

# Acting Up For Protection Montreal's Chinatown

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Montreal's Chinatown situates in the heart of the city, one of North America's oldest Asian communities. It is not only a place of embodying more than 140 years history of Chinese community in Montreal; but also a site of reflecting Chinese architectural culture, Chinese art culture and Chinese food culture. Such a historic and cultural invaluable colorful neighborhood has become subjects in real estate developers' projects and repeatedly destroyed in recent 50 years. If it still could not get fully protected and carefully preserved, the neighborhood will be carved up by modern building projects, the Chinatown will gradually lose its unique character, its incalculable historical value and its valuable cultural assets. The Montreal's Chinatown will be eventually vanished forever. The historical and cultural importance of Chinatown is not duly acknowledged, protections of the Chinatown should act up immediately and thoroughly.

Montreal's Chinatown has memorable long history. It has experienced more than 140 years of unique development process, from just a laundromat developed to an area containing Chinese community, Chinese hospital, Chinese learning schools, Chinese cultural palace, Sun Yat Sen square, Chinese newspaper offices, Asian restaurants, food markets, souvenir shops, convenience stores and a stage for lion dance and for dragon dance. Montreal's Chinatown is the last surviving Chinatown in the province of Québec and is one of the few Chinatowns in Canada to have kept some of its original authentic architectures, four large red and golden towergates respectively mark the south, east, north and west entrances of the Chinatown. It is a place where the original architectures embody Chinese community rich development history; It is a Chinese cultural hub where the rich and colorful Chinese culture was born in Montreal; it is a stage where Chinese carnivals, Chinese spectacles, Beijing opera, Chinese traditional lion and dragon dances demonstrate Chinese culture and customs; It is a site where the generations of Asians to visit for looking back the taste of the hometown; It is a neighborhood where local Asian-Quebecers come for recalling childhood memories; It is a historic and cultural important district where tourists often visit for enjoying Chinese architecture, for appreciating Chinese art culture, and for tasting Chinese food; It is also an area where local Asian-Canadians frequently walk in for buying Chinese products which are difficult to find elsewhere in Montreal. Furthermore, the Chinatown is also a helping center to aid many new immigrants learning French and English, finding job, looking for new home and adapting their life in Montreal.

Since the 1970s onwards, Montreal's Chinatown has been shrinking and has been an attractive place in the developers' sight for modern real estate mega projects. The Chinese

residential properties, Chinese restaurants and stores, Chinese organization offices, etc. in the neighborhood have been gobbled up by real estate developers. Over 6 acres of such buildings were demolished in the construction of the Complexe Guy-Favreau; A block of Chinatown was occupied for the construction of Palais des congrès de Montréal; Additional buildings in the area were harmed in the construction of the Complexe Desjardins; Recently, developer started again to buy residential properties in the neighborhood and are prearranging a new mega project. So many successive such modern mega projects not only have reduced the size of Chinatown, but also have obstructed the neighborhood expansion; So many successive such modern mega projects not merely have raised so much fears for the neighborhood already thrived for the past 140+ years to be dissolved into the modern developing projects, but also have brought a lot of worries for the Chinatown already earned historical and cultural importance to be erased from the Montreal landscape; So many successive such modern mega projects not only make Montreal and Canada lose the big part of their history and culture, but also make the massive part of Montreal multicultural characteristics be gloomy. Hence, protecting the Chinatown and preserving the neighborhood are called for and are in imminent.

