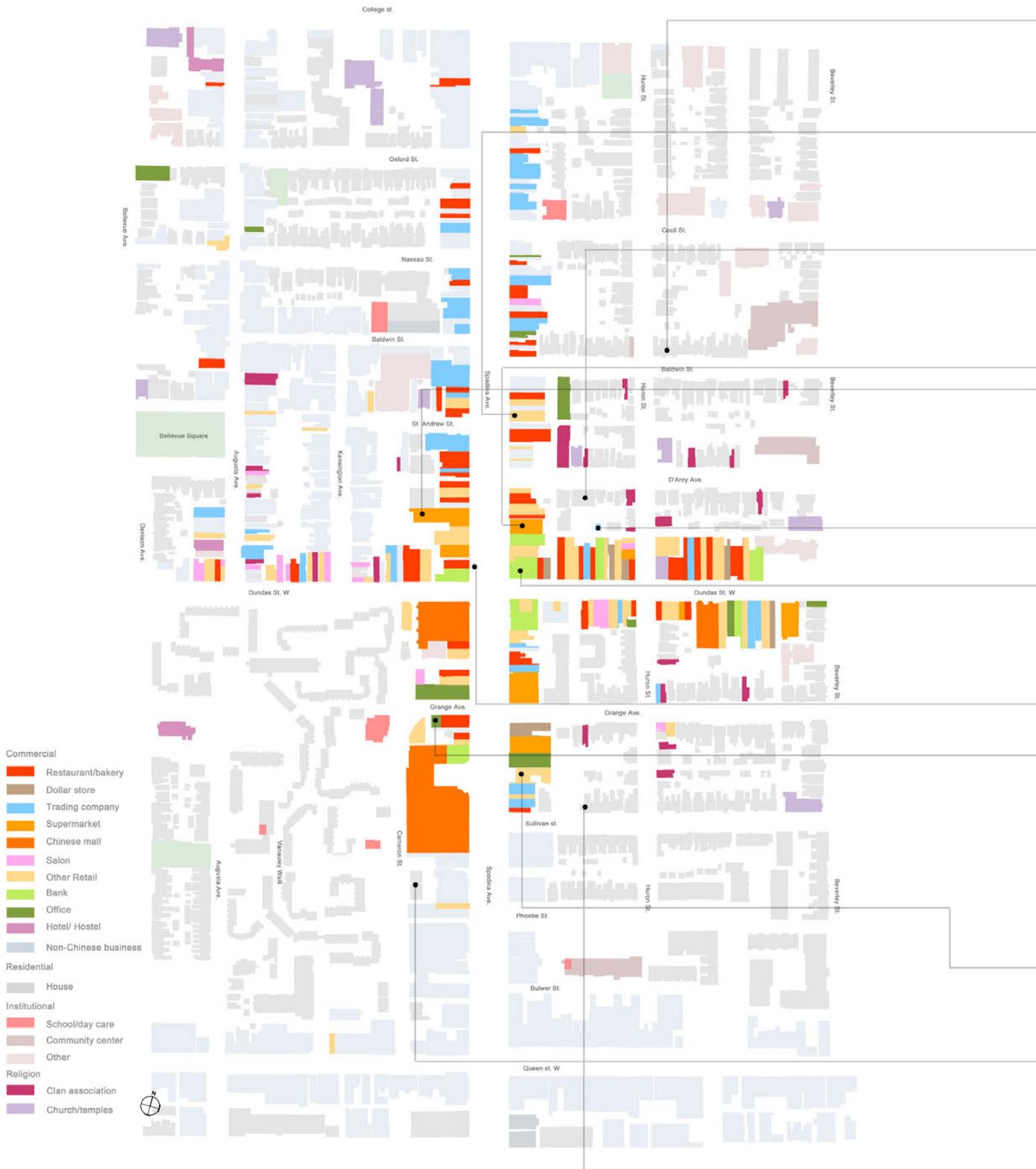


Fig 1.16: Colour-coded map of downtown Chinatown, Toronto.



Fig 1.17: Location of the study sites in the city fabric.

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# Chapter 2: Chinatown

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*"I'm aware that one walks a strange, fine line between trivializing oneself and becoming a patronizing tourist. To me, it's a risk worth taking...I'm actually more interested in being a tour guide of sites of crisis; we need to see these... places! We need to enter these environments...Then we ask, 'What produced these conditions?' We begin to understand the institutions, the protocols, the populations."*

TEDDY CRUZ <sup>1</sup>

# Chinatown

This chapter reveals a completely different side of Chinatown. As a part of the community, I see myself as a tour guide who brings the reader into this historical neighbourhood. Most guidebooks focus on the cultural and natural heritage of a place. This chapter uncovers Chinatown's unique spatial characteristics, places that are typically modified or re-adapted by local immigrants. Sixteen case scenarios are chosen to represent the different types of social and economic activities taking place in specific spaces, each of which is illustrated through analytical drawings and photographs.

The sixteen scenarios have been formatted to each encompass a large photograph, axonometric diagrams, a site map and comments. The photograph and commentary provide a sense of the site and its sense of place. The axonometric diagrams explain the location's spatial composition in detail, while the site plan shows how the spaces fit into the larger urban fabric.

Each of the scenarios is also organized into one or more of four social units: clan/kinship, regional, family, or individual.

- a. Fujianese Supermarket Complex
  - a1. HuaSheng Supermarket                      Clan
  - a2. Apartment Building                         Clan
  - a3. Vegetable Wholesaler                     Clan
  - a4. Sunny Meat Market Ltd.                 Clan
  - a5. Clan Associations                         Clan
- b. 285 Spadina Ave. (RBC Royal Bank)      Mix
  - b1. Chinatown Dollar Mart                 Clan

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- b2. Bookstore and DVD booth      Family/ individual
- b3. Bakery      Regional
- b4. Lamb Kebab Store      Individual
- c. Multi-family House      Family
- d. Retail stores      Mix
- e. Massage Parlour and Accounting Offices      Mix
- f. Garment Factories      Regional
- g. Backyard Farming      Family
- h. Residential Row House      Family/clan
- i. Street Vendor      Individual

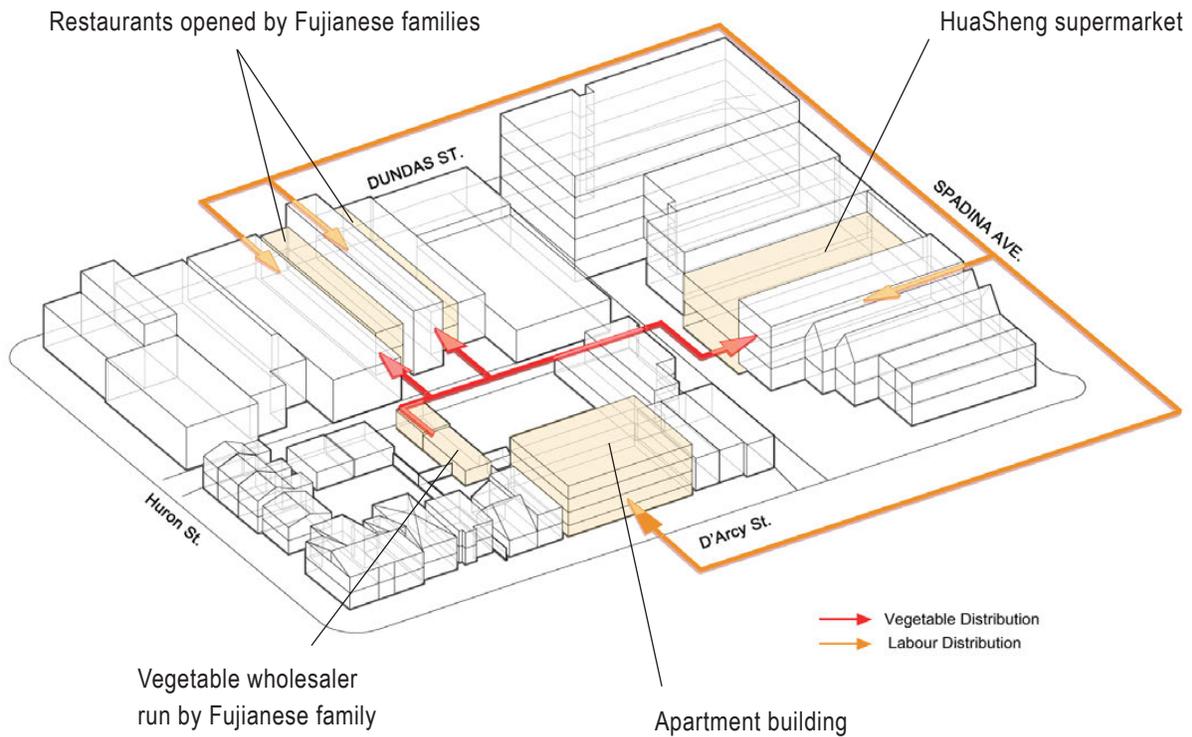
Individual	Family	Clan	Other	User / Use
				Residential
				Retail
				Garage
				Other

Fig 2.01: Buildings are grouped based on social unit type and program use.



## a Fujianese Supermarket Complex

Location: Multiple locations  
Use: Service distribution system



On the northeast corner of Spadina Ave. and Dundas St., a hidden food and labour distribution network is formed by a supermarket, an apartment building, a vegetable wholesaler, and two restaurants. Vegetables are distributed in the back alleys to supermarkets and restaurants. Many of those who work in this Fujianese business network rent units in the apartment building.

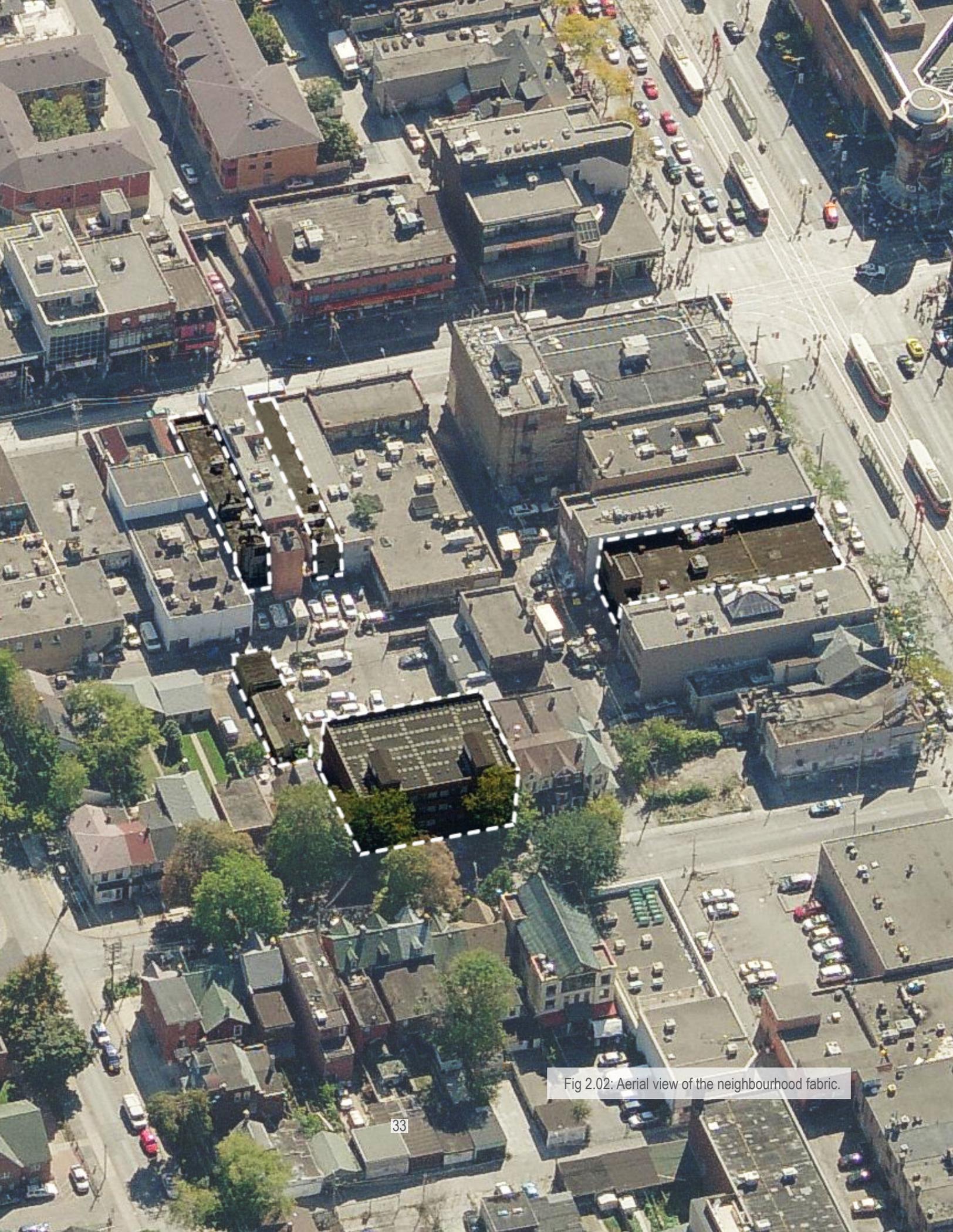
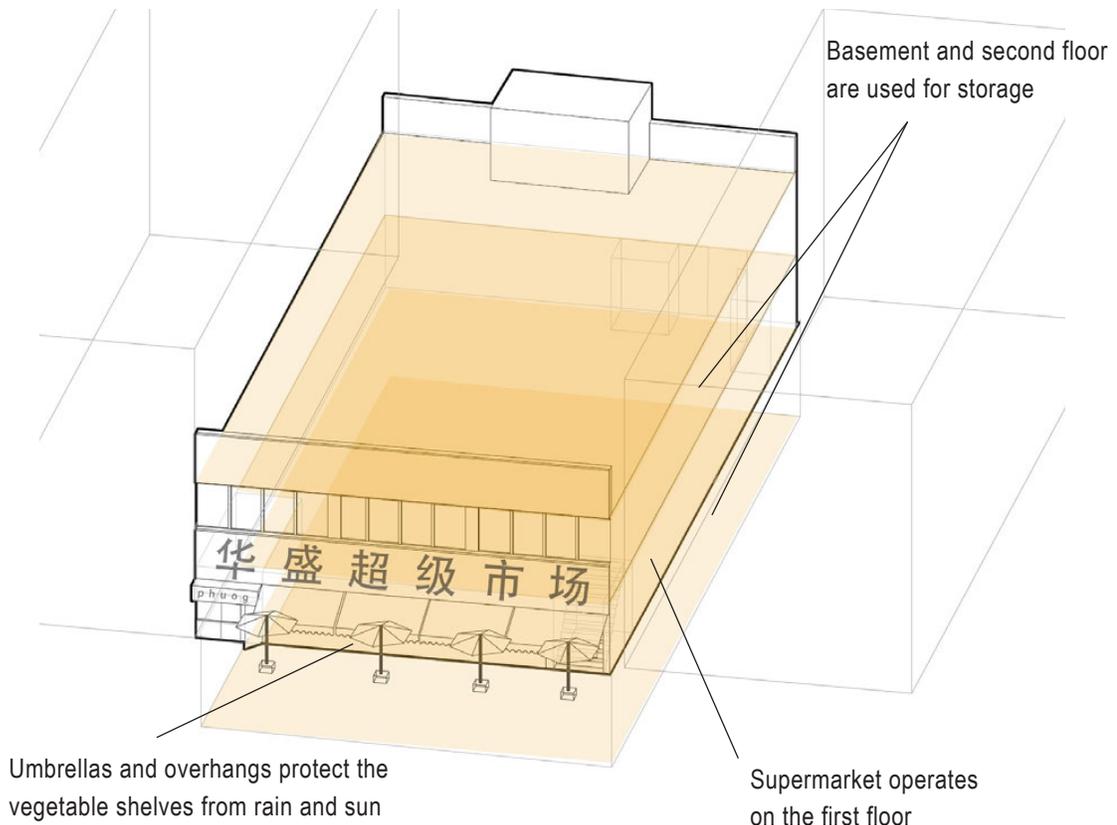


Fig 2.02: Aerial view of the neighbourhood fabric.



## a1 HuaSheng Supermarket

Location: 293-299 Spadina Avenue  
Use: Chinese grocery store



Hua Sheng supermarket owns the property at 293 Spadina Ave. The main floor is used as a retail space, while the basement and second floor are used for storage. In the basement, there is a vegetable, fruit, and frozen product package assembly line, where a few Fujianese workers sort and pack. A small rest space sits beside the staircase, used mainly by service workers at lunch and dinner. There are also two large freezers in the basement, in which frozen products are stored.



Fig 2.03: Small room in the basement.



Fig 2.04: Employee rest area in the basement.



Fig 2.05: Staircase leads to the basement.

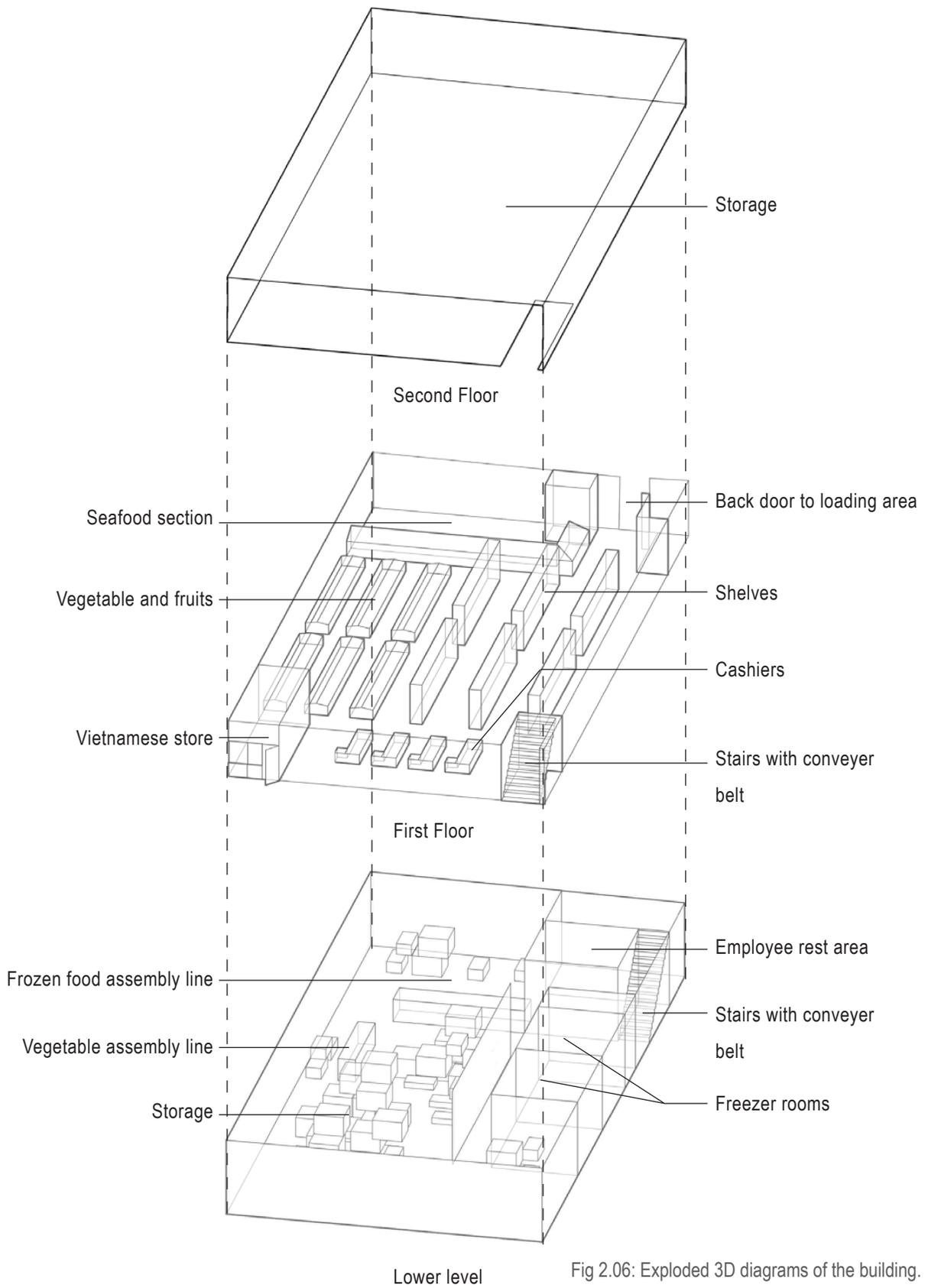


Fig 2.06: Exploded 3D diagrams of the building.



Fig 2.07: Vegetable shelves in front of the store entrance.

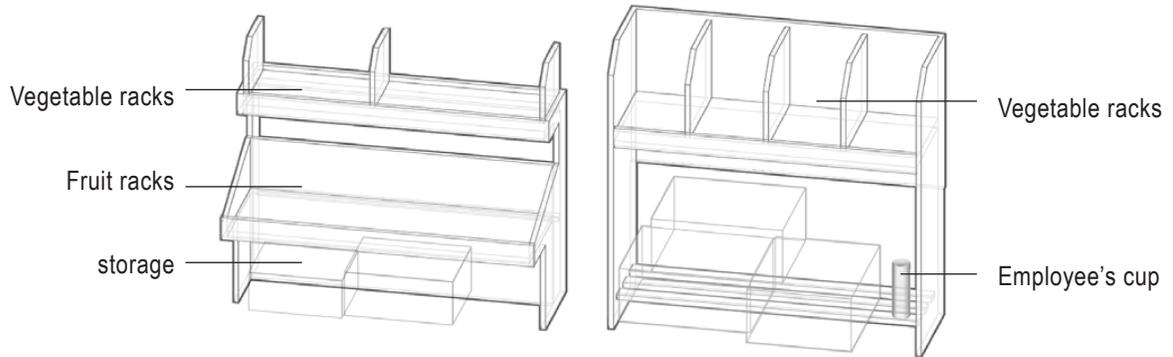
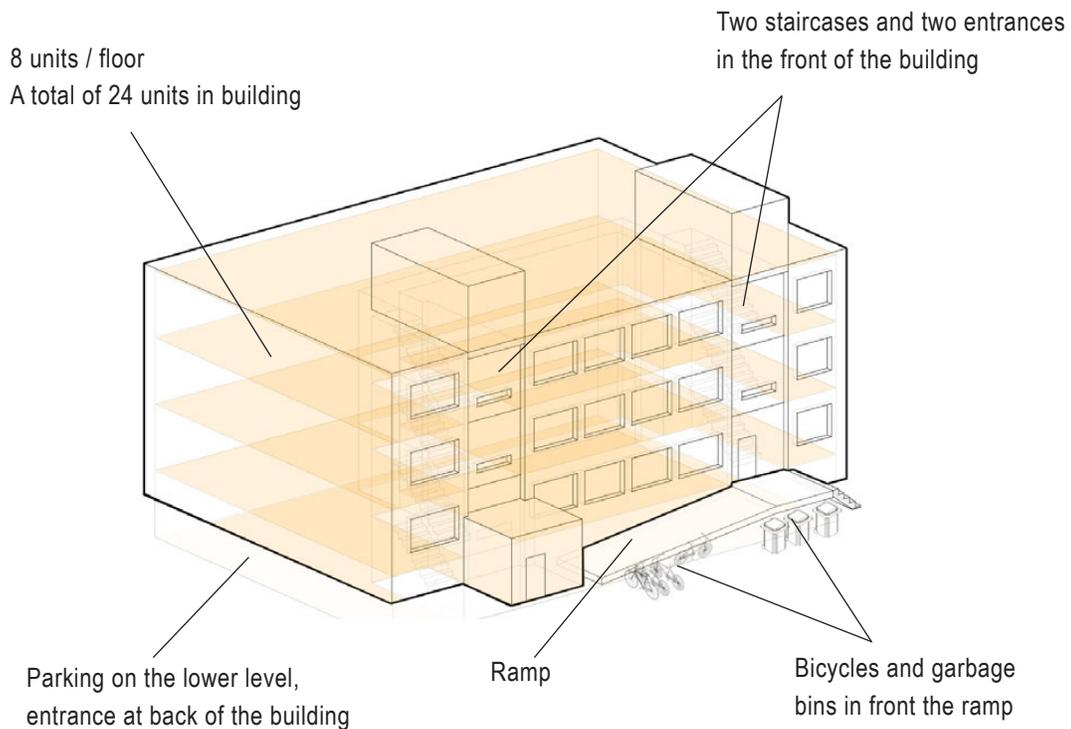


Fig 2.08: Diagram of the vegetable shelves.



## a2 Apartment Building

Location: 123 D'Arcy Street  
Use: Rental apartments



This building on D'Arcy Avenue was an old industrial space divided and transformed into apartments for rent. This building functions as a social incubator in which tenants meet friends from the same place of origin. As many residents like to keep the unit doors open, walking in the corridor is thus like walking through a narrow alley where noises and smells come from every unit. Though the apartments are in generally poor condition, it is a desirable place to live because there are strong relationships among many of the tenants. Immigrants with families prefer to rent apartment units instead of houses because the acoustics in houses are worse.

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Fig 2.09: View to the apartment entrance from D'Arcy Street. Bicycles are piled in front the ramp since the railings are perfect for locking the bikes to. No proper space for garbage bins.

# LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

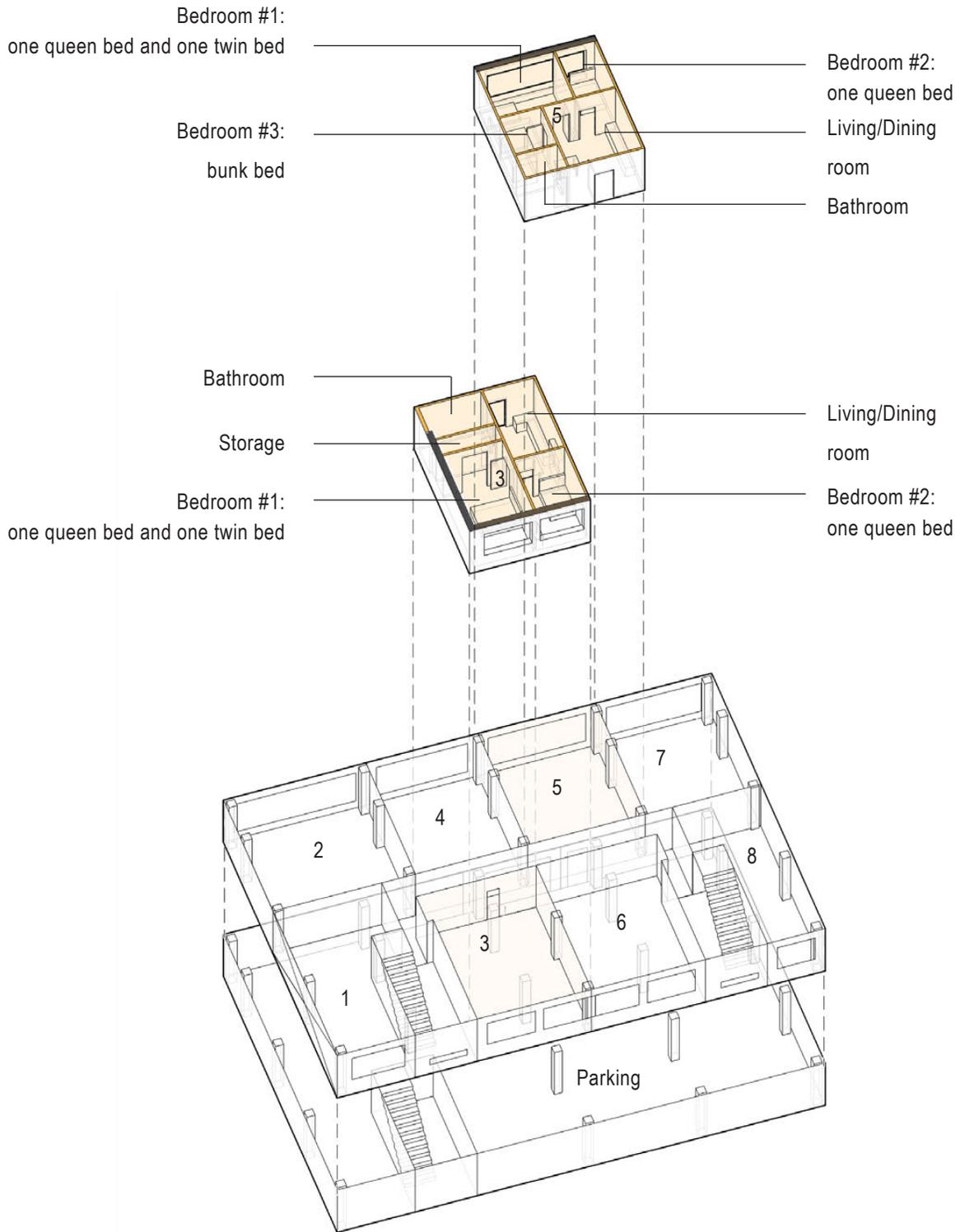


Fig 2.10: Exploded 3D diagrams of the building.

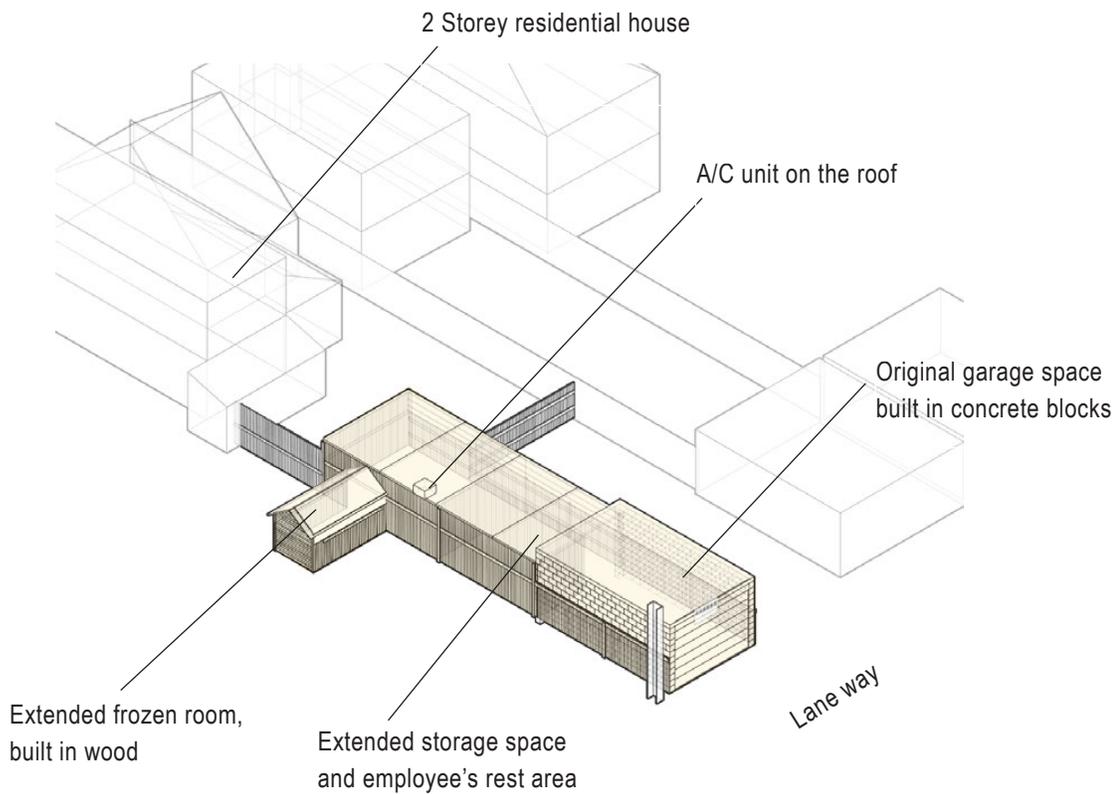


Fig 2.11: Interior corridor of the apartment building. Buckets and mobs are stored in the corridor to save space inside the units.



## a3 Vegetable Wholesaler

Location: A garage in a lane way  
Use: Vegetable distribution centre and storage



In the alley between D'Arcy and Dundas, there is a garage that has been converted into a vegetable wholesaler. It consists of two structures: a concrete block for the original garage and a recycled wooden extension. At the side, there are all kinds of cardboard boxes piled up. Workers come back and forth with trolleys between here and other Fujianese businesses.



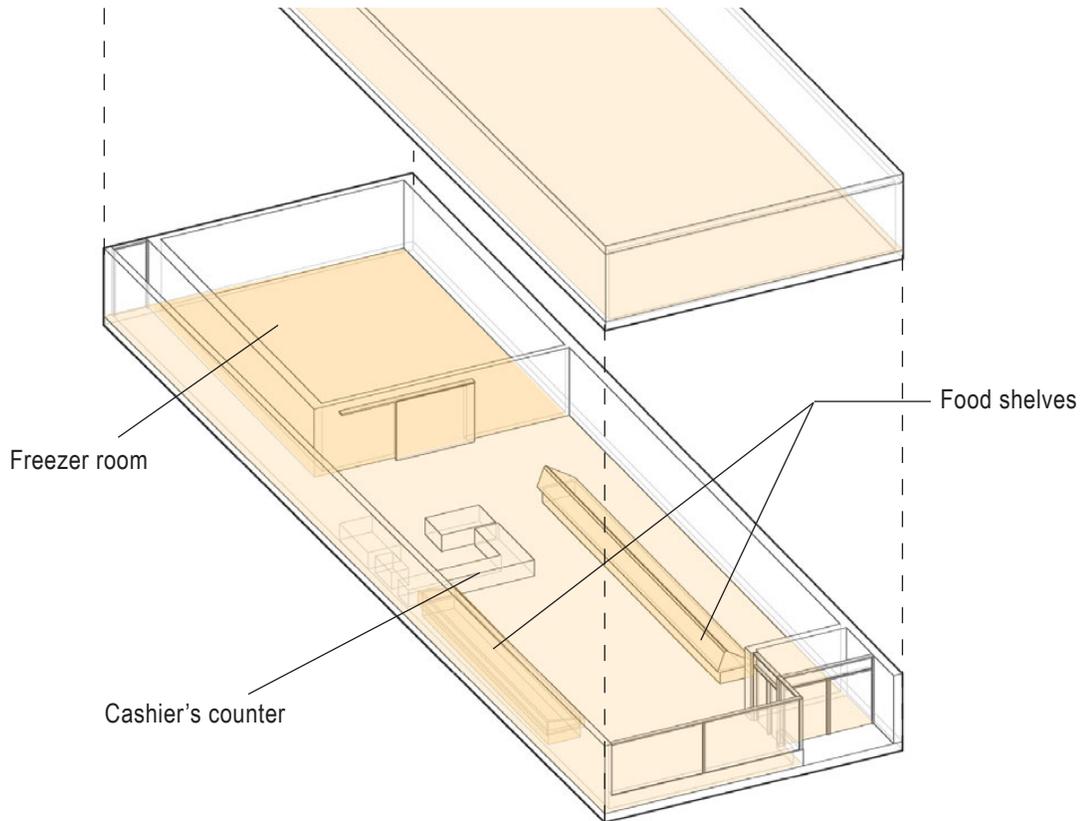
Fig 2.12: Entrance to the vegetable wholesaler.



## a4 Sunny Meat Market Ltd.

Location: Spadina Avenue

Use: Poultry retailer and distributor to restaurants and supermarkets



This poultry store sells partridge, quail, ducks, pigeon, and all kinds of chicken. Sometimes pork, lamb, and rabbit are available, too. The owners also have large farms in the suburbs and distribute their products to restaurants and supermarkets on a daily basis. They also have another retail branch in Richmond Hill. Most of their employees are from Fujian province.



Fig 2.13: Food display in the store.

# a5 Clan Organizations

Location: Within the residential fabric of Chinatown  
 Use: Social gathering



Clan associations can be found in every overseas Chinese community. There are four main types of association: “clan or surname associations, district associations, community organizations, and political associations.”<sup>2</sup> As the Chinese community was initially socially isolated from mainstream society, these associations arose to provide services such as “settlement assistance, help with sending remittances to China, lodging, and employment.”<sup>3</sup> Many associations are currently facing the problem of self-renewal because they have been unable to attract younger members. Current activities held at most associations include mah-jong, cards, and karaoke.



Fig 2.14: Examples of clan associations in Chinatown.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

The self-organized socio-economic system of the Fujianese diaspora in Chinatown is shown through the economic, social and cultural activities found in the neighbourhood. (Fig 2.15) All of the examples in the previous pages stand in relation to the business chain of the Fujianese supermarket. Besides those establishments, immigrant Fujianese also developed networks that are exclusively Fujianese, which offer localized versions of social services, economic activity and cultural involvement.

The rise of the Fujianese supermarket chain resulted from the influx of Chinese immigrants and the demand for Chinese products over the past few decades. The Fujianese grocery stores, which originally were grocery stores and shops scattered around Chinatown, have grown into a large ad hoc supermarket chain today, spanning the Greater Toronto Area. Approximately forty out of fifty Chinese supermarkets are owned by Fujianese immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area.<sup>4</sup> In addition, other Fujianese businesses, such as suburban farms and fisheries, food manufacturers, export and import companies, etc., have emerged as the supermarket business expanded.

The key to the success of the Fujianese supermarket business is not only the increased demand for Chinese grocery stores, but also the large pool of social capital specific to Fujianese ethnicity. The Fujianese diaspora is connected strongly through clan and kinship. It forms a large pool of social capital that is strengthened by personal trust, family ties, cultural values, friendship, group solidarity and so on. This kind of social capital is very resilient and flexible in response to difficulties and pressures. It has also given clan members a competitive edge in their struggle for social mobility, despite the limited material and financial resources available to them.

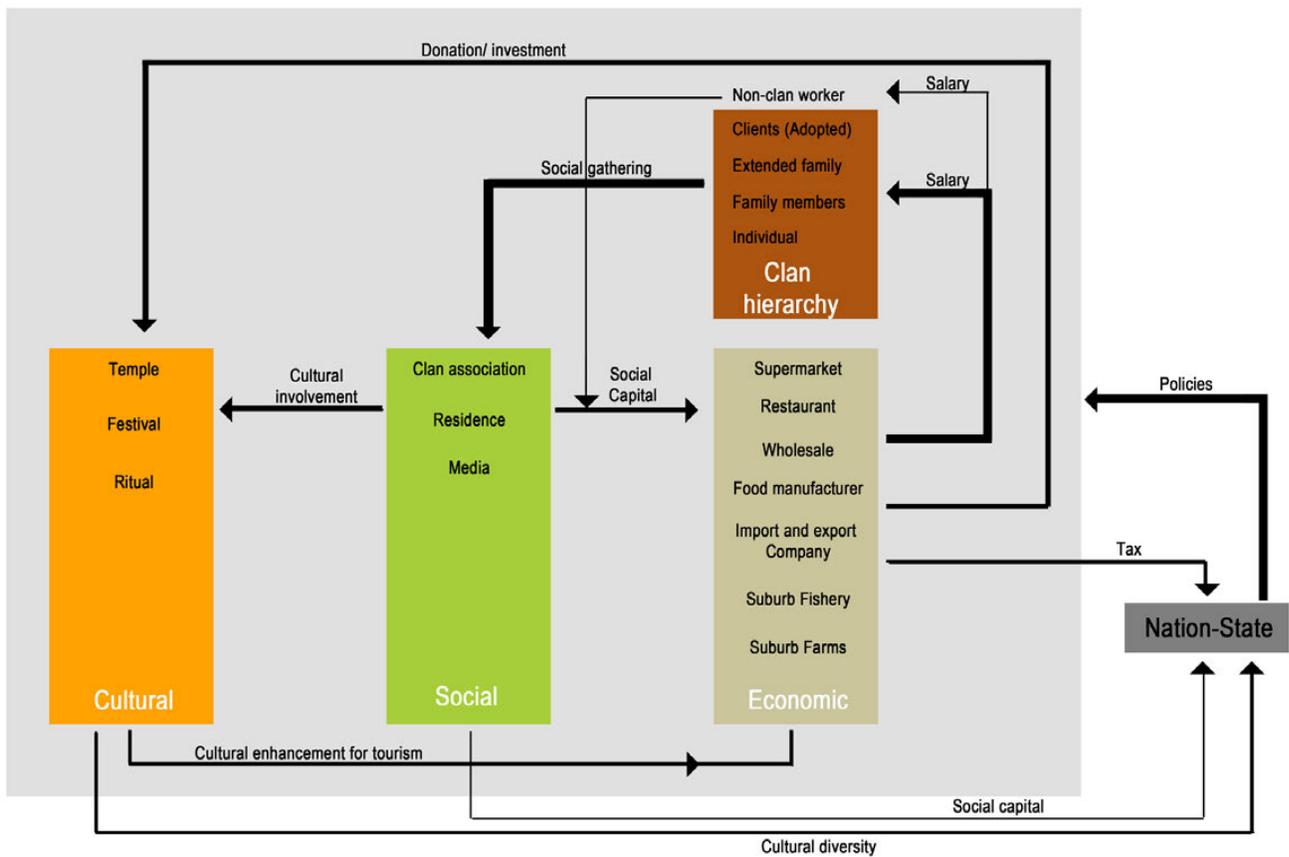
As the businesses do well, Fujianese immigrants use a certain amount of their income to contribute to their culture. They donate or invest in the construction of temples and other activities like festivals and community rituals in Chinatown. Cultural activities also help to promote

## CHINATOWN

and enhance the local identity of Chinatown overall. At the same time, successful immigrants help to attract more people to Chinatown, who then patronize their own businesses.

The economic, social, and cultural sectors of the Fujianese diaspora in Chinatown are organically linked through the flow of capital, labour, and information. Fujianese immigrants' tight social relations have successfully transformed social capital into financial capital, and they have thus generated their own wealth.

Fig 2.15: Diagram of the existing socio-economic system of the Fujianese diaspora in Chinatown.

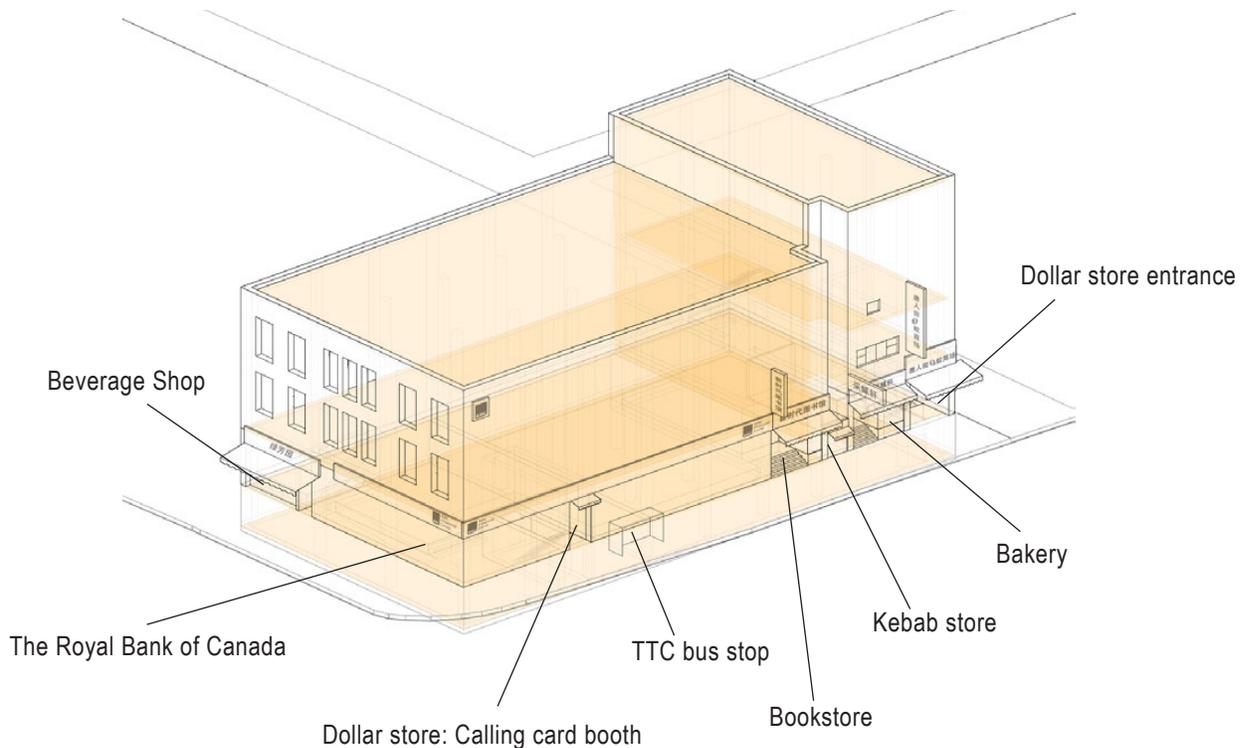


## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



### **b** 285 Spadina Avenue

Location: The northeast corner of Dundas St. and Spadina Ave.  
Use: Mixed use



285 Spadina Avenue was a Yiddish theatre beginning in 1922 and became a cinema called the Victory in 1941. As the Jewish community left the area in 1975, the Chinese Entertainment Company Golden Harvest purchased the property and converted the building into a theatre that played Chinese films and plays.<sup>5</sup> In the digital age, however, theatres have lost a lot of their core business, and currently, the Royal Bank of Canada is the building's biggest tenant. A dollar store is the second biggest tenant, renting the entire basement. In addition, there is a bookstore, a bakery, a kebab store, and a bubble teashop. The insertion of these small businesses has brought a dynamic liveliness to the streetscape. On the upper level, however, the space remains empty; the interior theatre space has never changed.



Fig 2.16: The Victory Theatre in the 1960s.



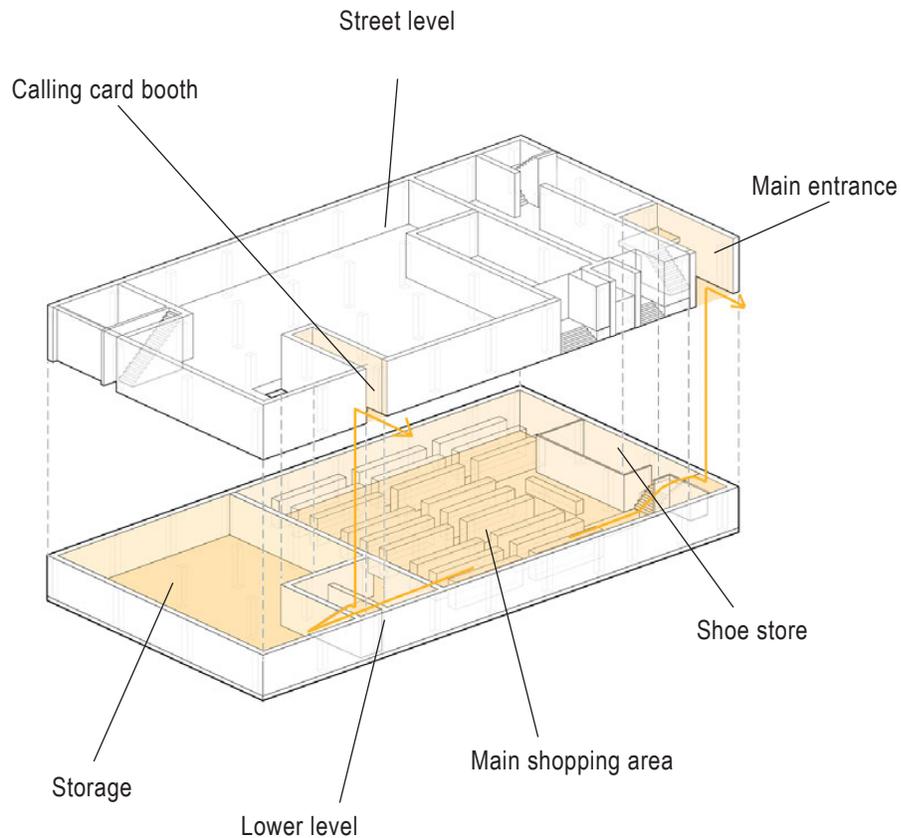
Fig 2.17: Royal Bank of Canada is the biggest tenant in this building now.



## b1 Chinatown Dollar Mart

Location: Dundas Street

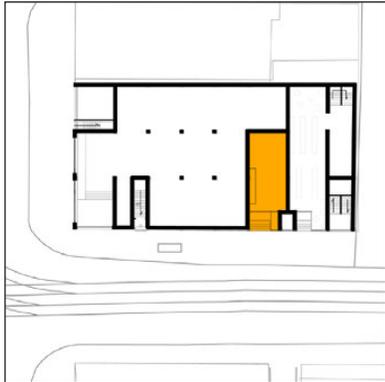
Use: Retail space re-adapted from an old fire exit



The Chinatown Dollar Mart, located in the basement of the old theatre, is one of the largest Chinese dollar stores in the area. It also has affiliated branches in suburban Chinatown communities. Entering from a heavily decorated staircase on the southwest corner, customers are confronted with many cheap products imported from China. Apart from the main section, the store extends to an isolated staircase, formerly used as a fire exit, where a woman from Mainland China now sells international calling cards.



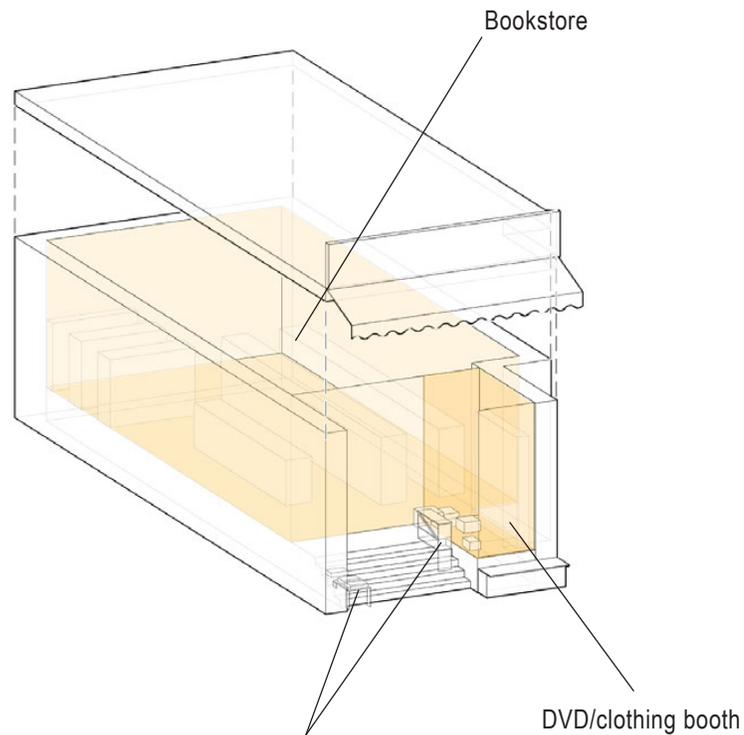
Fig 2.18: Commercial activity in an old fire exit.



