

Intervention à l'OCPM par Jessica Chen, la foundation Jia juin 8, 2022

Chers commissaires de l'OCPM,

Je m'appelle Jessica Chen. Je suis une membre du Groupe de travail sur le quartier chinois et je vous présenter aujourd'hui au nom de la Fondation Jia, le nouvel organisme de développement communautaire sans but lucratif qui a pour mandat de promouvoir le patrimoine culturel du Quartier chinois de Montréal. Nous vous remercions de nous donner l'occasion de commenter les nouvelles autorisations proposées en matière de hauteur et de densité des bâtiments situés dans le quartier chinois. La Fondation Jia **appuie** la modification proposée par la Ville de Montréal au Plan d'urbanisme. La conservation de l'environnement urbain et bâti du quartier chinois est essentielle pour préserver sa valeur historique, sociale et architecturale et, surtout, pour permettre au mode de vie et aux pratiques culturelles de la communauté non seulement de survivre, mais de prospérer.

Instead of re-iterate the points outlined in the written submission, I hope to use my time here to share some of my personal experience and learning based on my years of working in different Chinatowns, especially in Vancouver's Chinatown.

In my written submission on behalf of the Jia Foundation, I outlined some of the shared struggles in different Chinatowns of North America and strategies tried by community groups and policy makers. Generally there is a common understanding that Chinatown discussion is much more than revitalization, or just heritage buildings conservation; it is about its people, its cultural heritage, and their way of life. Any economic strategy should centre around it.

I was a city planner with the City of Vancouver from the late 1990s to 2010, working with its inner city neighbourhoods known as the Downtown Eastside for over 10 years. Chinatown is one of the neighbourhoods included in the DTES, basically the first faubourg in Vancouver, just like our Montreal Chinatown being in faubourg Saint-Laurent. Situated in the same location with the un-broken history since its formation makes Chinatowns in Montreal, Vancouver, Victoria very unique. For example, Toronto's Chinatown has been relocated.

Vancouver's Chinatown is a good case study for Montreal to see what has worked well and what has not, even if those events happened at different time in different sequences, so we can avoid the mistakes and do better. With some of the shared city planning and other public policy histories in North America such as the 1970s urban renewal programs to 1980s suburbanization to 1990s federal government stopped its affordable housing programs and de-institutionalization of psychiatric care without sufficient community care programs resulting in different social economic issues in different cities.

In that shared history, Vancouver's Chinatown managed to stop the highway construction and was designated as a historic site by the City and the Province since the 1970s. Heritage zoning, design guidelines, list of heritage buildings and their heritage value statements were all put in place. Like we are trying to do now. However, those other social economic challenges due to the prolonged public disinvestment and misaligned policies among many other reasons become more difficult to resolve.

So *revitalization of Chinatown* discussion has a long history in Vancouver. In the 1980s new social and cultural organizations are formed to serve the growing and changing community, and the construction of the Chinatown Gate – it became popular also in different Chinatowns including ours in Montreal. In the 90s and the 2000s, there was increased concerns about equitable development with the gentrification pressure becoming more evident so the discussion of Chinatown shifted to: how can we “Revitalize without Displacement” and tried to balance the diverse range of needs. And I see that in the recently adopted Plan d'action pour le quartier chinois par la ville de Montreal. It has a long list of comprehensive objectives too, but eventually we will need to find ways to prioritize with a coherent development and urban design vision AND a designated team with right expertise to carry it out.

Even with such a long history of Chinatown being a heritage site, Vancouver City Council around 2010 wanted to try something new and started looking at how height and density can be tools to not only help revitalization but also pay for

some of the public amenities. Two arguments then were 1) we need more people to live in Chinatown, so we need to densify 2) allow rezoning projects to take place in some areas and negotiate with the developers of those projects to help pay for needed affordable housing and heritage conservation cost. Sounds familiar? The result of it is a rezoning policy in 2012 allowing only a small portion of Chinatown for rezoning from 9 to 15 stories on the case by case basis.

Since that policy, within short 5 years, major changes took place. Condo projects were developed with new population moving in who do not have much connection with Chinatown; however, the public benefits received in terms of affordable housing or heritage conversation were minimal but the loss of long-term legacy businesses were visible. Chinatown has become Coffee-town as one long-term senior resident lamented. So in 2017, when another rezoning project was proposed, a major community mobilisation took place – young and old, Chinese or non-Chinese, and many other communities in solidarity – united to oppose to this proposal, fearing that Chinatown as we know it will disappear forever. That is now known as the Keefer Clash (a movie was made). Last year the alarm around Wings Noodle bloc and mobilisation followed in Montreal felt familiar, isn't it? Since then the City of Vancouver reversed that Rezoning policy in 2018 and started their new approach to planning in Chinatown focusing on the cultural heritage, seeing Chinatown as a place for reconciliation and cultural redress, and with the aspiration for UNESCO heritage designation. Today their Cultural Heritage Assets Management Plan went forward to Council and (TBC).

So, Montreal Chinatown, we are not alone. What we are doing today is important, one step toward the right direction, in my view, and it is just the beginning. We cannot afford to only look at Chinatown as merely a place of commercial or development opportunities. Height and density is only part of the discussion and with the many other critical work ahead, Jia Foundation looks forward to continuing working with the community partners and the City to move things forward.