In the past years, the government of Quebec and city hall of Montreal have acted up to protect Montreal's Chinatown and recently announce provincial protection for the heritage district to shield the neighbourhood from further negative effects brought on by development and gentrification<sup>[1]</sup>. Quebec Culture Minister Nathalie Roy classified the block bounded by de la Gauchetière street, St-Urbain street, Côté Street and Viger Avenue as a Quebec heritage site and designate it as the “institutional hub” of Chinatown<sup>[1]</sup>. This is the first historical site (Quebec's highest level of heritage protection) by the Quebec government<sup>[2]</sup>. Montreal Mayor, Valérie Plante, said the city would modify its urban plan to ensure that future development in the downtown neighborhood respects specific criteria regarding building height, density and architecture<sup>[3]</sup>. She also said “we not only wish to protect and enhance our history, but also to highlight the contribution of the Chinese and Asian community to the historical and cultural richness of the city”<sup>[4]</sup>.

Our association, one of the organizations in Chinese community, welcomes such Chinatown protection decisions made by the government of Quebec and city hall of Montreal. These decisions are an excellent start and are a turning point for further survival of the neighborhood. However, further fully protections of the entire Chinatown are needed, the specific protecting approaches that we propose are as follows:

- 1) The entire Chinatown, bounded by Saint Dominique Street, René Lévesque Boulevard, Viger Avenue and Jeanne-Mance Street, should get protected and be designated as historical and cultural heritage district, only one block of Chinatown was designated as

status of historical district is not good enough. Since each part of the Chinatown reflects different period of the developing history and culture, only the entire Chinatown can signify integral Chinese community development history and culture, no matter the core or the periphery of the Chinatown get destroyed, the corresponding period of history and culture would be erased forever and the Chinese community development history and corresponding culture are not intact anymore. Hence, protecting the entire Chinatown is the real and effective approach to preserve the integral history and culture of the neighborhood.

- 2) The intangible Chinese culture in Chinatown should get protected as well, only designating the tangible buildings in Chinatown center as historical and cultural district is not good enough. Since tangible Chinese architectural buildings and intangible Chinese culture is complimentary and is undividable in the Chinatown. The Chinatown is not just rows of buildings, it is also the Chinese community with their services, the Chinese cultural center with their activities, the Chinese residences with their colorful lives and the Chinese food with rich tastes together make Chinatown with historical value and cultural assets. Without intangible Chinese culture, the Chinatown would be just an architectural museum, Hence, the layout of the Chinatown has to be preserved and protecting intangible Chinese culture is called for, it is part of Chinatown protection.
- 3) Further real estate projects in the neighborhood should match the architectural style of the Chinatown and be with some Chinese elements, only lower the further developers' projects height to about eight stories is not good enough. Since each community has its own characteristics. The Chinatown is symbolized by Chinese architectures and Chinese culture. Almost all buildings in the neighborhood are with Chinese architectural style and with some Chinese elements. Without these symbols, the Chinatown would lose its unique characteristics, its historical value, and its cultural assets and could not be distinguished from other communities. Hence, keeping Chinese architectural style and Chinese elements in the new architectural projects in the neighborhood is an indispensable measure to preserve the neighborhood and to protect the Chinatown.
- 4) Establishing a systematic and integral planning to manage property trades and to control further high raising projects in the neighborhood is an inevitable step to protect the Chinatown. Since any new modern project need to buy the properties in the neighborhood, if the property trades are limited in the area, and need permissions either from government of Quebec or from city hall of Montreal, the further real estate development projects will be automatically restricted and the Chinatown will be protected and the neighborhood will be preserved.

Protecting Montreal's Chinatown and preserving the neighborhood are not one day work and

not a power of one person can accomplish. We need pulling up our sleeves to continue fighting for the Chinatown's future. We are urging the public to join the effort together to protect the Chinatown and to preserve our community.

## Reference

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[3] Montreal's Chinatown, threatened by development, to be granted heritage status, 《Global News》 by Morgan Lowrie, January 24, 2022

[4] One Of The Oldest Buildings In Montreal's Chinatown Is Now A Protected Heritage Site, By Hélène Bigras-Dutrisac, February 16, 2022, from <https://www.loopnet.ca/learn/one-of-the-oldest-buildings-in-montreals-chinatown-is-now-a-protected-heritage-site/436817893/>, on May 29, 2022.