## b2 Bookstore and DVD Booth

Location: Dundas Street

Use: Two businesses operating in one property

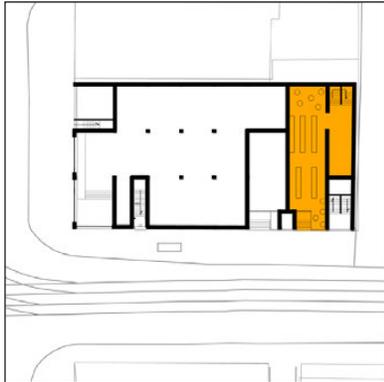


Homemade furniture fits into steps

A DVD/clothing booth is located on the landing of some steps that lead into a bookstore. An old Chinese lady comes in every day to set up the store by displaying everything on shelves both inside and outside of the building. After work, all products are stored behind a roll-up door. By optimizing the use of the building's threshold, both the bookseller and DVD merchant benefit from rent-splitting and customer-sharing.



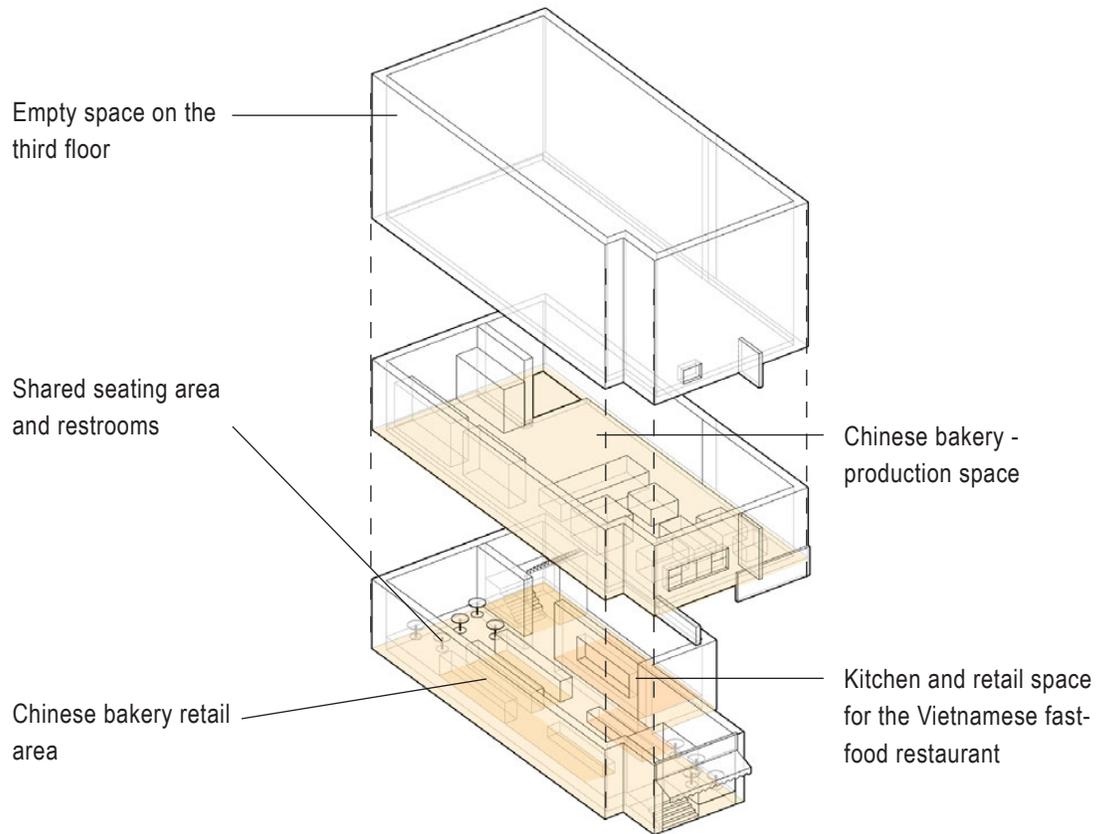
Fig 2.19: Set up of the DVD/clothing booth.



## b3 Bakery

Location: Dundas Street

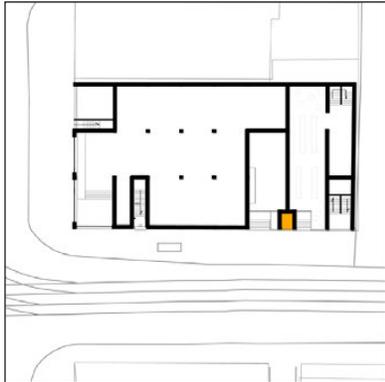
Use: Two businesses operating in one space



This store on the first floor is co-rented by a Chinese bakery and a Vietnamese fast food restaurant. The second floor is used by the bakery for baking. Rent, utilities, and other costs are shared between these two businesses. By cohabiting in the same environment, a particular ecosystem has formed in which the businesses support and rely on each other. Indeed, the hybridization of two separate programs in one space is a common commercial strategy in Chinatown.



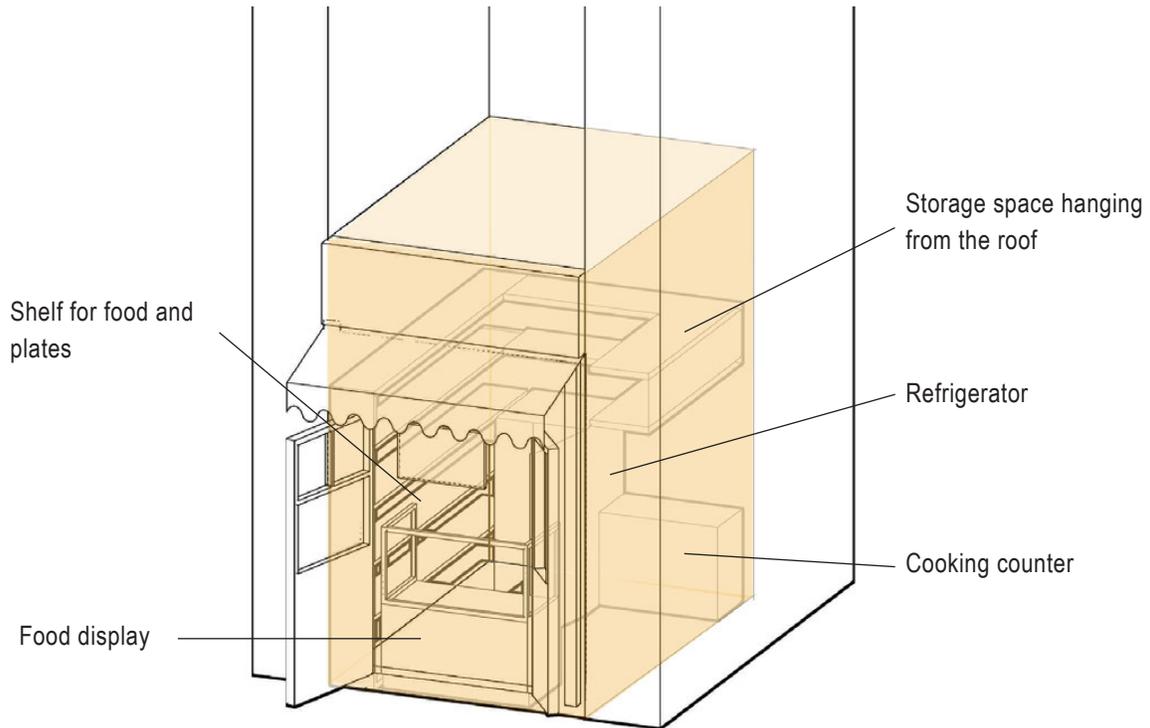
Fig 2.20: Paying area shared by two businesses.



## b4 Lamb Kebab Store

Location: Dundas Street

Use: Micro retail store in between building envelope



A tiny Chinese kebab store, in between the building envelope, is a popular food stall that services mainly Chinese customers. The size of the store is about 2m (W) x 1.5m (L) x 2.5m (H). Despite the small size, it has everything needed for food retail: cooking counter, fridge, food/plate shelf, display case, and storage. The menu, stuck on the doors, offers a wide range of food besides lamb kebabs: Bing Tang Hu Lu (crispy candy-coated fruit on a stick), Malatang (skewers cooked in hotpot soup), tea eggs, baked sweet potatoes, fried stinky tofu, etc.



Fig 2.21: Kebab store in between the building envelope.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### **Top-down and bottom-up business models**

In the early 1980s, wealthy owners of Hong Kong corporations brought large amounts of economic capital to Chinatown during the Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Many of them invested in large properties and built theatres, office buildings, shopping centres, etc. These properties were further divided into smaller units, a process which has provided Chinese immigrants with places to start small businesses and sustain themselves. The history of the building on 285 Spadina is a perfect example of this kind of top-down business model. One of the largest properties in Chinatown, it was successively a Yiddish Theatre, and bought by the Hong Kong Golden Harvest Entertainment Inc. in 1975.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, with the influx of pirated DVDs, the local entertainment industry failed and the landowner divided the larger property into small-scale retail units for local business owners. The diagram in Fig 2.22 shows examples of three largest properties in Chinatown and how their relationship with local businesses has emerged from the bottom up.

Many local families and clan groups have started small businesses with very little resources, such as grocery stores and dollar stores. Such businesses require little economic capital to establish. They first rent properties in Chinatown, including those bought by investors from Hong Kong. Gradually, as businesses gain profits, they slowly purchase the properties. A portion of the profits is reinvested back into the business for future expansion. For example, many Fujianese grocery stores have expanded to large supermarket chains that have farms, fisheries, vegetable wholesalers, and sometimes restaurants.

The organic spatial merging of these two types of business models has formed the unique social, economic, and cultural landscape of Chinatown today.

# CHINATOWN

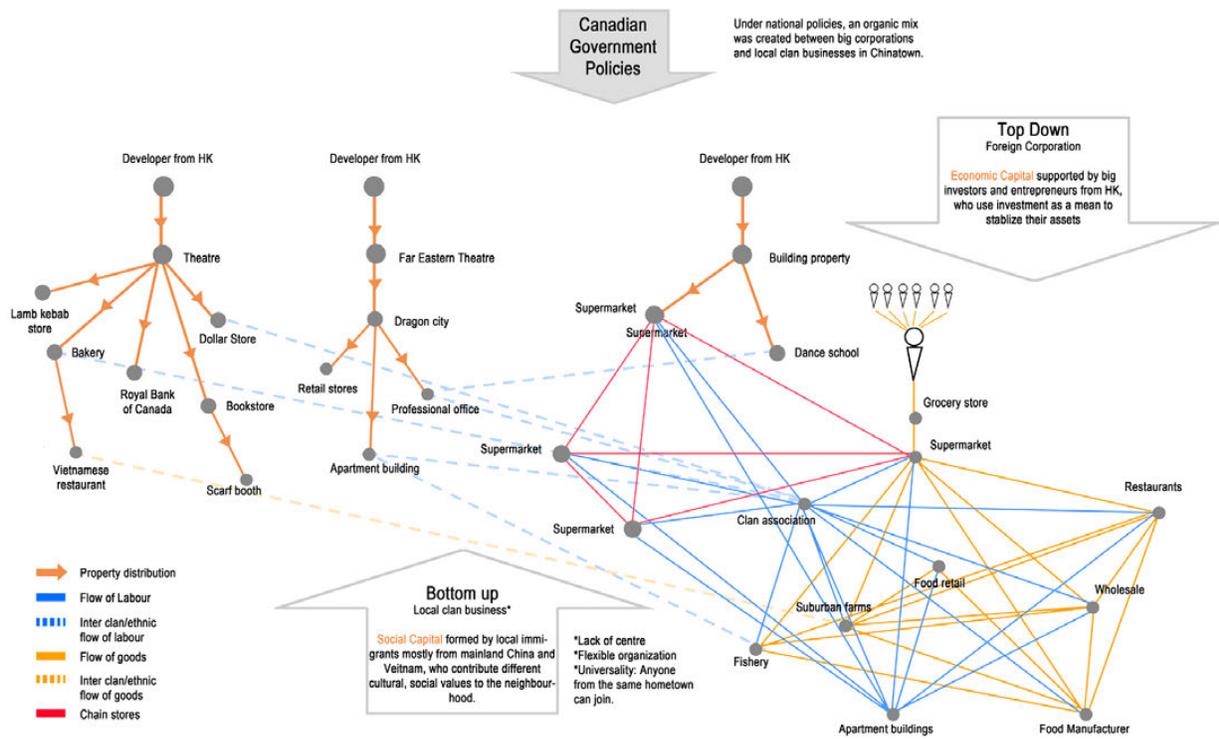


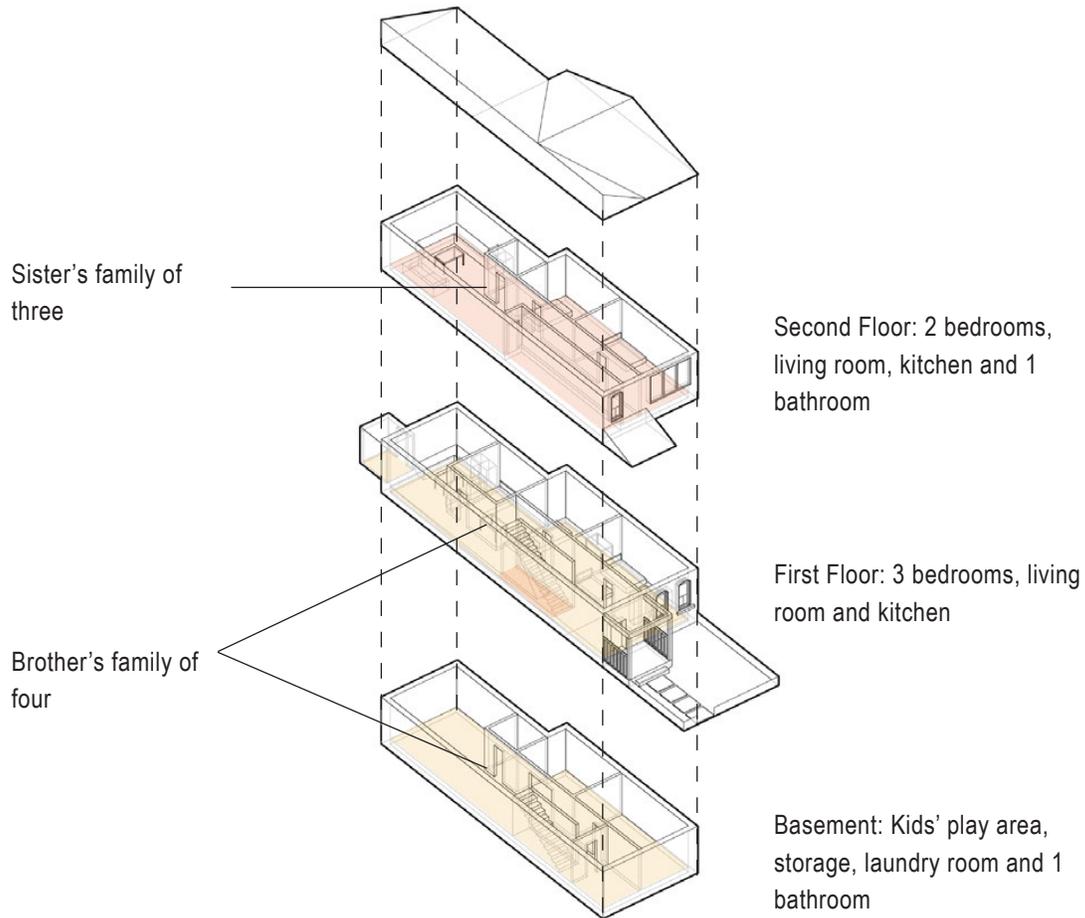
Fig 2.22: Diagram of two business models observed in Chinatown.



## C Multi-family House

Location: Baldwin Street

Use: House shared by two extended families



This is a multi-family dwelling that incorporates two separate units: one shared by a family of four, and the other shared by a family of three. The two owners are siblings who inherited this property from their parents.



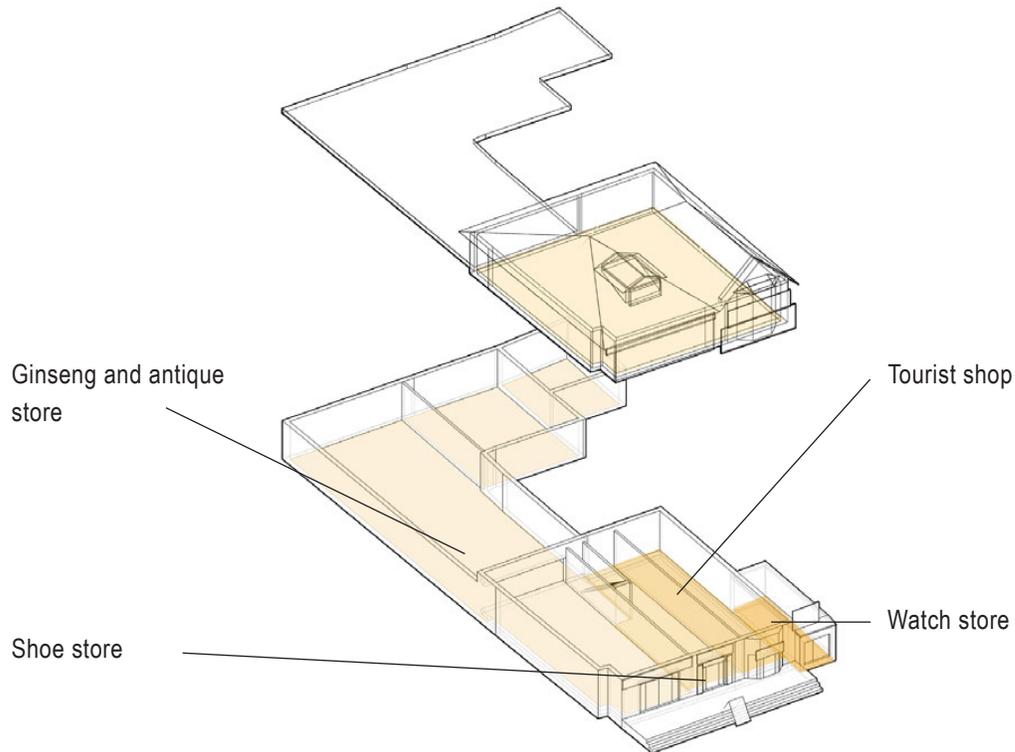
Fig 2.23: Entrance to the house.



## d Retail Stores

Location: 235-233 Spadina Avenue

Use: House transformed to three retail units

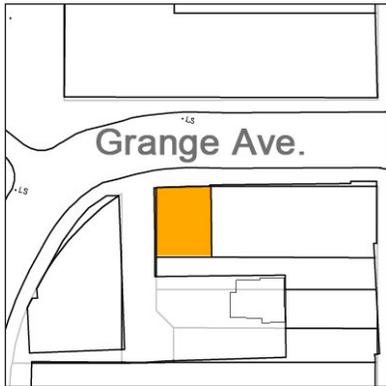


This property used to be a residential house that was transformed to three separate ground level commercial spaces. A store that sells ginseng and antiques covers most of the ground floor, including the garage. A shoe store and a tourist shop are located beside them. A small watch store has been extended into the gap between the house and its adjacent building. The second floor is currently empty, and its façade is occluded by giant signs.

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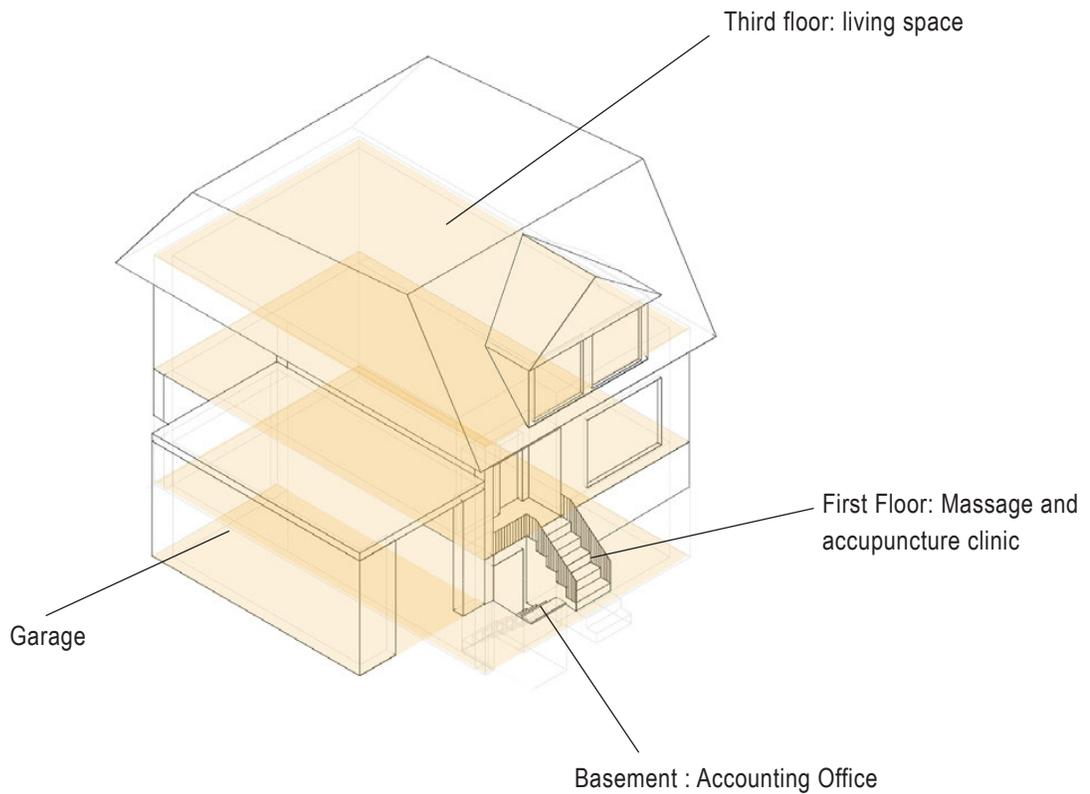
Fig 2.24: Existing façade of the building.



## e Massage Parlour and Accounting Offices

Location: 72 Grange Avenue

Use: Co-habitation of multiple programs in one house



This is a two-storey house with an accounting office in the basement, a massage/acupuncture clinic on the first floor and a living space on the second floor. A garage was added between the house and an adjacent restaurant. There are more than 10 signs out front, advertising the commercial activities inside. The co-habitation of multiple programs has created a more dynamic streetscape.



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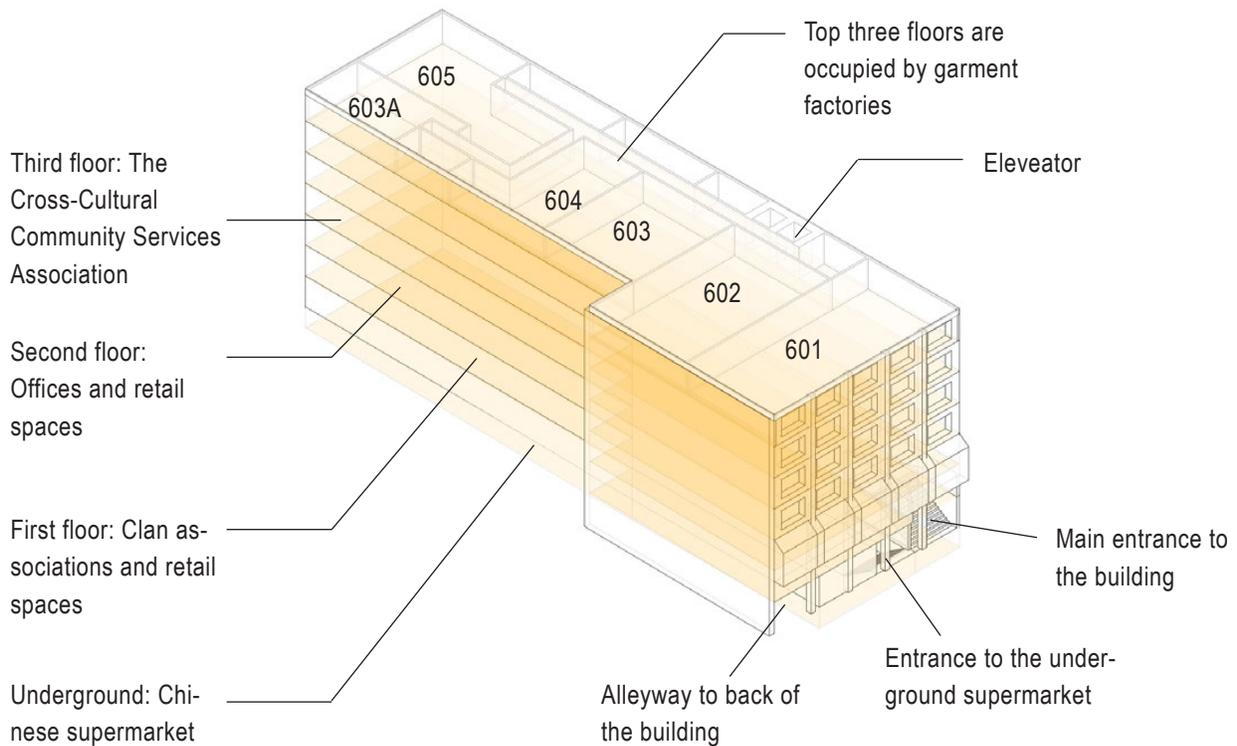
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Fig 2.25: Entrances to the accounting and acupuncture offices.



