Alumni

Revitalizing Chinatown

Columbia urban planning students help a community rebuild

By
Marcus Tonti
|
Spring 2004

A visitor emerging from the subway into New York's Chinatown can easily feel as if she has traveled to another country. Filled with the sound of Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese, neighborhood streets feature a colorful jumble of signs in Chinese and other languages. Storefronts, many open to the sidewalk, display exotic vegetables, fish, produce, jewelry. While the attractions of Chinatown draw tourists from the rest of the City and beyond, this vibrant neighborhood is also home to more than 70,000 New Yorkers.

The great majority of them Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, many speak little or no English and make a living not only in the shops and restaurants but also in garment factories out of the public eye. The area offers no refuge from the traffic problems and real estate pressures that affect life all over New York. And more than many other parts of the City, Chinatown—highly sensitive to the ups and downs of the tourist economy and close to the World Trade Center site—still feels the aftershocks of 9/11.

Determined both to preserve and to bolster the neighborhood, the community organization Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) approached faculty at the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation's urban planning program in late 2002. AAFE had begun a project called the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative (RCI) to identify Chinatown's post-9/11 needs and help the community plan for the future—physically, socially, and economically. RCI project manager Jennifer Sun '02APP, an alumna of the planning program, knew that a Planning Studio—a core class for first-year planning students that allows them to practice the skills used by professional planners—could help evaluate the

neighborhood’s problems as well as its promise and offer solutions both practical and inspired. Studio classes give students the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of complex urban issues, Sun explains, and then begin to design ways to improve them.

So in the spring of 2003, eight Columbia students under the guidance of Richard Bass, an adjunct associate professor of urban planning, turned their sights on Chinatown. Students supplemented demographic data and existing studies with extensive research and interviews with community members to reach a broad series of recommendations. Finding that a lack of affordable quality housing leaves many residents in substandard apartments even as it creates pressure to convert local factories to residential space, the students proposed the construction of new housing along Allen and Delancey streets. To shore up the economy, they recommended new zoning to prevent Chinatown’s existing manufacturing sites—mostly garment factories—from being converted to residential or retail use.

Casting a collective eye to the stretch of South Street between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges—an area not traditionally thought of as part of Chinatown, even though it is just a few blocks away—the students also saw possibility. They called for tourist-friendly development along the East River, including a ferry terminal, and suggested that a grand pier could feature a restaurant and a Chinese garden. Peter Cheng, executive director of the Indochina Sino-American Community Center, valued the students’ fresh point of view: “Right now there’s no pier, and nobody ever talks about a pier, so you assume it cannot be done. But if you think about it, Chinatown is right next to the waterfront,” so a pier could make perfect sense.

Studio participant Seth Myers ’04APP recalls embracing the advice from both Bass and Frank Lang, AAFE’s director of planning and development, to “be creative, and not be deterred by things that would make a professional planner say ‘Whoa!’ So we came up with a far-ranging group of ideas, including some that crossed into the ridiculous.” For instance, according to Juan Rivero ’04APP, a fellow participant, one proposal, eventually set aside, would have encircled the neighborhood with a “Great Wall of Chinatown,” to better define the area and create a new tourist attraction. Another suggestion—because the proximity of the City’s police headquarters creates security-related detours that constrain travel to Chinatown—was simply to relocate the NYPD elsewhere in the City, perhaps to Rikers Island.

The freedom to consider anything and everything, Myers says, ultimately strengthened the students' final recommendations. Along with its housing and waterfront proposals, their 92-page study called for a formal business hub at Chatham Square and advocated the protection of Chinatown's historic core area—the region south of Canal Street and west of the Bowery. This area is home to the neighborhood's earliest buildings (dating to 1880), longstanding cultural groups such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the landmark Church of the Transfiguration, and other old sites including the Mott Street General Store and the Columbus Park Pavilion.

Students also tackled problems of transportation and congestion, open space, and the need for improved pedestrian connections to the neighborhood. Solutions ranged from the ambitious and expensive—such as a central bus terminal for competing neighborhood providers—to the relatively simple, for instance better signage for visitors approaching Chinatown from the City Hall area.

The studio project was so successful that AAFE Executive Director Christopher Kui, who sits on the New York City Planning Commission, arranged for the students to present their findings to commission Chair Amanda Burden '92APP; Burden in turn asked them to address the entire commission. After that, another member of the commission was impressed enough to approach Columbia about setting up a similar studio to study economic development issues in East Harlem, which a new set of students is now undertaking.

Sun reports that the current RCI plan shares some of the goals for Chinatown identified by the Columbia students—among them, improvements for pedestrians and the designation of a special planning district that would incorporate the new development guidelines. AAFE continues to lobby public agencies including the Department of City Planning and the Economic Development Corporation to adopt policies and pursue projects consistent with RCI objectives.

As the dialogue goes on about how best to celebrate and strengthen this corner of the City, Sun reminds us that Chinatown is "not just a tourist destination or an outdoor mall. It's a living, working neighborhood with incredible resources to contribute to the rebuilding of lower Manhattan."

Read more from ***Marcus Tonti***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **Marcus Tonti***