## f Garment Factories

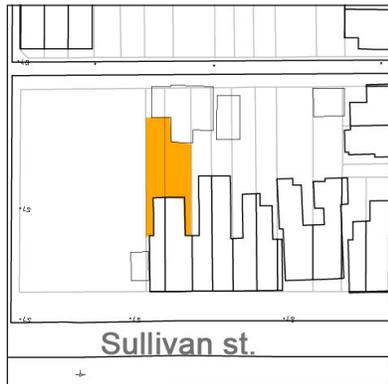
Location: Spadina Avenue  
Use: Production industries



Garment factories in Chinatown are often located either on the upper levels of a building or in the basement because of the need for large production and storage spaces. To save expenses, garment factories like to hire women immigrants who do not speak English but have a solid knowledge of knitting and sewing. The recruitment of workers often depends on the place of origin of the lead worker. The top three floors of this building are currently leased to garment factory owners who are Vietnamese, Chinese, and Canadian. Many workers in the Vietnamese and Chinese garment factories are middle-aged women from Guangdong.

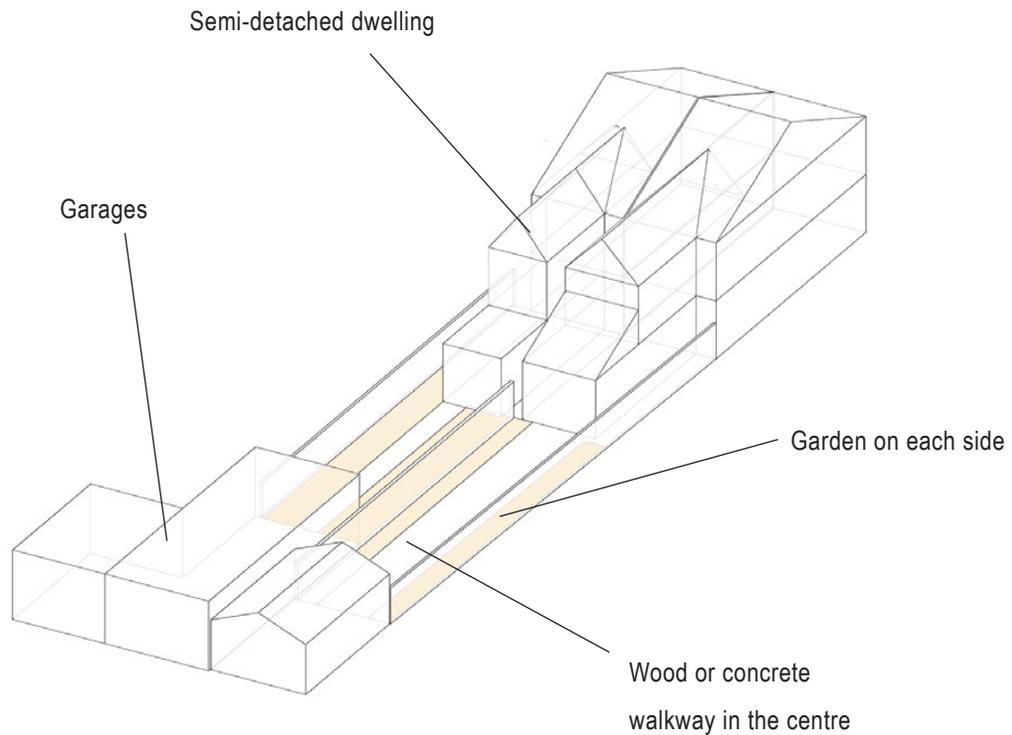


Fig 2.26: This garment factory specializes in making wedding dresses.



## g Backyard Farming

Location: Sullivan Street  
Use: Urban cultivation in the backyard



Backyard cultivation is common in many households, especially among families with elders, as many old immigrants from rural China have kept up their agricultural habits. They can not only make money by selling extra produce on the sidewalks, but they also make friends with other sellers who speak the same dialect.

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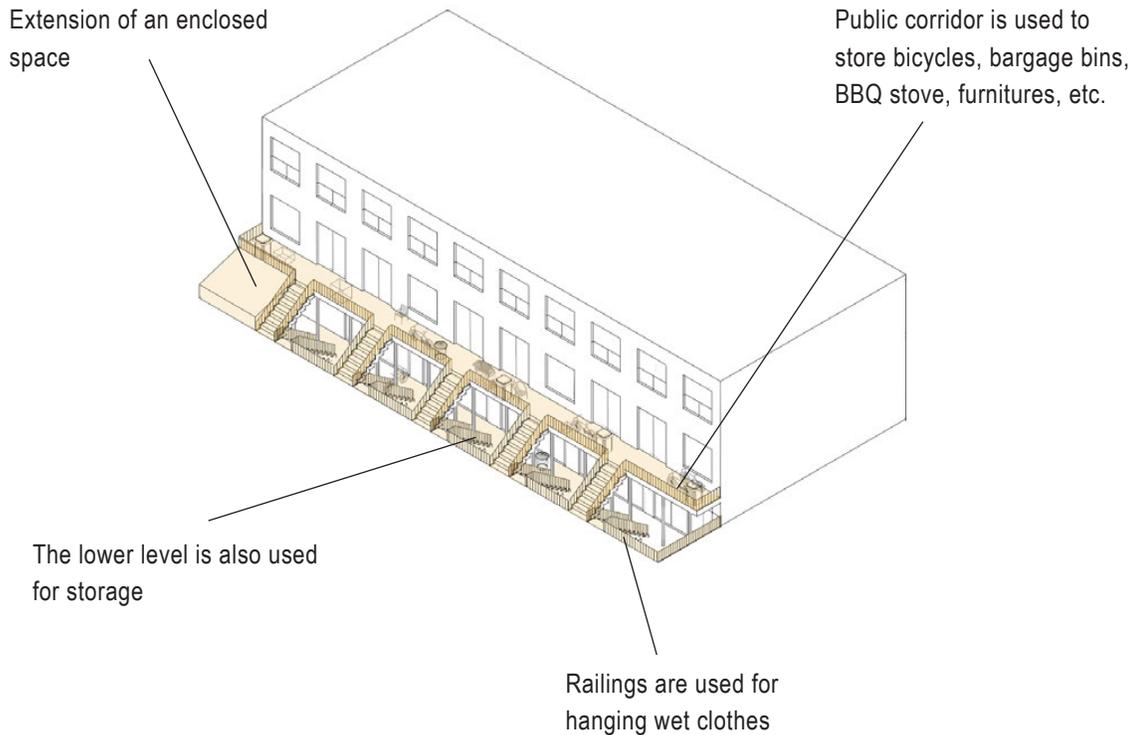
Fig 2.27: Common Chinese vegetables grown in a backyard garden.



## h Residential Row House

Location: 55 Cameron Street

Use: Informal use of public infrastructure



This is a residential row house, mainly occupied by Chinese immigrants. The informal use of public infrastructure is common in this neighbourhood. For example, railings are used to hang wet clothes, public corridors are partially converted into enclosed storage areas, and balconies are sealed up to become interior spaces. Even though this scene is not the most attractive, occupied public infrastructure can still obtain a level of convenience and comfort similar to interior rooms. The way immigrants have extended the living space into the public sphere characterizes the particularity of this site.

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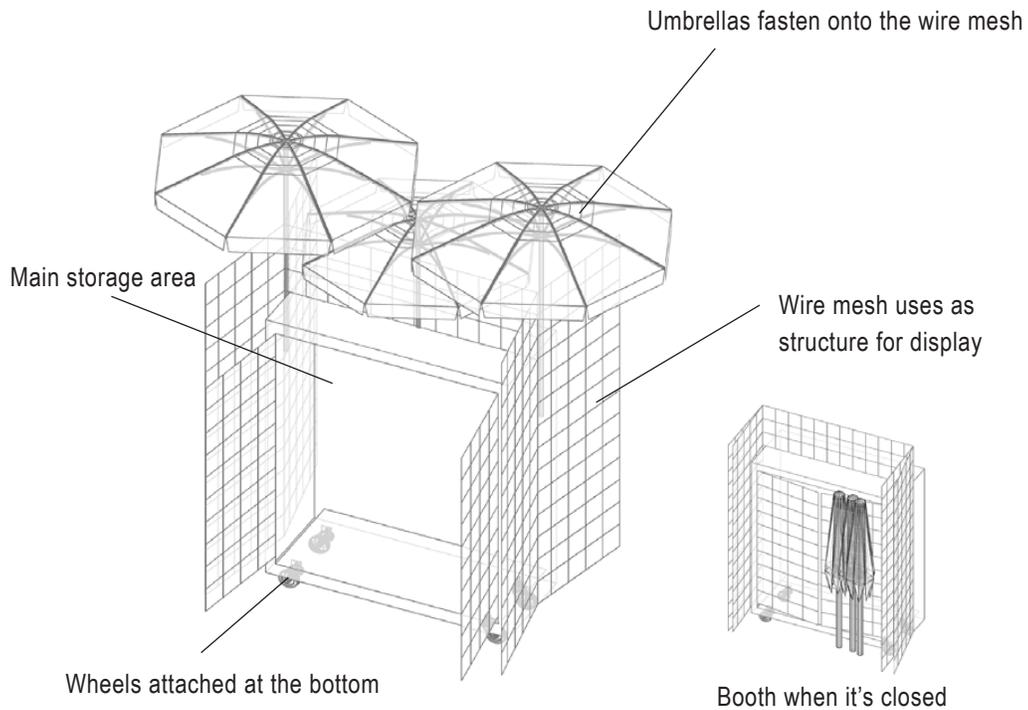


Fig 2.28: Informal use of a public corridor.



## i Street Vendor

Location: Spadina Avenue  
Use: Temporary retail structure on sidewalk



This is a mobile clothing booth found on the northwest corner of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street. Every morning regardless of weather, the vendor goes into an alleyway behind a building on Spadina Avenue and picks up a steel box with wire mesh attached on each side. She moves the box out to the sidewalk and spends five minutes setting up her booth. When the booth is open, the wire mesh swings out to become the support for the clothing displays. Three umbrellas are stuck along the metal box to cover the whole booth from rain and sun. This booth is a model design for mobile structures—fast, cheap, and effective.



Fig 2.29: Owner sets up the booth at 9 am.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Endnotes

1. Teddy Cruz and Caleb Waldorf, "Learning from Tijuana," *Triple Canopy*, October 27, 2009, accessed August 4, 2012, [http://canopycanopycanopy.com/pieces/legacy\\_piece/111](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/pieces/legacy_piece/111).
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6. Kenny Zhang, *Flows of People And The Canada-China Relationship* (Canadian International Council, 2010), accessed June 27, 2012, [http://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/filefield/China\\_Papers\\_10\\_0.pdf](http://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/filefield/China_Papers_10_0.pdf).
7. "Heritage Toronto Mondays."





Chapter 3:  
Chinatown  
Rules

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

*“The place’s ‘form of being’ always shows the people involved how its ‘form of doing’ should be. Any space that lacks such an organic connection between the forms of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ would be without support from within. It might be pleasing to the eye for a brief moment, but would not grow together with those who use it.”*

ATELIER BOW-WOW <sup>1</sup>

# Chinatown Rules

This chapter is a reflection on Chinatown’s informal rules, the spatial strategies local immigrants have used to reshape the urban landscape in Chinatown. None of the building or urban fabric examples from the previous chapter was designed by a professional architect. This “architecture without architects” has been surprisingly optimized in its performance and has created a urban fabric that expresses Chinatown’s own unique identity.

In Atelier Bow-Wow’s “Echo of Space/Space of Echo,” the relationship between the occupant and building is described as an interdependent mechanism similar to that which exists between animals and the environment that nourishes them.<sup>2</sup> For example, insect hunting as an activity is about looking for an insect’s favourite environment because a certain environment echoes with a certain kind of behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Atelier Bow-Wow calls the insect’s physical habitat its “form of being” and the insect’s behaviour its “form of doing.” Similar properties of habitat are found in the built environment in Chinatown. Based on their “form of doing,” many immigrants have modified the existing urban environment and transformed it into a corresponding “form of being.” They demonstrate what appears to run opposite to modern architecture, that which has broken the spatial echo between forms of being and doing. In fact, immigrants originally experienced such broken spatial echoes by landing in a completely new environment, and have subsequently and often successfully established their own internal continuity.

Fig 3.01: Categorization of spatial typologies. Adding space to the exterior and partitioning space in the interior are the two primary methods that immigrants use to retrofit Chinatown. Based on these two principles, various spatial typologies are derived to fit in the specific condition.

Fig 3.01 shows such processes of creating transformative

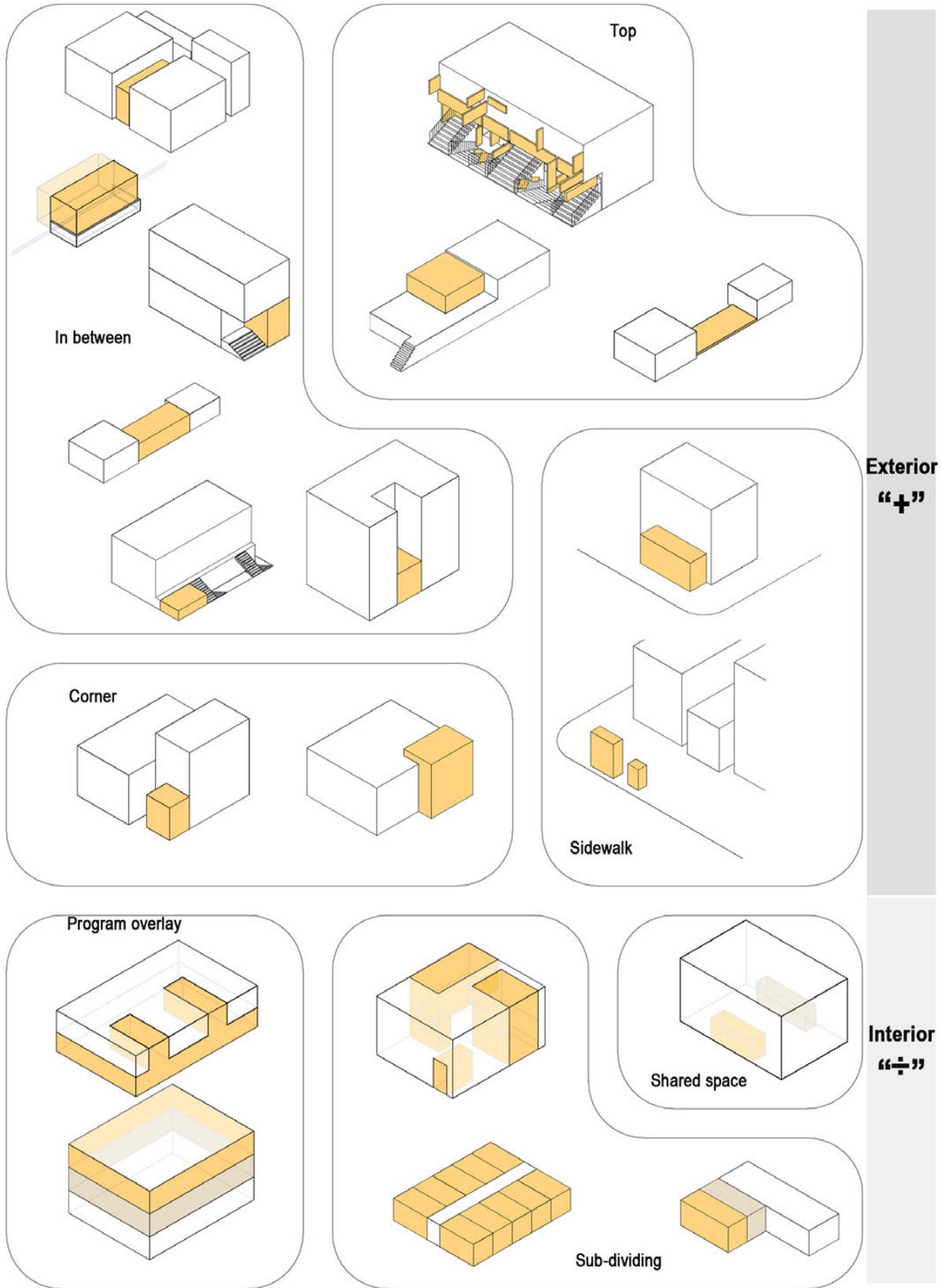
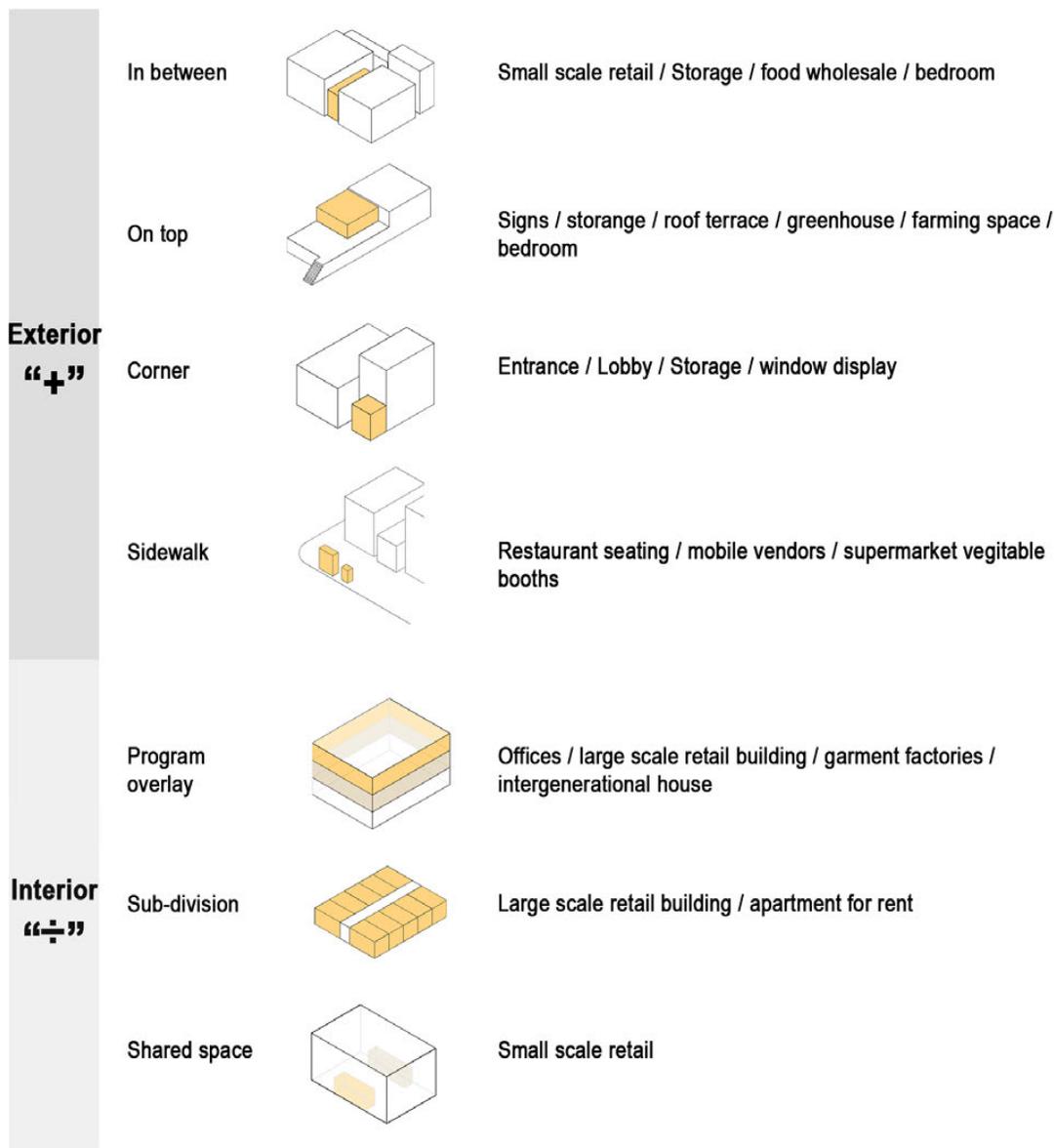


Fig 3.01

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

spatial typologies in Chinatown, based on immigrants' modifications to existing locations. There are two ways they have occupied the existing Toronto urban fabric: by adding space to the exterior [+] and partitioning space in the interior [+]. "Exterior" refers to outdoor spaces such as those between buildings, on top of buildings, at the corners of buildings, and those located near shared infrastructure. "Interior" refers to spaces within the building envelope. There are three ways of dividing interior space:

Fig 3.02: List of corresponding programs relating to their spatiality.



## REFLECTION

program overlay, sub-division by interior wall, and shared use of one space. It is the permutations and combinations of all these typologies that has created the vibrant urban fabric in Toronto's Chinatown.

In addition to the transformative spatial typologies, the list below shows the how corresponding programs relate to their spatiality and function. Many programs listed are unique products of the local culture and ethnicity. An outline of these programs in relation to their spatiality—namely, preferable location and scale—can serve as a template for designs in Chinatown. For instance, storage, bedroom, and entrance spaces are usually small spaces built as extensions outside of a building. Offices, factories, and apartments are often units divided from large floor plates. Even small-scale retail units are interesting because they are found both outside and inside of buildings. A summary of the relationship between program and space can help in the design of living spaces where the forms of “being and doing” echo with each other.

This analysis of Chinatown thus not only reveals spatial properties in relation to programs, but also outlines ad hoc design methods developed by immigrants used to retrofit existing sites based on need and available resources. Three design concepts were developed for

Fig 3.03: Streetscape of Dundas Avenue. Half of the pitch roof of a building is cut off for the construction of a new commercial building.



## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



Fig 3.04: Backyard farming. Wooden paths divide the farming area into three sections, growing different types of produce.



Fig 3.05: Exterior extension. Restaurants expand their seating areas onto the sidewalk.

examples of such a process; the projects and interventions are proposed for Chinatown in the next chapter.

### **Building as a Process**

Learning from Chinatown, then, is a building process that is never-ending because of the evolving social dynamics at work within the ethnic community. Some of the businesses open and close down in a couple months, while others may thrive and become local and even city institutions. Some immigrants come in and out of Chinatown without settling down, and capital will flow in and out of the area depending on changes to immigration policy and other factors. To support the dynamic social context in Chinatown, immigrants will keep retrofitting spaces for particular uses, which in turn allows for sites to become spaces of transformation according to the unique urban forms and programs of those who live there.

These sites of transformation are usually voids and leftover urban spaces, and many have taken advantage of blurry zoning boundaries and property lines. Informal businesses like vegetable stands and clothing booths sprout up on the sidewalk and in between buildings. Restaurants expand their seating areas onto the sidewalk. Extra housing units for extended families are built on top of existing structures. Tenants transform garage spaces to wholesale food markets in hidden alleyways. Elder immigrants make use of their backyards, growing extra produce to sell. This invigoration of under-utilized spaces activates the urban form into a highly layered and dynamic city fabric.

With limited resources, Chinatown immigrants often search for the cheapest ways of building structures and the most efficient ways of using space. Low-cost building materials, time-efficient construction methods, and the maximum utilization of space are the main considerations immigrants take into account before construction; building aesthetics is rarely an issue for most immigrants.

Although Chinatown has ongoing issues with public sanitation, building code violations, and unregistered informal businesses, there

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Fig 3.06: Program overlay.  
Three distinct programs each occupy one level of the house. Refer to page 63.



Fig 3.07: Interior partition.  
One house is subdivided into three separate retail units. Refer to page 61.

is much to learn from the way immigrants have altered the rigidity of the modern urban landscape. Many newer neighbourhoods, especially suburban ones, deprive inhabitants a wide flexibility of use, as well as the possibility of expansion, thus imposing lifestyles that are cut off from many people's cultural backgrounds. Learning from Chinatown, we should consider buildings—and the spaces in between—as open processes, not products.

### Hybridization and Microcapitalism

Chinatown has many small and marginal businesses that are extremely competitive and often do not last more than one generation. These businesses represent a radical form of micro-capitalism, where small-scale retail owners can quickly exploit extreme opportunities to generate wealth. Under the pressure of high competition, owners also aim to maximize efficiency by minimizing rent, utility, and labour costs. This is represented in various hybrid programs found throughout Chinatown.

The previous chapter features an example of a bakery on Dundas St. that shares the same location with a Vietnamese fast food restaurant. It is interesting that two different businesses are installed in the same space, especially as they cross not just clan or regional lines, but also linguistic and national ones. They have become a particular ecosystem by sharing the same environment.<sup>4</sup> Just like a popcorn store in a cinema, or a pharmacy within a hospital, these ecosystems are created by the needs and flows of people. This process of creating such ad hoc mixed-use programs is called hybridization. In the case of the bakery sharing the same space as the restaurant, both storeowners share the rent and customers. Only the cashiers' counters and kitchens are separate, due to the different nature of each business. Thus, the strategy of incorporating hybrid programs into one space takes advantage of blurred retail boundaries and creates opportunities for both owners.

This brings up an interesting argument raised by architect Teddy Cruz, who points out that "density is not only about unit per acre, but also social exchange per acre."<sup>5</sup> Whereas current regulations allow for only

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



Fig 3.08: Sidewalk vegetable merchants.

A row of older Asian vendors appropriates the sidewalk to create a space of commercial and social exchange.

three units of housing, in his project “Living Room at the Border,” Cruz proposed affordable housing units, a community centre, offices for a non-profit organization, and a garden to support communal activities. Instead of one program, he proposed five different uses that support and integrate with each other.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in Toronto’s Chinatown, immigrants often insert multiple programs into one building, which naturally generates social interaction and integration. They are all conditions linked by the presence of architecture. And significantly, the further study and promotion of these hybrid spaces will not only benefit commercial activities, but can also help revitalize the declining social agency of clan associations in the area.

### Encroachment on Shared or Public Space and Infrastructure

Sidewalk vegetable merchants in Chinatown have been a special headache to city regulators because they pose problems of illegal commerce, poor street sanitation, and the blocking of pedestrian traffic. The merchants on the northwest corner of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street are mostly older immigrants who do not speak English, but rather speak only regional Chinese dialects. They sometimes have to pack up their products very quickly to escape from city regulators, who come to clear the street, but most of the time, they just sit behind the stalls chatting to each other. Indeed, making money from their produce is not the only purpose of gathering; there is a strong social function as well, especially among those speak the same dialect.

Another example is the vegetable packers who work in the supermarkets. Hand-made vegetable shelves and piles of cardboard boxes extend onto the sidewalk in front of the supermarket, often located around the vegetable packers so they can reach all the products. This naturally forms a temporary workstation where workers pack and sort the produce on the street. The extension of the workspace onto public space violates city regulations by intruding onto city property. However, it also obtains a level of convenience and comfort in creating a pseudo-interior space outside. The packers often have conversations with customers



Fig 3.09: Sidewalk extension from supermarkets.

A worker is unpacking and sorting vegetables onto the shelves. This set up becomes a temporary workstation for him.

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Fig 3.10: The intersection of Dundas Street and Yonge Street in Toronto.

about how to cook certain vegetables or which fruit tastes sweeter. They also communicate with colleagues who work at other workstations.

The immigrants' frequent use of public space as an extension of work and home life is exceptional in the general practice of modern urban design. Especially after 9/11, the trend has been toward heightened security and social segregation, which have contributed an atmosphere that limits authentic interaction among citizens. However, both the street vendors and supermarkets have been fighting with city authorities for years, and their vigorous defence of their everyday life has so far allowed them to keep spaces of their own. Indeed, the power of ethnic culture and social networks has transformed the wider landscape and urban program.

By contrast, even though the intersection of Yonge Street and Dundas Street is always full of people, there is not as much depth of social connection on the street; most people are brought together solely by commercial activity. Therefore, to activate public space, designers and city planners should consider the everyday life of people. Instead of designing parks or squares for congregation, it may be more efficient and affordable to design and incorporate into the urban fabric active, small-scale public spaces that support an open-ended range of individual or group activities. These small moves will have a bigger impact on the surrounding environment because they form the nodes of everyday social interaction.

The spatial forms found here are extremely responsive to the local social, economic, and political climate. This has resulted in many efficient, sustainable, and affordable ad hoc design solutions that suit the existing circumstances, solutions that challenge conventional architectural practice, which typically limits user participation. Instead, Chinatown's spatial characteristics showcase an open-ended, flexible, and hybrid framework that supports constantly changing contexts. They are also excellent examples of a participatory design approach in which users are fully engaged in the building process. Learning from these spatial strategies, I have generated three design proposals to promote incremental improvement and engagement within the community.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Endnotes

1. Atelier Bow-Wow, *Atelier Bow-Wow: Echo of Space / Space of Echo* (Tokyo: INAX, 2009), 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 31.
3. *Ibid.*, 30.
4. Atelier Bow-Wow, "Dialogue on Hybrid," in *Bow-Wow from Post Bubble City* (Tokyo: INAX, 2006), 231.
5. Teddy Cruz, "Creative Acts of Citizenship: Performing Neighborhoods," *Designing Civic Encounter*, December 10, 2011, accessed February 9, 2013, [http://www.artterritories.net/designingcivicencounter/?page\\_id=74](http://www.artterritories.net/designingcivicencounter/?page_id=74).
6. *Ibid.*





# Chapter 4: Intervention

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

*"[I]n order to do something big, to think globally and act globally, one starts with something small and one starts where it counts."*

NABEEL HAMDI <sup>1</sup>

*"We prefer to build half a good house rather than a bad dwelling."*

ELEMENTAL <sup>2</sup>

# Intervention

## Rethinking Design

One thing I kept asking myself during the research in Chinatown is what the role of the architect here? Since the landscape of Chinatown was largely built without the guidance of architects, how should we, as architects, approach the future of Chinatown? Should architects, designers, and urban planners even be involved? Learning from Chinatown, my answer to the above question is yes, but with an alternative definition of design.

In conventional architecture practice, architects aim to solve spatial problems within a specific site. For ease and unity of practice, these spatial solutions are usually fixed sets of rules that often neglect the diversity of users, especially in cosmopolitan Toronto, which is represented by a wide variety of ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds. Any alternative design method for Chinatown should be an ad hoc and participatory process that does not suppress the ethnic culture and everyday life of the neighbourhood. Ideas offered by architects like Teddy Cruz, Alejandro Aravena, and Nabeel Hamdi also posit similar views, though each of them carries out different practical approaches.

Teddy Cruz, an architect and activist, is renowned for his research on the border zone of Tijuana and San Diego. His practice's method expands the role of the architect, analyzing the local culture and transforming it into a set of political and economic frameworks.<sup>3</sup> He emphasizes bottom-up social organization, which encourages disadvantaged individuals to negotiate with top-down planning

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structures. As a result, the bottom-up spatial tactics in his practice are non-hierarchical and deeply rooted in everyday tactics found in the neighbourhood,<sup>4</sup> as the built environment engages with the existing social relations and cultural habits of the community.

Alejandro Aravena and his firm ELEMENTAL have approached a social housing project in Chile aiming to protect the area's local culture. In the design, half of a house is already built, and residents are empowered to modify and customize the second half. ELEMENTAL's social housing design suggests a participative design process responsive to both individual needs and the collective local culture. In addition, with a great focus on the economics of social housing, the design team has made sure that these houses will gain in value as they are added to over time. Thus, social housing becomes both an investment in its land value and a screen protecting local cultural identity.<sup>5</sup>

Nabeel Hamdi, architect and pioneer of participatory planning, states in the book *Small Change: About the Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities* that spontaneity, improvisation, and increment are the three most important qualities in architectural practice.<sup>6</sup> They are reflected, for example, in his design of a bus stop that helps foster community relations in urban slums. After a long-term site observation, the design team saw the potential of the bus stop as a locus for social gathering. The flows of people and goods transported by buses would slowly form a vibrant community around the stops.<sup>7</sup> This design demonstrates that small-scale, incremental changes can produce big effects.

Indeed, many architects are not focusing merely on spatial problems anymore. The new alternative approach is about working with given conditions and attempting to understand the existing circumstances in their political, social, and economic frameworks. Only then can one propose design solutions that are grounded, responsive, and effective. All three of the above architects' views on the role of the architect are highly dynamic, and their design philosophies have deeply influenced the three following designs in this thesis work.

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### **The Thesis Projects**

Having analyzed the socio-economic characteristics and spatial implications in Chinatown, my goal in the design part of the thesis was to search for possibilities in the existing social and economic framework, and improve the neighbourhood from within. The map in Fig 4.01 shows three potential sites that are currently underutilized and suitable for incremental improvement. Each project—housing as a process, clan association revitalization, and the Huron St. renovation—reflects the design concepts generated in the previous chapter, operate on different scales, in different stages, and focus on various aspects of the existing urban environment.

The first project is a multi-household Chinatown dwelling that promotes neighbourhood interaction and offers new opportunities for improving the quality of Chinatown housing. In contrast with the modern interpretation of the house as a machine for living, this project emphasizes the social relationships and cultural habits of each dweller. The built form is flexible and adaptable to support the evolving social activities and family structures that happen inside. This multi-family dwelling also sets an example for a sustainable and affordable lifestyle in the city. A wider expansion of the model may help reverse the harmful effects of suburban sprawl by offering an alternative to the few amenities in ad hoc housing, attracting more Chinese families back to Chinatown.

The second project is a revitalization plan for a clan association, a unique social product formed by the Chinese diaspora. More than 30 clan associations are scattered around Chinatown, and many of them are facing the problem of declining participation. Revitalizing these associations will not only help them retain their historical significance, but also bring back members of the younger generation, many of whom are moving away from Chinatown to the suburbs.

The last project, situated on Huron Street, aims to provide residents with an outdoor space distinct from the rest of the urban fabric. Living in the city centre, Chinatown's residents have relatively limited access to nearby outdoor parks or large playgrounds. The proposal for renovating a section of Huron St. into an outdoor public area thus

## INTERVENTION

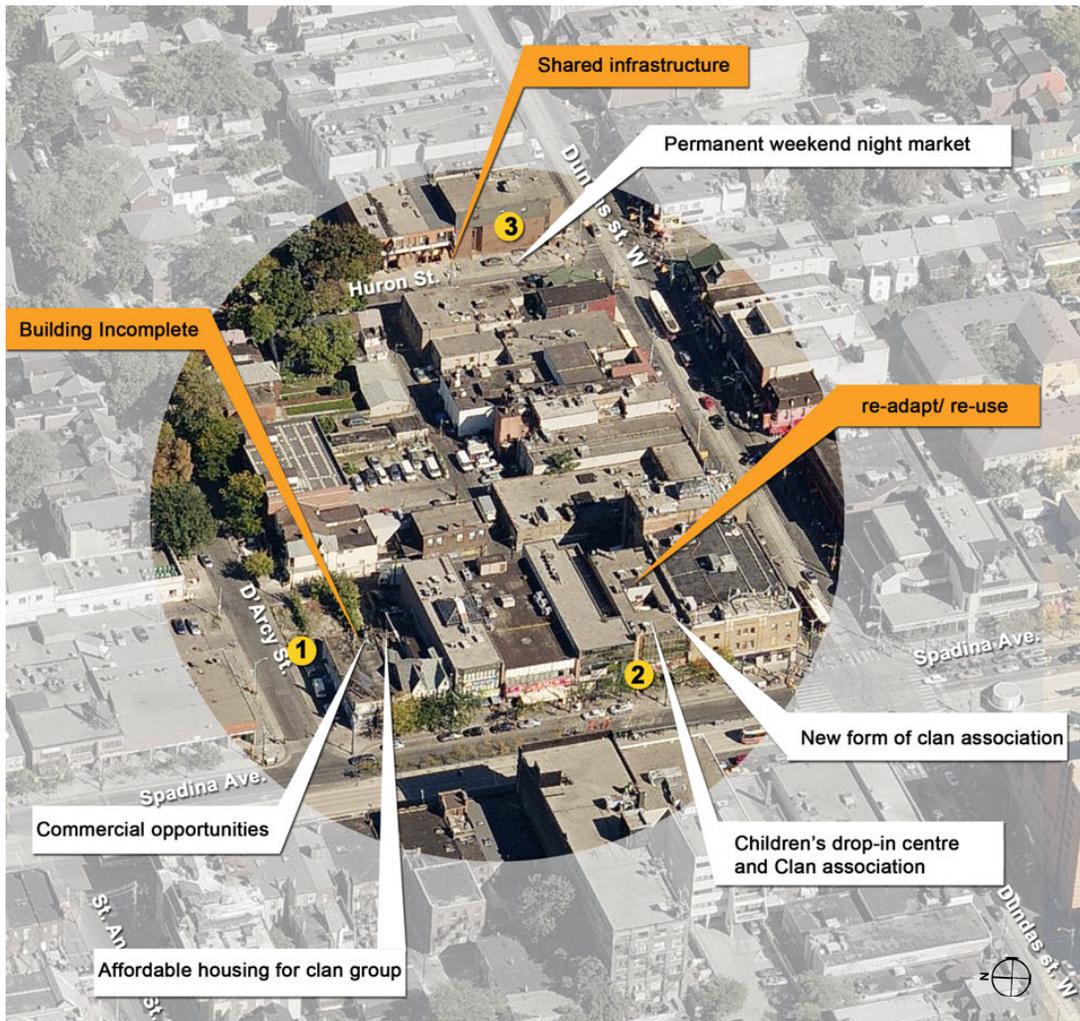
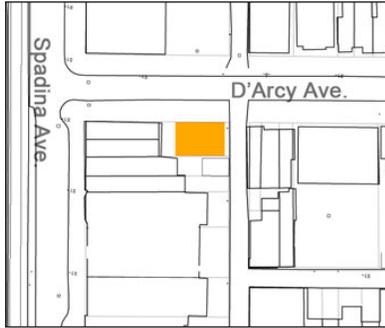


Fig 4.01: Aerial photo of the northeast corner of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street, showing the project locations.

meets the local demand for open space. A series of loosely programed infrastructures is designed to accommodate a variety of non-conforming activities.

As they are developed, all three projects should involve an open-ended participatory design process that responds to the individual needs and circumstance of the community. However, they do not provide a complete set of answers for Chinatown—nor could one be offered, nor should be offered. Rather, the three projects reflect the strength of a strong, shared social life and offer possibilities for a multitude of future scenarios.



## 1: Housing As A Process

Family plays an extremely important role in traditional Chinese culture, representing a lifestyle characterized by security, stability, and rootedness. However, in a place like Chinatown, where people are constantly coming in, moving out, going back, or moving on, family has weakened and somewhat lost this unifying role amidst the flux. In order to re-establish such security and stability, immigrants have sought ways to connect to each other through common feelings and practices, which are heightened for individuals who have moved to a foreign place from the same place of origin. For example, in the apartment on D'Arcy St., residents from the same small area in China have formed a new neighbourhood within the building. Despite the poor living conditions, immigrants view it as a desirable living environment because there are strong relationships among many of the tenants.

In this vein, to better utilize the leftover space behind the Shan Tou Restaurant owned by a Fujianese businessman (see Fig 4.02), I propose a multi-family dwelling that features four separate units. This building is intended to be perceived as a small neighbourhood made from a mix of household types, where its residents become a society of their own. Learning from the apartment building on D'Arcy St., I have made sure that neighbourhood interaction is central to this new project, as immigrants' comings and goings reflect and foster the relationships among them. Regardless of whether residents are young or old, conflicts, friendships, feelings, and emotions circulate daily within this complex.

Rented vs. Owned Private Dwellings in Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood:

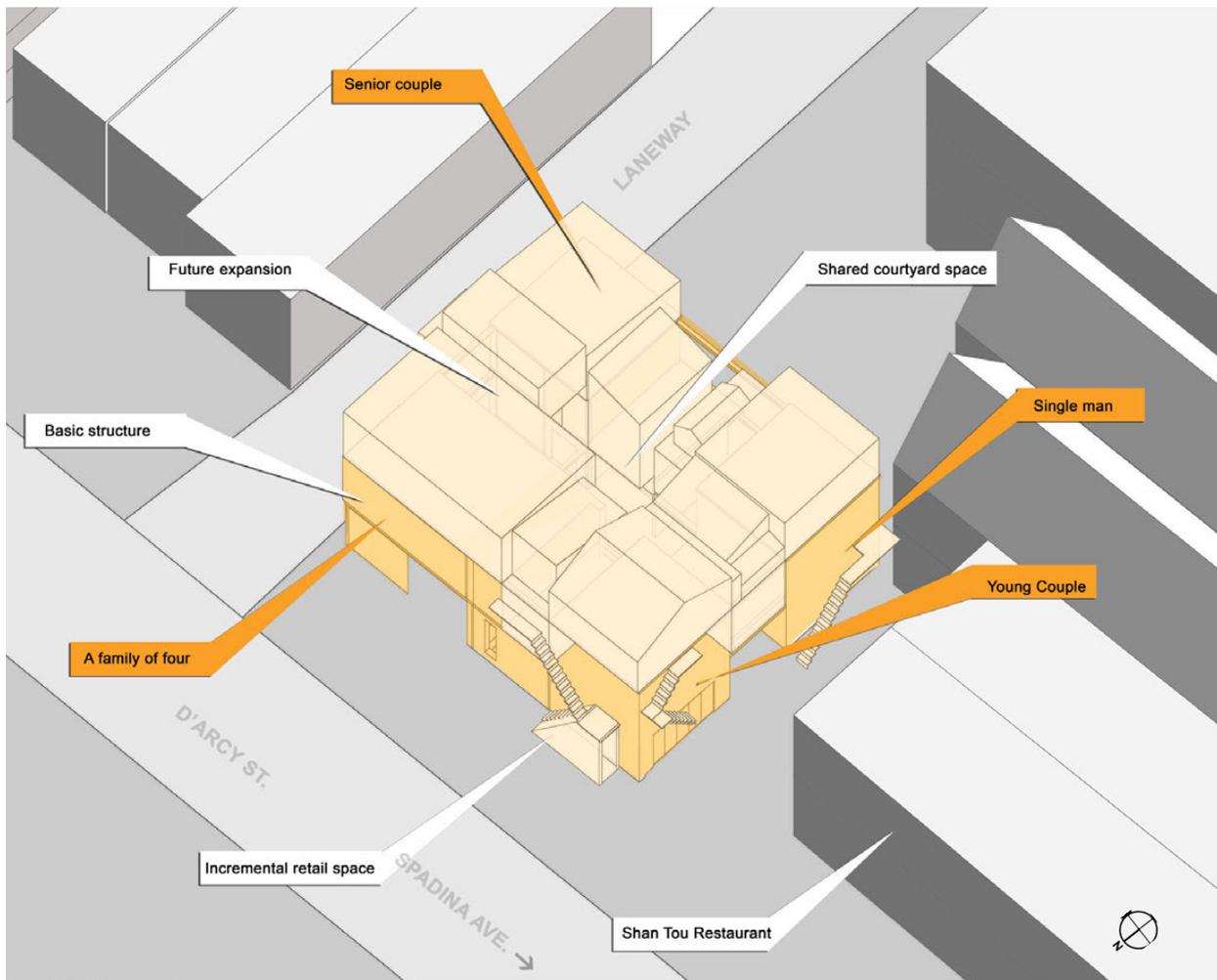
1. Owned, 2270 30%
2. Rented, 5370, 70%<sup>8</sup>

70% rental housing is a high percentage compared to other downtown neighbourhoods.

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The architectural form is intended to encourage social participation among the residents. Each unit consists of basic living domestic infrastructure with electricity and running water, and vacant spaces that could be filled. The idea is that the residents would build in these voids based on their needs and available resources. The courtyard is designed to act as a sanctuary, belonging to no one and everyone. There is a window in each dwelling facing this central space, providing natural light into every unit. The courtyard is a traditional Chinese dwelling space and can appear more private or public, according to the role it comes to play in the everyday life of the building's residents.

Fig 4.02: Axonometric drawing of the multi-family dwelling, showing the site condition and building components.



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Built with minimal design, this dwelling gives residents a lot of power to adapt and improvise. This open process of transformation not only offers the possibility of various future expansions, but also that of going back to a former minimal state, from which one can rebuild. Void spaces will gradually be filled in or modified, and the building will continue to evolve. Sharing such a property has benefits for all four households.

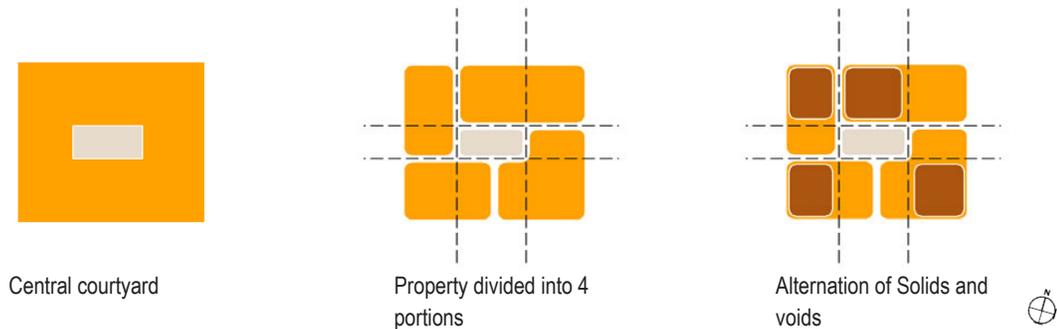


Fig 4.03: Diagrams of the ground floor plan, showing locations of the solids and voids.

Although this is a hypothetical scenario for Chinese immigrants, this model of minimal housing can be modified and applied to other ethnic communities. The hypothetical client of this project is the owner of the Shan Tou restaurant at the corner of Spadina and D'Arcy. Instead of buying properties in the suburbs, he decides to build a new home on the leftover land behind his restaurant. To minimize the cost of construction, he invites three other friends to share the property and chip in money for construction: a couple who owns a local salon, a senior couple moving from the suburbs back downtown, and a single man who is the manager of a nearby Chinese supermarket.

### INTERVENTION

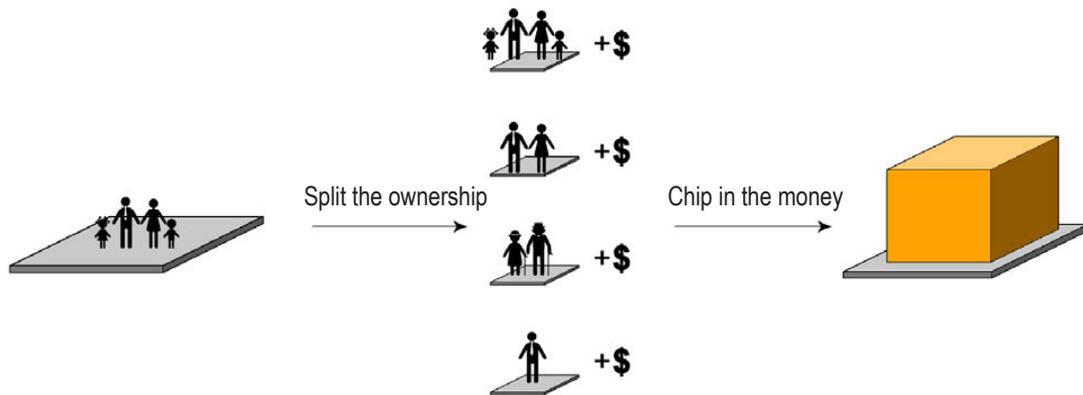


Fig 4.04: Diagram indicates the process of building this multi-family dwelling, by sharing properties and centralizing money.

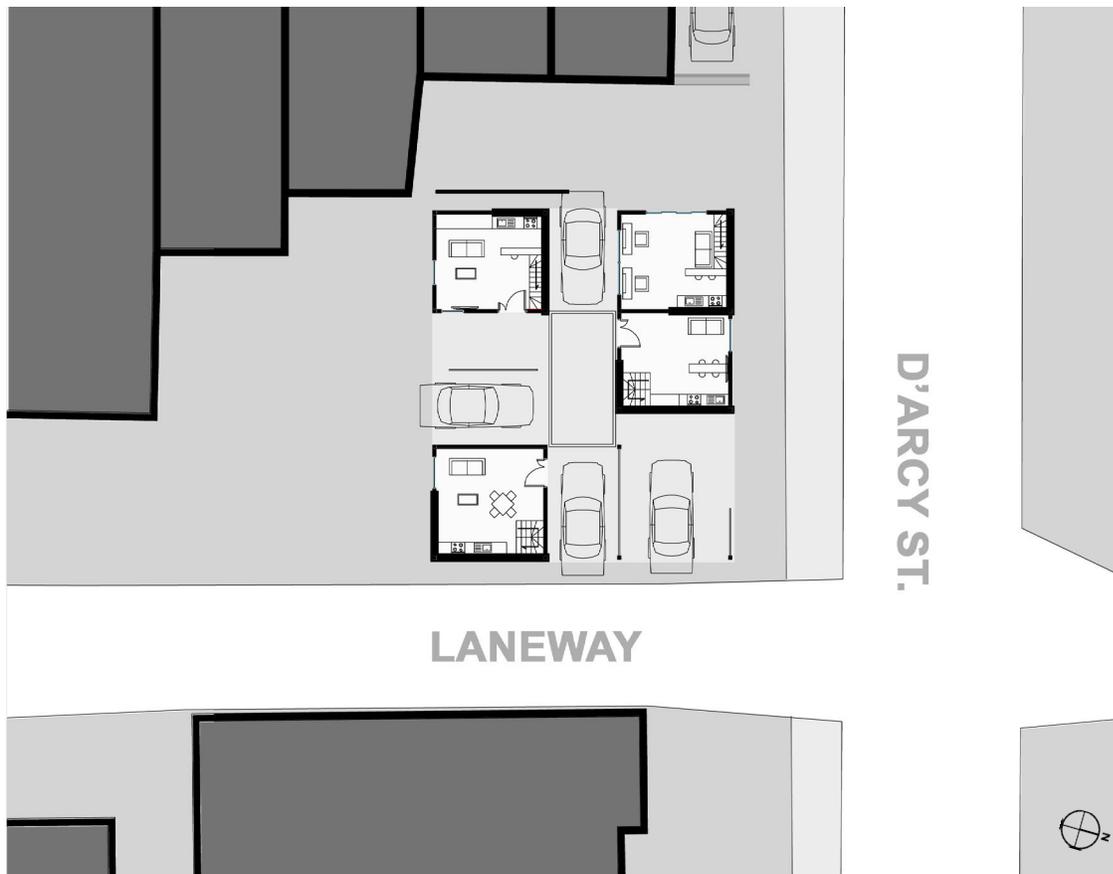


Fig 4.05: Site plan. Scale 1:300.

Share of construction spending as well as property ownership

Capital accumulation

Wa

2013

2015

Senior couple

Family of four

Young couple

Single man

1bed + 1 bath + green house

2 bed + 1bath + 1 balcony

1 bed + 1 bath + 1 balcony

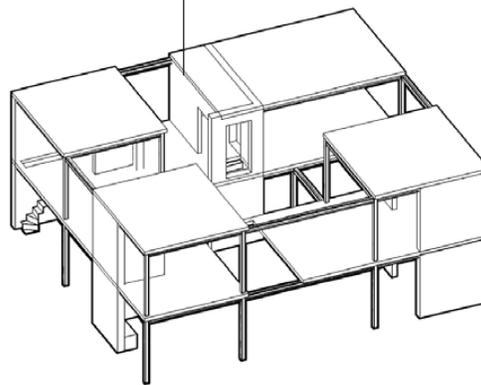
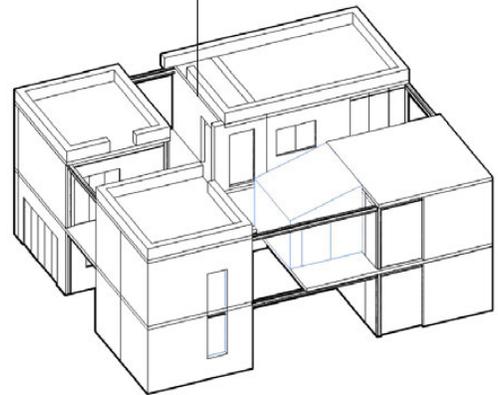
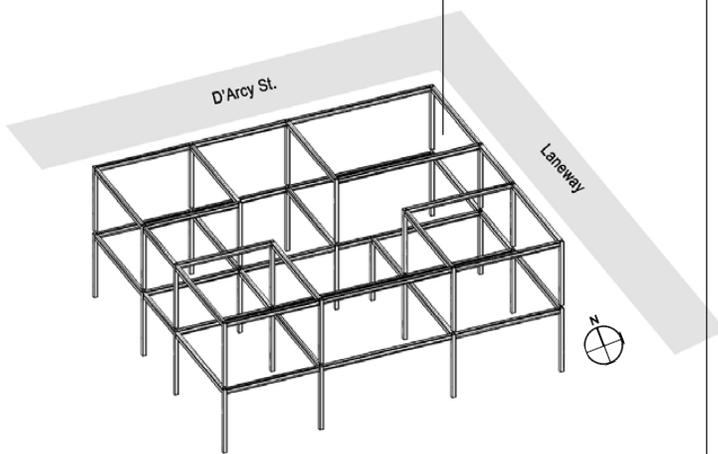
1 bed + 1 bath + 1 balcony

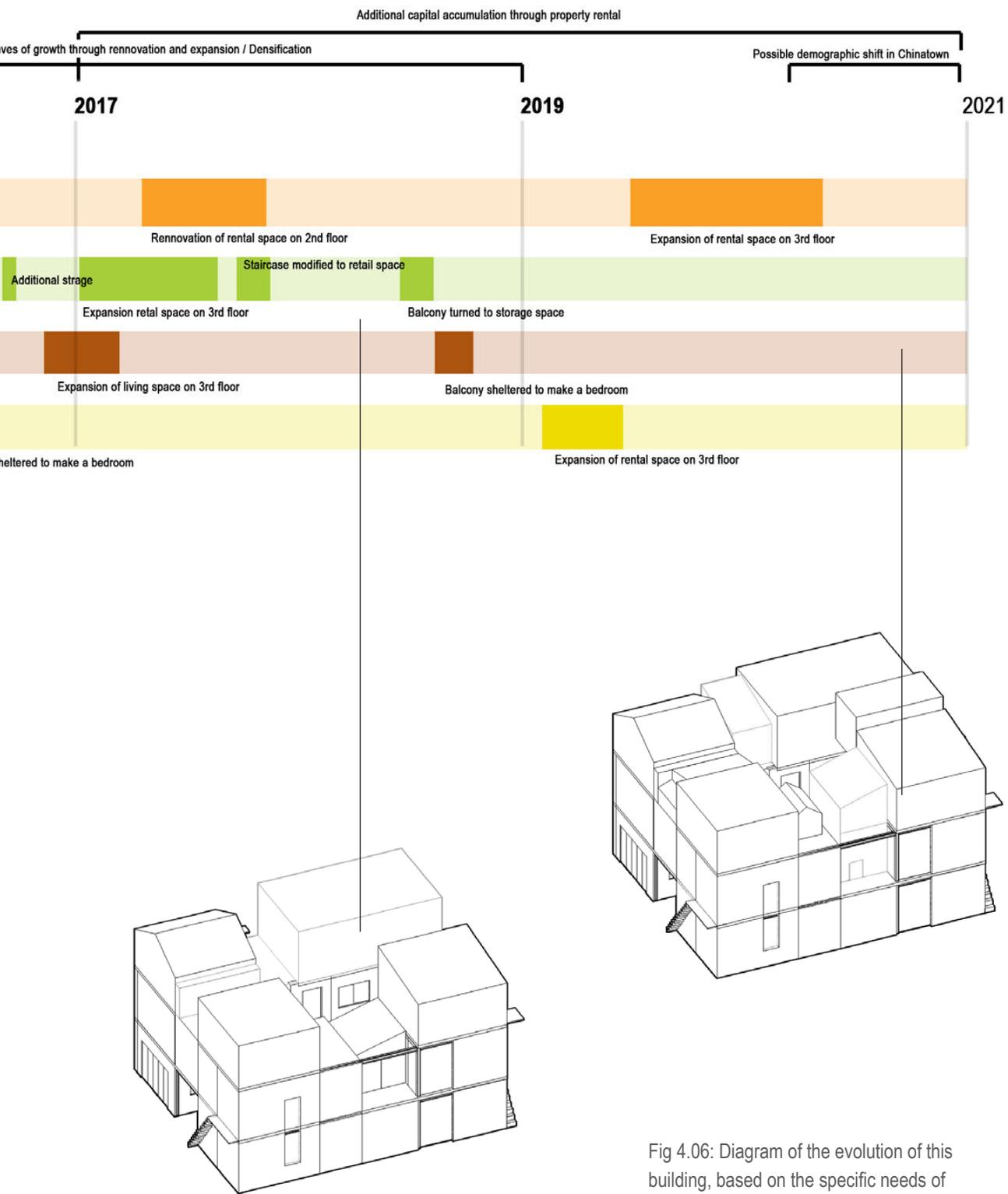
Salon store opens

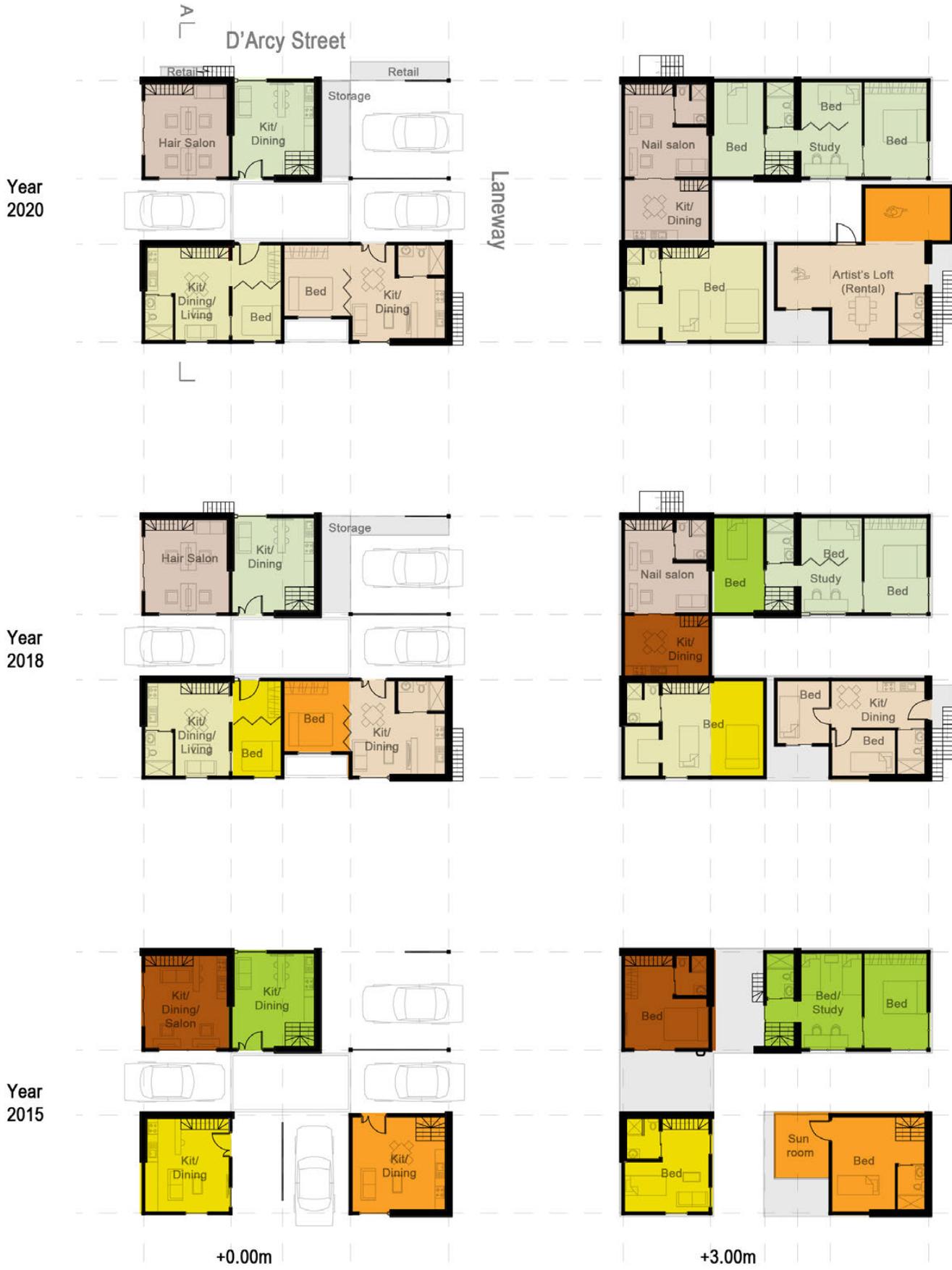
Balcony sheltered to make a bedroom

Expansion of salon on 2nd floor

Balcony s







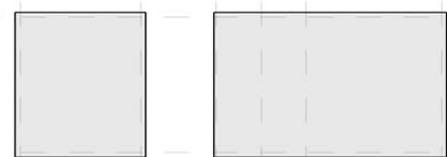
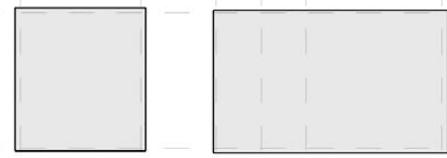
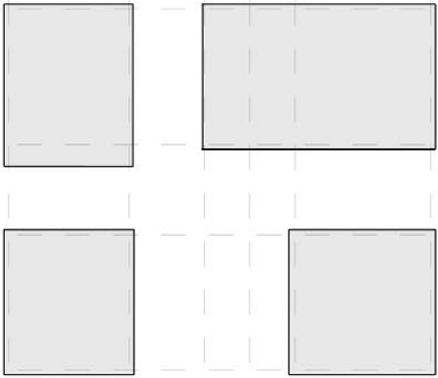
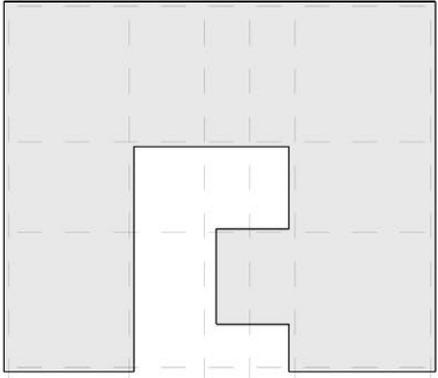
Year  
2020

Year  
2018

Year  
2015

+0.00m

+3.00m



+6.00m



Fig 4.07: Floor plans. Scale: 1:75.

+9.00m

LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



# INTERVENTION



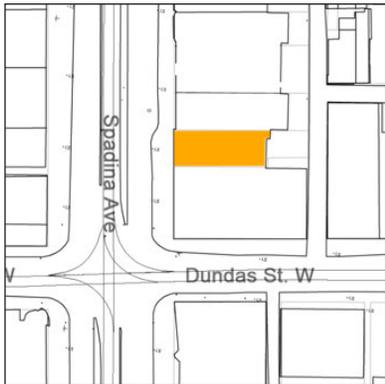
Fig 4.08: Sectional perspective A, showing possible activities inside of the building.







Fig 4.09: Building perspective, looking at the northeast corner.



## 2: Clan Association Revitalization

The clan association has slowly lost its local function as Chinese immigrants are increasingly recognized and allowed to participate in mainstream society. Better access to good education, health facilities, banks, and community centres has undermined the traditional functions of clan associations. Also, globalization, along with more efficient forms of transportation and communication, has sped up the decline of clan associations. Immigrants, especially those of the younger generations who are more assimilated into the mainstream of the new society, are losing interest in the association's traditional activities. Many clan associations are thus facing the problem of self-renewal; they will soon fade into history without the participation of younger members.

The "Lung Kong Tin Yee" Association, one of the largest clan associations in Toronto's Chinatown, is facing such a situation. It was formed based on an age-old brotherhood of four heroes (Liu, Guan, Zhang, and Zhao) during the historical era of the Three Kingdoms.<sup>12</sup> In order to have a place for gathering, in the 1910s members of the association chipped in money to purchase a property at 24 Elizabeth Street. This property was later sold due to the expropriation of land for city hall. The association then bought the three-storey building at 287-289 Spadina Avenue as a permanent home.<sup>13</sup>

The association rents out the properties on the first two levels and in the basement, and keeps the top floor for the association. Similar to other clan associations, Lung Kong is now utilized as an entertainment

Population by age group in the Kensington-Chinatown neighbourhood:

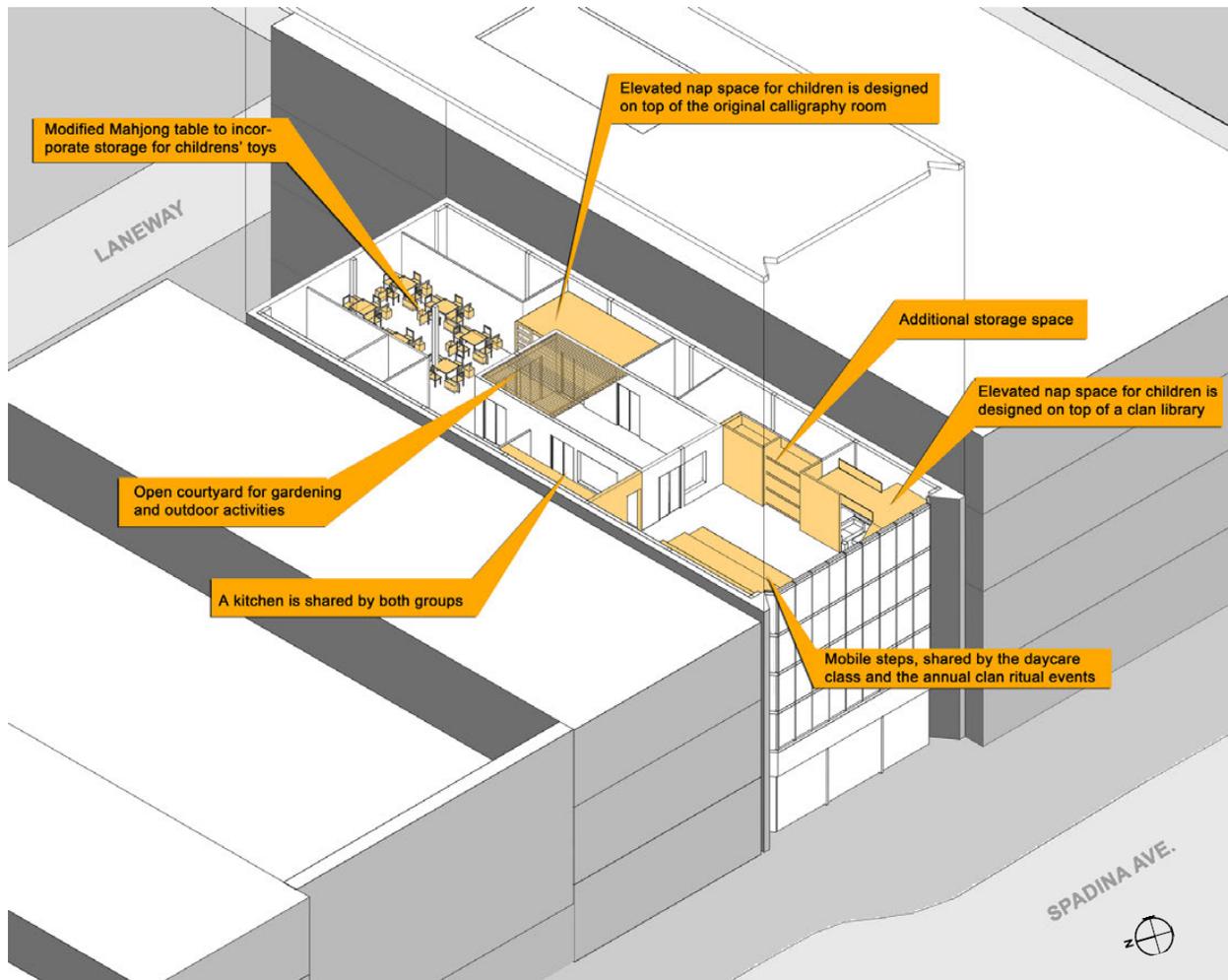
- 0 - 14: 8%
- 15 - 24: 19.7%
- 25 - 64: 58.1%
- 65+ : 13.9%<sup>9</sup>

Comparing the 2011 census to the 2006, the population of children aged 0 to 14 has dropped 15%.<sup>10</sup> The decrease may be a result of expensive day-care fees. Many parents who work in Chinatown cannot afford to pay for day-care, nor do they have time to look after them. A common solution for this problem is sending their children back to their home country, where grandparents have time to look after them. Also, grandparents are often brought to Canada to take care of children here.<sup>11</sup>

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club that facilitates mah-jong, cards, karaoke, and dating activities. These forms of entertainment provide opportunities for fellow members to network and give the group a sense of comfort and familiarity. However, the association is increasingly being patronized only by elders and those with limited access to other social networks. To revitalize the clan association, programs that interest and support younger generations must be integrated into its mandate.

Fig 4.10: Axonometric drawing of the clan association, showing the interior layout and project components.



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The existing third floor consists of two large rooms, separated by an outdoor courtyard. One large room facing east is used for clan activities and the room facing west is used for meetings and rituals. The central courtyard is currently used for storage and plants, and a small room has been built as an extension into the courtyard—a small and quiet space that elders use to read newspapers and practise calligraphy. The entire space is usually empty during the weekdays because most of the members have to stay home and take care of their grandchildren. They are only free to gather at the association during the weekends, when the children are taken care of.

Fig 4.11: The existing building section A. Clan association occupies the top level, and rents out the rest of the property.

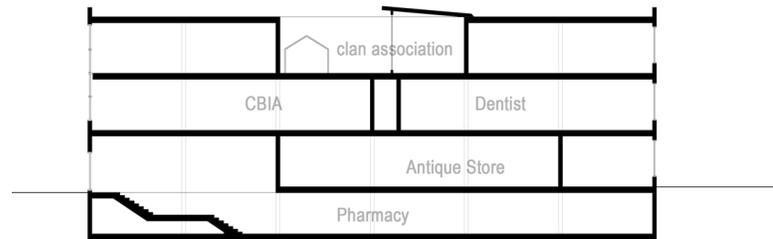
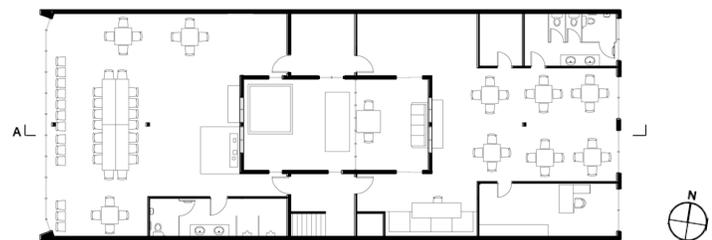


Fig 4.12: The existing third floor consists of two large rooms, separated by an outdoor courtyard.



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Fig 4.13: This large west-facing room is used for meetings and ritual ceremonies.

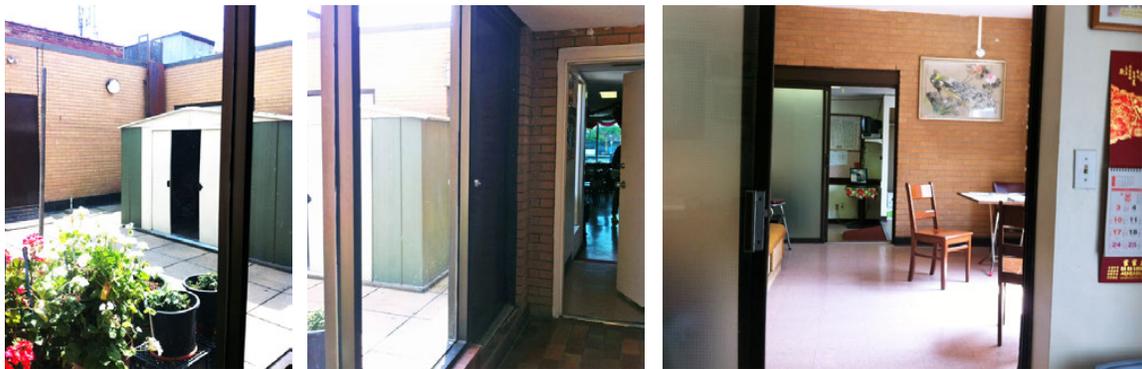


Fig 4.14: View to the exterior courtyard.

Fig 4.15: This small room is used for calligraphy and reading.

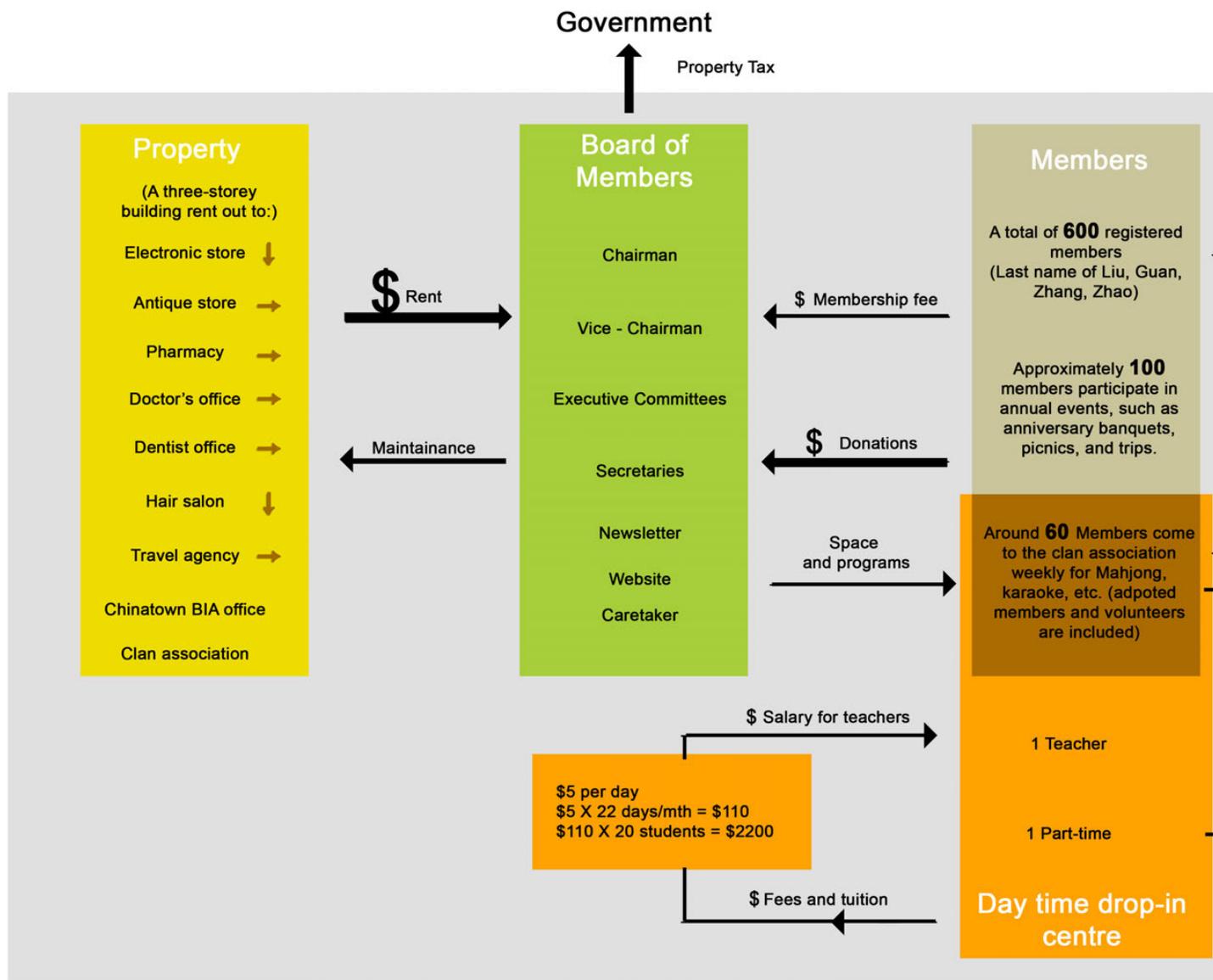


Fig 4.16: This large east-facing room is used for clan activities.

LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

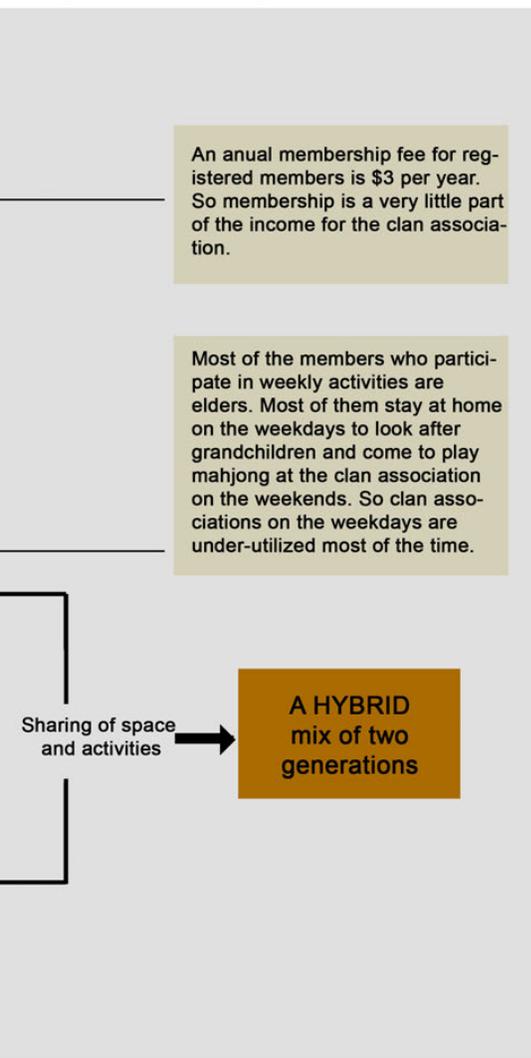
Fig 4.17: Day care price list.  
This list indicates the daily fees charged by municipal and city-organized child-care centres. Many parents who live in Chinatown are not able to afford such expenses.

Municipal Child Care Centres Daily fees		Toronto Home Child Care Daily fees	
Infant (newborn to 18 months)	\$91.00	Infant and Toddlers (newborn to 36 months)	\$40.78
Toddler (18 to 30 months)	\$81.00	Preschool, Kindergarten & School Age: 0-4 hours	\$16.63
Preschool (2 ½ years to 6 years and includes children who attend part-time kindergarten)	\$65.50	Preschool, Kindergarten & School Age: 4-8 hours	\$25.33
Where space is available, a half day preschool program may be offered.	\$37.61	Preschool, Kindergarten & School Age: 8-12 hours	\$34.03
Kindergarten 1 - This before and after full-day kindergarten program takes place in the child care centre.	\$45.00		
Kindergarten 2 - This before and after full-day kindergarten program takes place in the kindergarten school classroom.			
		a 12 months	\$41.00
		b 10 months (school instructional days only)	\$32.00
		School Age (grade one and up) 12 months	\$41.00



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Fig 4.18: Internal operations of The “Lung Kong Tin Yee” Association.



The diagram in Fig 4.20 reveals the internal operations of the clan association. The main ways the association sustains itself are through property rent and member donations.<sup>14</sup> Membership fees are negligible compared to the rental sources of income, so the activities geared toward members are not the main focus of board members. The small arrows in the “property” box indicate the business status of each tenant: it is clear that most of the businesses are merely maintaining, and some are declining. Given this, and the small number of new members, the current system will not be able to sustain the association over the long term.

In my proposal, a new function has been designed to renew the current system: a daytime drop-in centre for children. Education has always been considered extremely important to Chinese families, and immigrant parents often prefer to live a harsh life to save up and secure a better future for their children. By integrating learning programs into the clan association structure, more members of various ages and social backgrounds will be attracted and able to interact. Different from day-care centres, this drop-in centre will serve children from the families of clan members, and they must be accompanied by a guardian.

Two teachers (one full-time and the other part-time) will be hired to administer the education at the centre. In comparison to city-run day-care centres, fees for the association’s drop-in centre will be minimal, though enough to pay for the teachers. In addition, clan members can save on their grandchildren’s fees by contributing to daily chores, such as cleaning, food preparation, and supervision. Without putting financial pressure on the clan association, this new drop-in centre will serve as a self-sustainable system that can easily be integrated into the association’s current operational model.

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There are several benefits for having both younger and elder generations in a common facility: children will be better connected with their traditional culture by communicating with elders; elders can come to the association and enjoy social activities more often; parents can save money and time by sending their children to the association centre instead of a regular day-care centre; and most importantly, elders can close the generational gap by sharing activities with the children.

### Hybrid Mix of Two Generations

My approach to the design of a drop-in centre is to integrate it with the clan association in the same space. Learning from the hybrid bakery and restaurant, this project relies on the multiple uses of space as a key element in its design. The basic meaning of hybrid is “a thing made by combining two different elements.”<sup>15</sup> When two or more known genotypes are unexpectedly mixed together, new genetic alliances are created.<sup>16</sup> So the hybrid scheme in this project intends to create unexpected opportunities by incorporating two functions, and two generations, within the same facility.

Activities and programs required by both the clan association and the drop-in centre are listed. They are mixed and matched to create a new set of conditions to promote interactions between the two generations. In order not to entirely dismantle the original structure or re-arrange the existing space, several light, mobile, and handcrafted pieces of furniture and constructions will be inserted into the existing site. These are designed to accommodate and promote a shared environment, essential in revitalizing the dynamic function of the association, as well as saving space.

For example, if the children’s playground is incorporated with and located near the mah-jong tables, elders can look after their grandchildren while playing. Also, by elevating the children’s nap area, elders can read the newspaper or practise calligraphy quietly underneath. These tactical, small-scale changes can effectively save space and generate interactions between the two groups.

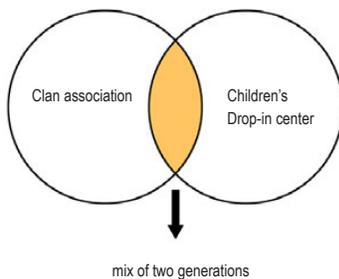


Fig 4.19: Mix of two generations. The diagram shows the relationship between the clan association and newly added drop-in centre. The two programs not only activate each other, but also generate more relationships.



Fig 4.20: Atelier Bow Wow’s sketch on the form of hybridization, from their book *Post Bubble City*.

## INTERVENTION

Fig 4.21: This diagram studies the possibilities created by combining one or more activities in the same space.

### List of activities of the clan association

- Mah-jong
- Karaoke
- Gardening
- Annual ritual events
- Tai Chi
- TV watching
- Reading
- Calligraphy
- Clan meetings
- Cooking



### Drop-in Center

- Classes
- Indoor play
- Outdoor play
- Napping
- Snacks



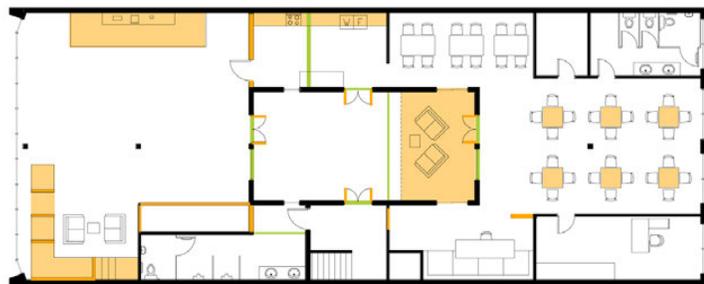
### Hybridization

- Mobile stairs
- Modified Mahjong Table
- Shared use of Courtyard
- Elevated nap space
- Insertion of Kitchen space

-  New furnished space
-  New Partition
-  Demolished



Fig 4.22: Modified third-floor plan. Five new pieces of furniture are inserted into the existing floor plan. They are all hand-made and easy to make. Changes to the wall structure are kept minimal.



LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



Classroom

Kitchen and  
lounge

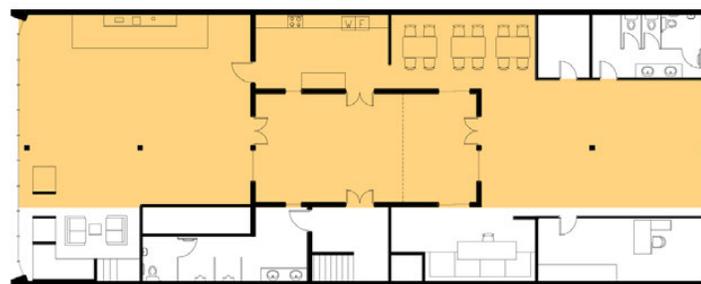
Mahjong and kids'  
playground



Ritual  
ceremony

Outdoor  
lounge space

Karaoke  
competition



Large open space for kids' sports  
or annual clan banquets

Fig 4.23: The diagrams on the right are coloured according to the function of space at different times and by different users. The space becomes more flexible with the addition of adjustable and mobile furniture.

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### Modified Mah-jong Tables

Mah-jong tables are modified at each leg by adding storage areas for children's toys. When elders come in to play, they unfold a play area beside them. A combined mah-jong and playground space helps the elders supervise and interact with their grandchildren. Under this system, both the children *and* the elders will want come to the association more often to socialize with their friends.

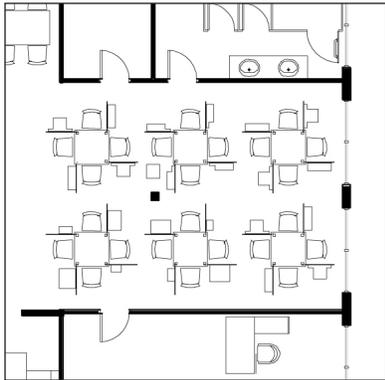


Fig 4.24: Vignette of modified Mah-jong tables.

### Mobile Stage

Ritual is an important part of life for the elders in the Lung Kong Association in promoting the virtues of loyalty, righteousness, kindness, and courage. However, ritual ceremonies are only held once a year, and the existing stage impedes other activities. So a mobile stage is designed and incorporated into the classes for children who attend the centre. It unfolds to become stairs where children can sit, and it is adjustable and can function as a traditional pedestal for the altar.

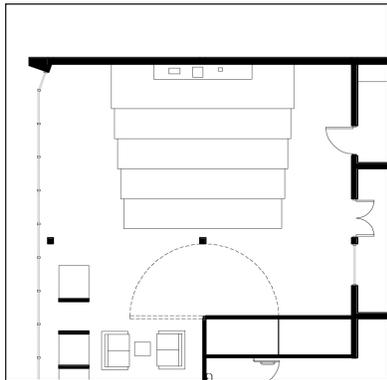


Fig 4.25: Vignette of children sitting on the mobile stage.

INTERVENTION



Fig 4.26: Vignette of clan members during ritual ceremony.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Elevated Nap Space for Children

The floor-to-ceiling height of the existing space is 3m. Because both the nap space and newspaper reading space are quiet, the bed is placed on a higher level in order to save space. At the same time, a slider and shelves for books and antiques are incorporated within the same construction.

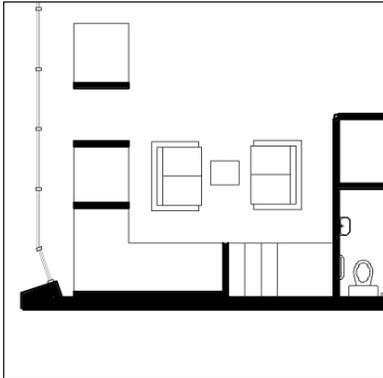


Fig 4.27: Vignette of children's elevated nap space and elders' reading area.

## INTERVENTION

### Shared Courtyard

The courtyard is designed to be a sanctuary shared by everyone who comes to the centre. The flexible outdoor space can hold various activities for different people at different times. The shaded ivy shelter is a perfect space to sit down and enjoy the breeze in summer. The floor surface will be painted to encourage children to play games outside. It is indeed a space where two generations can come together and enjoy nature.

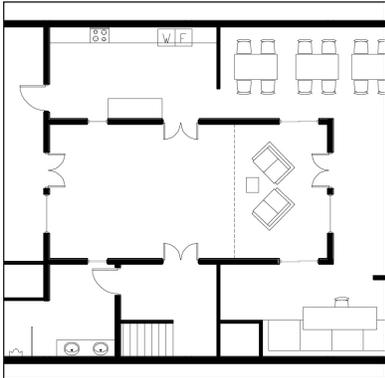


Fig 4.28: Vignette of the modified exterior courtyard.



### 3: Shared Infrastructure

The Chinatown Business Improvement Area (CBIA), a non-profit organization promoting the development of Chinatown, is proposing a renovation of Huron St. north of Dundas Avenue to the mid-block laneway. The impetus behind this project is to create permanent shelters and stages for a summer night market. The CBIA also wishes to clear up the sidewalks along Spadina Avenue by gathering street vendors on Huron Street for an informal weekday market. They wish the design in the end to become a landmark for Chinatown and a unique public space designed by and for local citizens. The status of this project is currently under review by the City of Toronto.

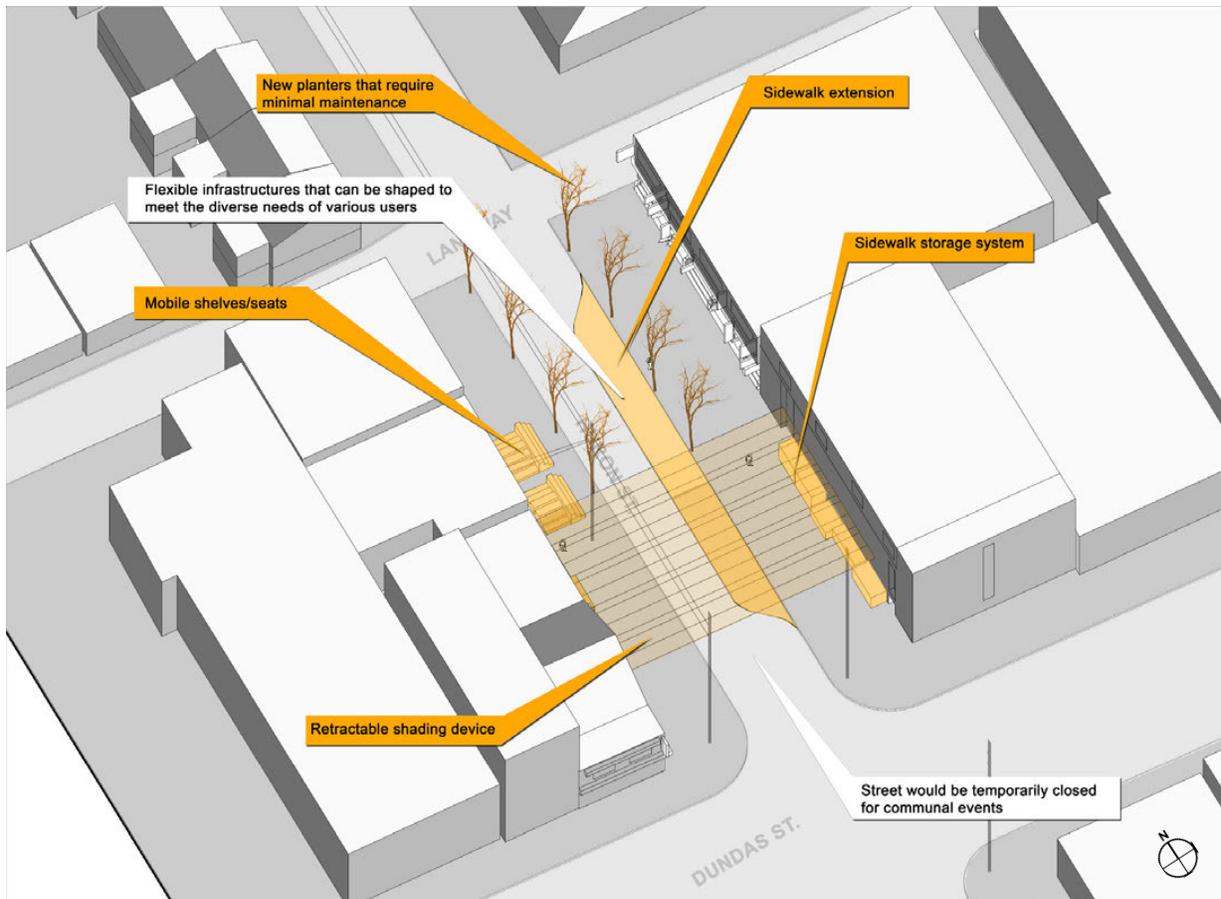
The approach to this project is to create flexible infrastructures to meet the diverse needs of various users. While the previous project focuses on the development of a series of tactical interior improvements for hybrid use, this project expands to encompass a more urban and communal scale. The essential feature of Chinatown's dynamic streetscape is the way that people have made new use of space by encroaching on and customizing public areas and infrastructures. For example, as seen above, railings are used to hang wet clothes, public corridors are modified for storage, sidewalks are occupied to sell produce, and an original fire exit is turned into a calling-card kiosk. These patterns of using public space are indicative of immigrants' habit of extending their work and home life onto the street. At the same time, the loosely programmed local infrastructure allows for these types of non-conforming

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activities.

Huron street runs parallel to Spadina Avenue, a few blocks to the east. From Dundas north to the first laneway, there are many retail units that are struggling, losing business, or closing down due to their location away from the main intersection. The goal here is to activate the street life and offer the public a more relaxing outdoor space, distinct from the rest of urban fabric.

Fig 4.29: Axonometric drawing of the Huron Street Renovation project, showing the site condition and project components.



LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



Fig 4.30: Street vendors selling vegetable and planters on Dundas St.



Fig 4.31: Street vendors

Chinese Gospel Church

A mixed space of pharmacy, food store, restaurant, travel agency, hair salon, and massage parlours

A mixed space of clan associations, travel agency, massage store and hair salon

Manufacturer of fortune cookies

Xin Long supermarket

TenRen's Tea shop



Fig 4.34: Streetscape of Huron Street, looking north.

INTERVENTION



ers on Spadina Ave.



Fig 4.32: Elders selling calling cards on the sidewalk of Dundas St.



Fig 4.33: Chinatown Festival, an annual event celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival.



## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

To design public infrastructures for the people, it is important to identify and analyze their relationship with users, programs, and informal uses over different time periods. The main concern is to define the spatial needs of users and develop systems that allow people the freedom to adjust the space to their various needs.

There are three “open systems” in the design, each of which is generated by the informal systems already operating in Chinatown. First, like awnings and umbrellas used in Chinatown, a retractable roof system will run half the length of the street and protect various activities from extreme weather. The summer night market, informal street markets, and outdoor exhibitions can take place underneath the roof system without the hassle of renting and installing tents or canopies.

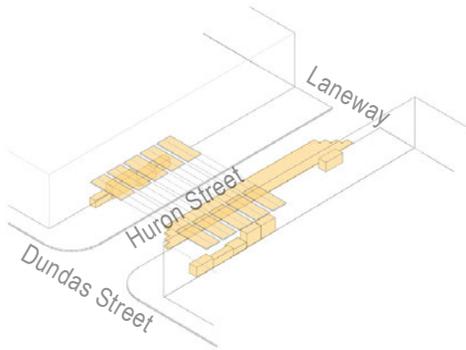
Second, a sidewalk storage system is intended to provide space for vendors or community organizations. Inspired by the clothing vendor’s booth mentioned above, this system is not only designed for storage, but also leaves aspects of the booth’s design up to the vendors based on the nature of their business. Tracks are installed onto nearby building walls so that they can be locked up at night.

The last system is a sidewalk extension on the northern stretch of the street that includes areas for seating, playing, and plants. Drinking water and electricity will also be installed and available for public use. By widening the sidewalks, more communal and commercial activities will be activated.

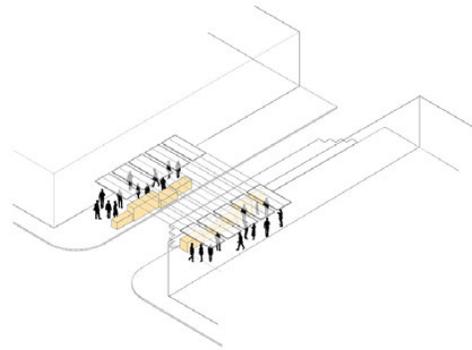
Instead of beginning with a pre-conceived solution for all, this project focuses on establishing open-ended support systems that will lead to communal sharing of the built infrastructure, as well as new and surprising uses. This project relates to the previous two because the goal for all is to set up open-ended frameworks that encourage spatial evolution and the involvement of locals Chinatown inhabitants.

Fig 4.35: The diagrams on the next page exhibit the relationships between users, programs, and informal uses over different time periods.

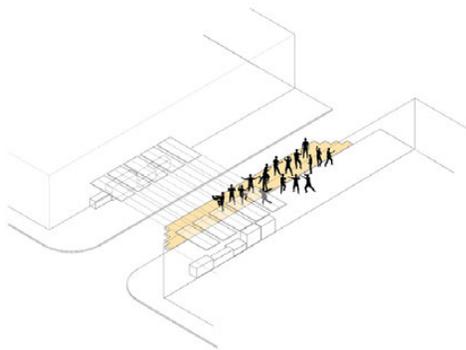
INTERVENTION



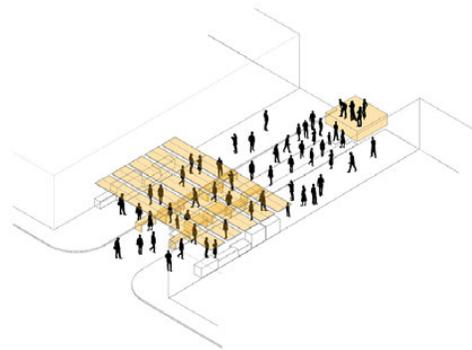
Basic infrastructures



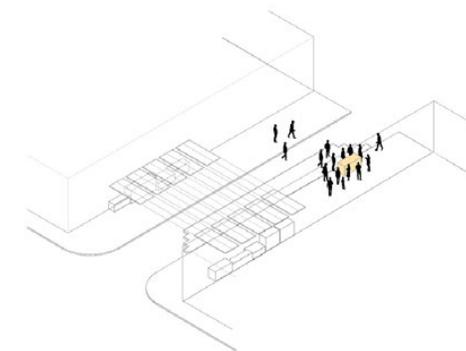
Street Vendors



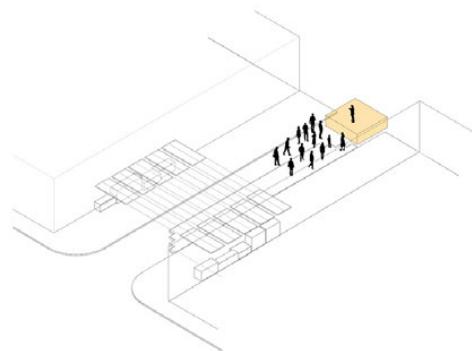
Tai Chi class



Summer Night Market



Community BBQ



Announcement



LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

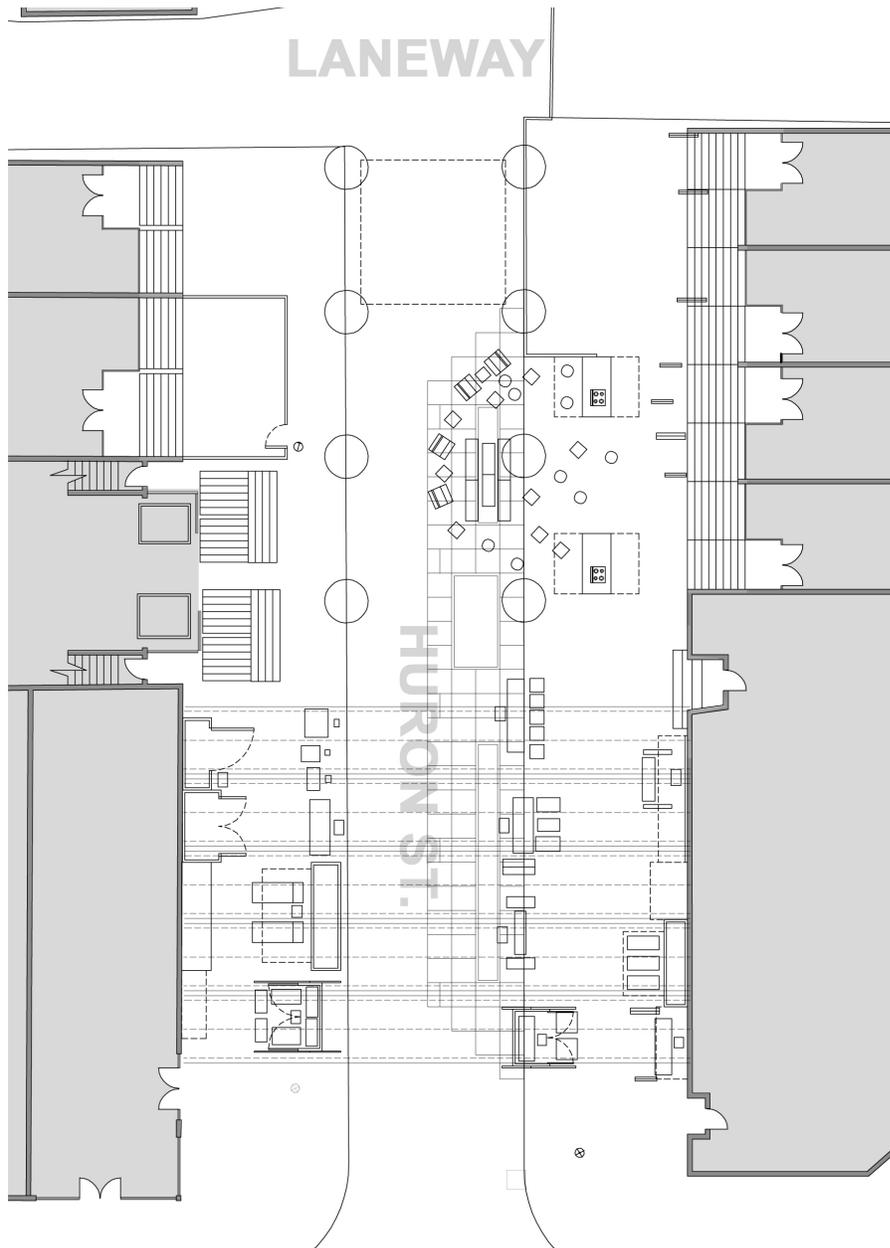


Fig 4.36: Site plan. Scale 1:300. 

## INTERVENTION

### Roof Shelter

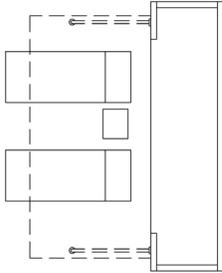
The roof shelter is designed to be as minimal as possible. Thin structural cords span the street, attached to the building walls. When the roof is completely open, the street will entirely retain its original feeling, and vendors can control the size of the roof fabric depending on the how much they want to be covered. The fabric is imprinted with traditional Chinese patterns.



Fig 4.37: Vignette of the roof shelter.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Sidewalk Storage System



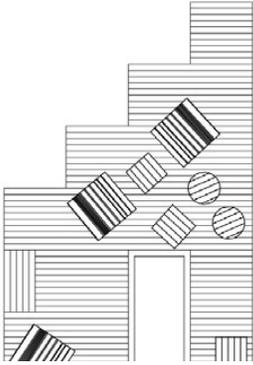
A track system is installed along the building walls. Vendors are given the power to design and make their own booth based on the nature of their business. As long as the form of booth fits into a certain dimension and a roller is attached for locking at night, the other choices of material, shape, and structure are up to the vendors.



Fig 4.38: A booth locked on the sidewalk storage track.

## INTERVENTION

### Sidewalk Extension



A sidewalk on the east side of the street is extended with raised wooden platforms, tables, chairs, and planters. Various programs, Chinese chess, vegetable planting, children's play area, and seating are incorporated. By adding programs onto the sidewalk, business owners will see the benefits of making space for people to linger in front of their establishments.



Fig 4.39: Activities taking place along the sidewalk extension.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Mobile Kitchen

This mobile kitchen comprises a kitchen unit with a sink, gas hob, and work counter. It is made from reclaimed lumber as the main structure, with a translucent polymer covering, and wheels on the bottom. It is stored together with other booths attached to the building walls, and organizations can rent it for public cooking, BBQ parties, and other activities.

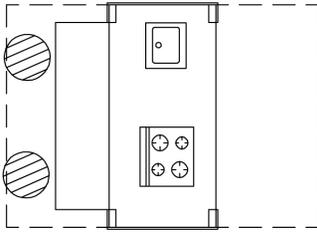
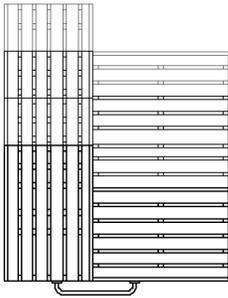


Fig 4.40: Design of the mobile kitchen.

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### Mobile Stairs



This is a simple design for sidewalk market vegetable shelves. They are made of wooden shipping pallets, which can be found everywhere in Chinatown, and two wheels on the bottom like a wheelbarrow. During the performances held at the summer night market, people can use them as seating areas.



Fig 4.41: Different uses of the mobile stairs.

LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN



## INTERVENTION



Fig 4.42: Possible activities taking place on Huron Street.

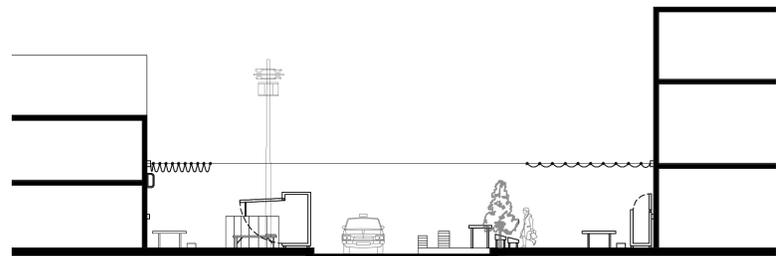


Fig 4.43: Section of Huron Street during the weekdays. Informal businesses open along the sidewalk edge. Roof shelters are adjusted depending on the weather.

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## INTERVENTION



Fig 4.44: Crowd at the night market.

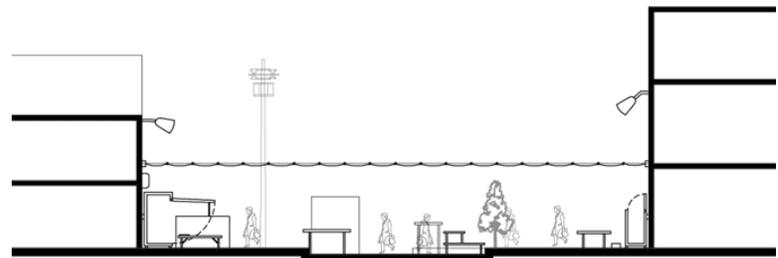


Fig 4.45: Section of Huron Street during the night market.

The street is temporary closed and occupied by the night market. The retractable roof shelter covers the street, protecting it from rain.

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

### Endnotes

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2. Marie-Hélène Contal and Jana Revedin, *Sustainable Design: Towards a New Ethic in Architecture and Town Planning* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009), 116.
3. Teddy Cruz and Caleb Waldorf, "Learning from Tijuana," *Triple Canopy*, October 27, 2009, accessed August 4, 2012, [http://canopycanopycanopy.com/pieces/legacy\\_piece/111](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/pieces/legacy_piece/111).
4. Allison Arieff, "Teddy Cruz: From the Global Border to the Border Neighborhood," *Build a Better Burb*, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://buildabetterburb.org/article.php?aid=107>.
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6. Hamdi, *Small Change*, 98.
7. Hamdi, *Small Change*, 73.
8. Toronto, Canada, Social Department, Finance and Administration, Social Policy Analysis and Research, *Social Profile #3 - Families & Dwellings*, October 2008, accessed January 3, 2013, [http://www.toronto.ca/demographics/cns\\_profiles/2006/pdf3/cpa78.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/demographics/cns_profiles/2006/pdf3/cpa78.pdf).
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11. A common scenario observed at the Drop-In Centre at the Alexandra Park Community Centre.
12. Brotherhood, [in Chinese], accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.palungkong.org/peach%20garden%20vow.htm>.
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14. Based on personal observation while volunteering at CBIA, which holds its weekly meeting at the clan association.
15. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "Hybrid," accessed February 2, 2013, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hybrid?q=hybrid>
16. Christopher Henry, "This Is Hybrid / A+t Research Group," *ArchDaily*, July 22, 2011, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://www.archdaily.com/152914/this-is-hybrid-at/>.





# Chapter 5: Conclusion

*“Architects must improve their visual literacy and develop a greater understanding of the multitude of adaptations to our suburban environments being initiated by a range of ethnic and cultural groups living in the GTA.”*

IAN CHODIKOFF <sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

In the age of globalization, radical improvements to transportation and communication have increased spatial mobility across the world. Indeed, people from all over are moving on such a large scale that Stephen Castles and Mark Miller have dubbed this the “age of migration.” Toronto is undoubtedly a globalized city able to attract people and capital from around the world. The influx of immigrants has contributed to a transnational revolution that is reshaping the city’s social and political fabric, as well as its urban form. Ian Chodikoff, urban designer and architect, emphasizes that designers should conduct research in order to create ethnic, cultural, and spatial mappings, which will in turn function as tools to develop effective design solutions in line with the way immigrants live.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is crucial for designers to respect the “localized” cultures brought in by immigrants from different nations, and learn from the unique and rich spatial implications specific to their ethnic backgrounds.

This thesis has entailed an in-depth study of Chinatown’s internal dynamics and structure by focusing on its unique spatial character, one formed both by bottom-up social forces and larger economic patterns. A series of phenomena was described and analyzed to show the variety, resilience, and frenzy of Chinatown and its residents. From these spatial implications, informal tactical improvements rooted in the everyday life of immigrants were proposed. The intention of all three proposals is to react dynamically to existing urban conditions by creating light, flexible, and inexpensive structures that are easy to make. Once the basic, open-

## CONCLUSION

ended structural systems are in place, the freedom to complete the space is given to local participants. In other words, these designs are not final products, but catalysts that encourage participation and social interaction. These projects are kept at minimal cost, in minimal form, and are intended to have a minimal impact on existing conditions. Together with the urban density and the large pool of social capital in Chinatown, it is most likely that the new sites will be quickly activated by the innovations of residents.

### **Bottom-up and Top-down**

Both the socio-spatial research and design interventions in Chinatown focus on a bottom-up perspective, which emphasizes actions by local immigrants. Through personal conversations while living and working in Chinatown, as well as walking observation in the physical space of the area, I was able to gain a comprehensive understanding on the local circumstances in the neighbourhood. I also developed a set of graphic methods for analyzing and representing the unique spatial implications found in Chinatown. The graphic research generated a set of frameworks, which fold into three design projects for the future of Chinatown. Because of the bottom-up approach used in the thesis analysis, the design solutions are all incremental and tactical. They often utilize the social capital within the existing community and improve the site with minimal architectural elements.

However, in order to make the design proposals more effective and productive on a wider scale, top-down institutions should also be involved. Some have argued that given the unprecedented diversity of Toronto, no one can speak for the entire community, and top-down forces have failed to represent the diverse cultures of ethnic communities. However, instead of completely ignoring this aspect, architects and planners should study and challenge existing institutional frameworks. As Teddy Cruz has said, “[d]esigners are not creators of simple products, but *translators* of realities into new political frameworks and economic systems.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important to create a mixed model that incorporates both bottom-up and top-down forces. Through the study of ethnic communities,

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

new policies can be designed as frameworks to support and extend the successful informal forms of urbanization that have arisen.

The thesis proposal for the multi-family dwelling on D'Arcy St. violates existing building codes and zoning laws. However, rethinking and retrofitting a top-down institution like zoning can generate new policies that can work with the model. Maybe instead of one single land use for this parcel of land, neighbourhood organizations should allow for two or more uses. In this way, locals will have more power and flexibility in customizing their homes. They would thus not only gain a sense of ownership through the modification process, but the new forms of dwelling would also anticipate and encourage social interaction. In addition, with the support of top-down institutions, this model of residential dwelling can be reproduced and tailored to fit other sites and cultural groups.

Opening a children's drop-in centre at a clan association also challenges the existing framework, as drop-in and daycare centres are only permitted by certain licensing arrangements and agencies. The question for the next phase of research would be how to convince governments to approve this community-based model. In what situation can the government and clan association share the power and responsibility of running such a centre? What new policies can be designed to benefit both agencies? If the model is approved, how could it be applied to other clan associations within the Chinese community? Also, how could it be applied to other ethnic groups? Without the modification of existing top-down forces, these two projects are mere proposals, and can hardly be achieved on a large scale.



Fig 5.01: Aerial views of Markham, over the site of Pacific Mall. Photos taken in 1953 and 1992.

### Suburban Chinatowns

The process of urban sprawl and the increasing migration of financial capital have led to the development of new Chinatowns in Markham, Richmond Hill, Mississauga, and Scarborough. These satellite Chinatowns are connected to each other through the constant flow of information, money, and people. Along with the downtown Chinatown, they comprise the nodes of a network that connects Chinese society in Toronto.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, during the research for this thesis, many downtown retail stores were found to operate chain stores in the suburbs. For instance, the dollar mart on Dundas Street has a store in a plaza on Highway 7 in Richmond Hill. The poultry store shown earlier has farms and retailers in the suburbs, and the large Fujianese supermarket chains have an even wider network of restaurants, farms, fisheries, and food manufacturers that form a business network across Ontario.<sup>4</sup> Though the suburban Chinatowns are completely different from the downtown Chinatown, they too have been transformed and customized by the intelligence of their immigrant populations.

The social status of immigrants living in the suburbs, however, differs from the immigrants who live downtown. Many wealthy professionals, especially of the younger generation, have chosen to live in the suburbs and go downtown only on weekends or holidays. It would be interesting to observe and investigate the lifestyles of these middle- and upper middle-class immigrants. How have they adapted to and/or modified their existing social and urban fabric? What are the formal/informal spatial implications found in the suburban conditions? These are possible research topics for the next stage of this study. It is essential for architects and designers to learn to anticipate and respond to on-going urban transformations and demographic shifts occurring all around the GTA.

To conclude the thesis work, let's return to the story of chop suey. Despite the story given above, the origin of the dish has always been somewhat of a mystery. Of course, some argue that it was invented in America, while some say it is an authentic dish from Tai Shan, in Guangdong Province. Meanwhile, outside Tai Shan, chop suey is called "Za Sui," which means a mix of cooked animal offal or entrails, in Mandarin.<sup>5</sup> No one has figured out which story is most authentic. Despite this, it is certain that the chef who first created this dish was from China. The way mixed bits of vegetables are stir-fried in a wok is a quintessentially Chinese cooking method. Through the migration of people, this dish can now be found in every corner of the world. And even though the ingredi-

## LEARNING FROM CHINATOWN

ents might vary depending on the resources available, the concept of chop suey has not significantly changed.

Learning from chop suey, it is clear that Chinese culture has always been deeply rooted in the Chinese diaspora. Chop suey symbolizes the hybrid identity of Chinese immigrants, just as Chinatown is a hybrid product of a western urban fabric and the adaptation of it by local populations. Instead of repelling each other, Chinese immigrants and their host cities have been largely successfully in harmoniously linking the city form and immigrant society, and we have much to learn from their hybrid forms.



Fig 5.02: Picture of mixed campaign boards, representing the Canadian flag.

## CONCLUSION

### Endnotes

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2. Ibid.
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5. "Za Sui" is recorded in the classic Chinese text "Journey to the West", written in the sixteenth century, during the Ming Dynasty. In the book, Sun WuKong tells a lion/monster in chapter 75: "When I passed through Guangzhou, I bought a pot for cooking za sui, so I'll savour your liver, entrails, and lungs." *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Chop Suey" Origins, accessed March 11, 2012, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chop\\_suey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chop_suey).



## Appendix A: other design tests

This appendix contains two more design tests I developed during the study of Chinatown; due to time constraints, these projects remain underdeveloped. However, the concept of each suggests an innovative direction for the improvement of Chinatown.

### **Project 1: Hybridization of clan association, day-care centre and senior apartment**

This is a design test on the hybridization of three programs: clan association, day-care centre and senior apartment. They are organically linked together through strongly connected social relations: elders who live in the apartment can make friends with those who go to the clan association, and elders who participate in the clan association can choose to look after children at the day-care centre. With the multi-family dwelling across D'Arcy Street (page 97), this area becomes a small-scale mixed-use complex, which includes living, working, schooling, and social gatherings.

The site is adjacent to the multi-family dwelling. There is a parking lot enclosed by a one-storey retail store to the west and a clan association to the east. The senior apartment is designed to be on top of the retail space, while the day-care centre is located above the clan association. Shared facilities, including a café, fitness centre, roof terrace, and entrance lobby are right above the parking lot (now underground).

Although underdeveloped, the concept of this project suggests new ways of inserting programs into a dense city fabric. The focus is to set up a self-organized social framework that involves all users of the building.

APPENDIX A



Fig 6.01: Vignette of the day-care centre and senior apartment.



Fig 6.02: Building sections.

### Project 2: Art and Cultural Support

The fundamental concept of this project is to introduce art and cultural facilities into Chinatown. From the previous studies, one can tell that Chinatown is dominated by retail stores and restaurants. Although it has a large pool of social capital, Chinatown lacks an artistic and cultural facility. The inspiration for inserting an art studio on top of the Chinatown Centre Plaza comes from a few art and design studios I found in Chinatown. All of them were opened by mainstream business owners who choose the place for low rent. The idea struck me that it would be interesting to have artists and designers living in Chinatown, both promoting social integration with mainstream society as well as other ethnic communities.

Hovering on top of the plaza, which is often quiet and underutilized, art studios and lofts could activate the Chinatown Centre Plaza. The building would become a new gate for Chinatown, but rather than the traditional wooden gates in other Chinatowns, Toronto's would symbolize its contemporary side.

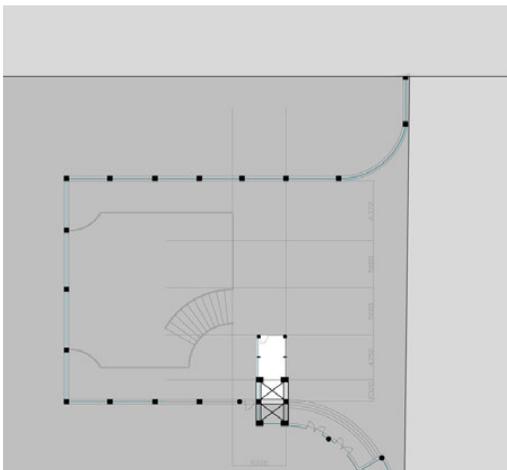


Fig 6.03: Ground-floor plan.

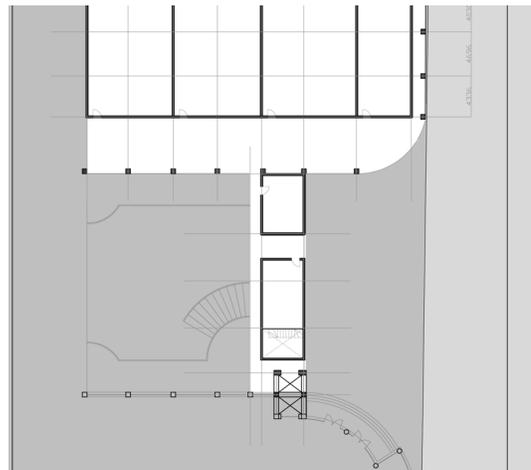


Fig 6.04: Third-floor plan.

APPENDIX A



Fig 6.05: Building elevation.



Fig 6.06: Building section.



## Appendix B: A Material Palette for Chinatown

The images in this section exhibit a rich collection of interesting features and materials found in Chinatown. Each image captures a particular detail of building elements such as signage, an exterior staircase, a customized street display, or materials that strike the eye. The assemblage of these examples not only reflects the vibrant and colourful façades of Chinatown, but are also a potentially powerful palette that can help architects in designing future buildings.

This section is divided as following:

**Exterior staircases** are often built as a separate entrance for users living in extended spaces on the upper levels. They are usually very steep and narrow. Some owners use the space underneath them for storage.

**Signs** are found everywhere in Chinatown: building façades, streetlight poles, stairwells, railings, etc. It is interesting that most signage found in Chinatown has only coloured text. Unlike in Times Square, where the commercials are full of moving images and graphics, Chinatown's businesses prefer to use the most direct way of spreading the information.

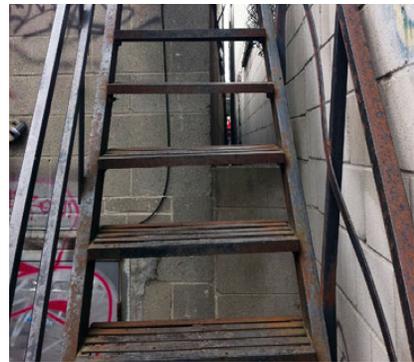
**Customized street displays** are handcrafted by the local storeowners who wish to display their products close to the sidewalk. If one pays attention, each product display is unique, tailored to the nature of the product and the surrounding infrastructure.

**Building materials** in Chinatown include brick, concrete block, metal, wood, plastic, tiles, resin, etc. The common properties of these materials are their low cost, and ease of maintenance and installation. Some of them are recycled from previous constructions.

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Fig 6.07: Collection of exterior staircases.



APPENDIX B



Fig 6.08: Collection of Signage.



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APPENDIX B

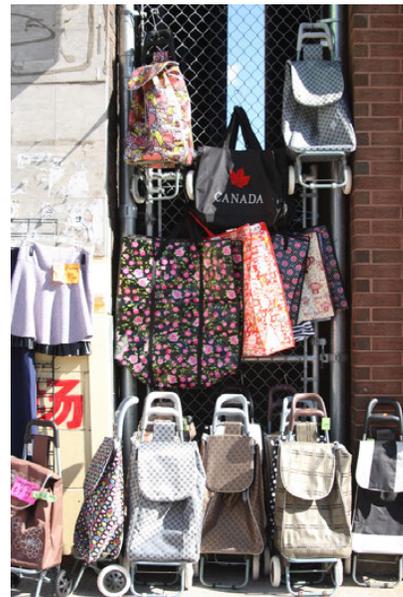


Fig 6.09: Collection of customized street displays.



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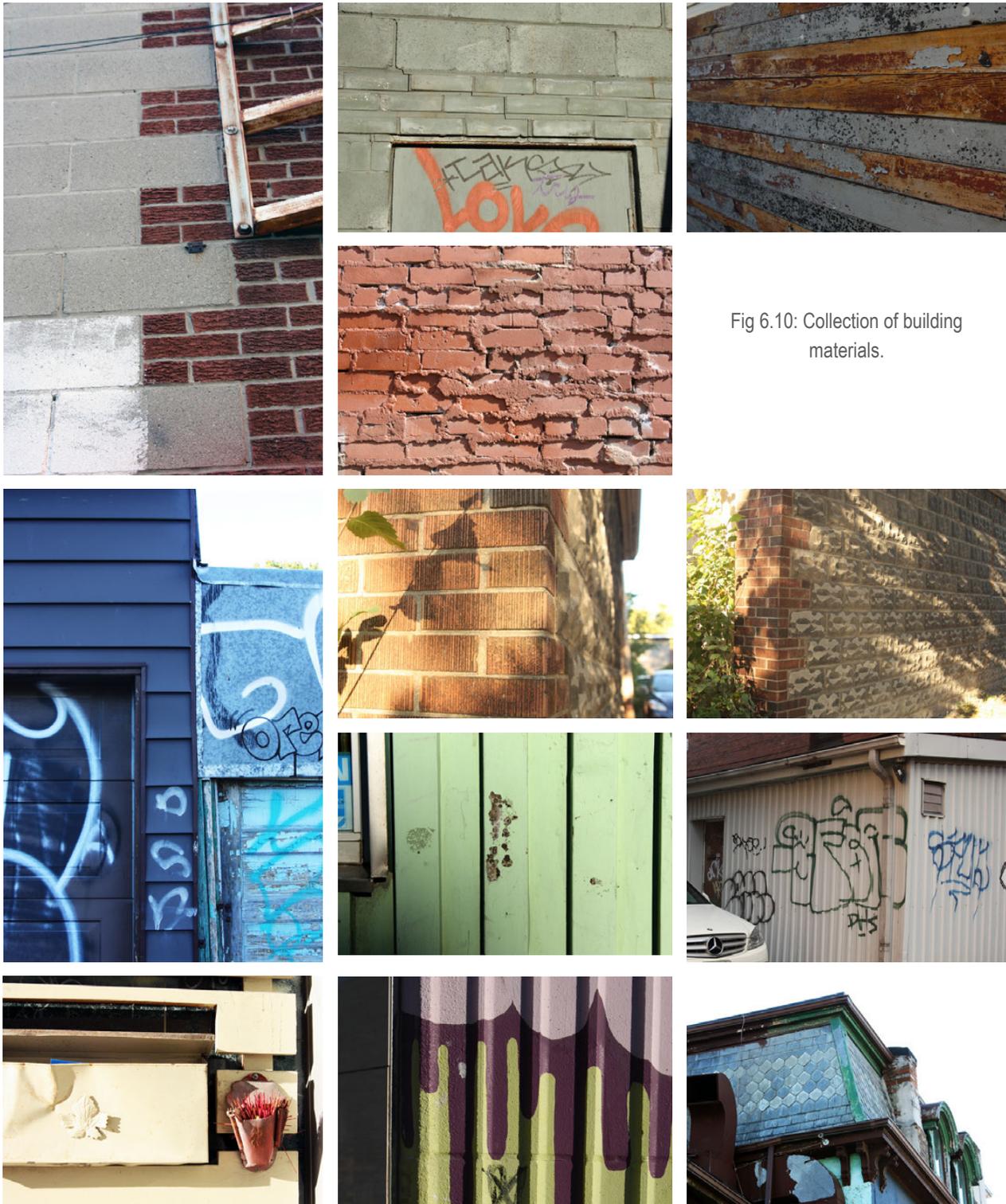
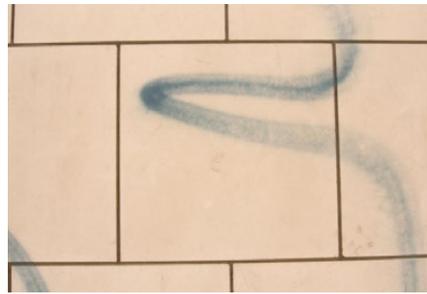


Fig 6.10: Collection of building materials.

APPENDIX B





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