

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Objectives

Started as an ethnic enclave in the 1860's, the Chinatown-International District in Seattle today is a place of immigrant histories, personal and family memories, community pride, and home to many elderly residents, restaurants and businesses. Being a multi-ethnic neighborhood located at the edge of downtown Seattle, it is also a place where forces of cultural and spatial contestations are manifested in the everyday environment, from the encroaching office development to issues of cultural representation in the design of streetscapes and public art.

This report presents the work of a graduate-level community design studio in the Department of Landscape Architecture at University of Washington in studying the urban design problems and opportunities of the Chinatown-International District and in generating preliminary concepts and strategies in response to the identified issues. The scope of this project included an inventory of the physical conditions of the District (as defined by 4th Avenue, Yesler Way, Rainier Avenue and Dearborn Street), focus-group interviews with selected community organizations and the development of a series of urban design proposals in response to the issues identified in the site survey and community interviews.

Rather than focusing solely on physical solutions, this studio places urban design in the larger context of community building, placemaking, identity formation and collective actions. The central question in the studio concerns the roles of ethnic communities in cities and how placemaking through architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and community participation can help articulate and facilitate those roles. As part of an ongoing effort to develop an urban design master plan to guide future development and improvement in the District, the primary goals of the studio are (1) to assist the local community organizations in setting goals for the master plan, and (2) to develop preliminary design strategies that can facilitate dialogues in the planning and design process.

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Through the focus-group interviews and distribution of this report, we hope to encourage discussions among the community groups, residents and businesses about the implications and opportunities of the current planning process in creating an urban design plan for the District. Through interactions with the community and presentation of the proposals, we hope to encourage the community members to participate in a public process to discuss the future of the community and the issues and opportunities for improving the quality of life and the environment in the District. We hope the work of the studio will contribute to the creation of a plan that addresses the concerns and the interests of the community as well as design outcomes that embody the cultural and place identities of the neighborhood..

Unfolding of the Studio Process

The design studio took place from April to June 2002. Eleven students from the departments of Landscape Architecture, Urban Design and Planning, and Architecture at the University of Washington began with a preliminary visit of the site and finalized on a set of interview questions with the help of Assistant Professors Lynne Manzo and Dan Abramson. They also developed a list of issues to study through site observations. In the following two weeks, the students conducted a series of interviews with five local community organizations including the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area (BIA), InterIm Community Development Association, International District Housing Alliance, and Little Saigon Business Association. In addition, Professor Lynne Manzo kindly contributed her expertise to moderate two additional interviews with Chong Wa Benevolent Association and Wing Luke Asian Museum. While the number of organizations was limited by the time constraint of this project, the selection was intended to reflect a broad range of perspectives from different sectors in the community.

In between the focus-group interviews, the students also conducted detailed inventories of the physical condition of the District on topics ranging from street conditions to the location pattern of businesses in the District. The findings from the interviews and site observations formed the basis for the next stage of developing design proposals. A list of criteria was developed to ensure that the design proposals addressed the specific problems and opportunities as identified in the

interview and site survey.

In the final four weeks of the studio, the students each concentrated on developing one design proposal that would together contribute to improvement of physical and social space in the District. In April, a design team for the actual urban design project funded by the South Downtown Foundation was selected that would consist of Nakano Associates, Mayumi Tsutakawa, Edgar Yang and Kenneth Yeh. To ensure an effective linkage between the studio work and the formal project, we invited the design team to critique the student work in the studio. The final products of the studio work, including the community study and the design proposals, were presented at the final studio review on campus to an audience of community/focus-group representatives, members of the design team, and the faculty in the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at UW. A press release about the final review was distributed by the UW News and Information Office and was published by the Daily Journal of Commerce.

Common Ground and Contested Terrain

As we studied the neighborhood issues and listened to many members of the community including residents, business owners and staff of social organizations, we became aware of the often contesting views and competing claims on many issues in the community, from parking, housing and open space to the very name of the District itself. However, in analyzing the findings of the interviews and site survey, we are also convinced that the urban design process provides an unique opportunity to find common ground on many issues related to improving the conditions of the District. While there are disagreements on many issues, there is also a strong desire shared by all the people we interviewed to make the neighborhood a better place to live and work. In this report, we identified five main areas of concern as expressed by those who participated in the interviews. They include *street livability, community and place identities, balancing neighborhood and development needs, open/green space and development guidelines*. However, while these shared concerns offer opportunities for building consensus, we believe that given the District's uniqueness as a multi-ethnic neighborhood undergoing significant social and economic changes, it is important to engage in a substantive and constructive debate on many of the issues from housing and development to open

space. We believe that such a debate in an open community process is critical to finding creative and appropriate solutions to the area's many challenging issues.

Eleven Projects vs. One Master Plan

As originally conceived, a primary objective of the studio project (as well as the primary scope of the actual urban design plan) was to produce a master plan for the District that would include specific plans for intersections, streetscape and open spaces, as well as review of existing zoning ordinances and recommendations for pilot projects. However, upon an evaluation of the diverse needs of the neighborhood and in recognition of the social process needed to implement the design, we decided to take a decentralized approach of developing a series of smaller-scale proposals that target specific sites and issues within the District. Because of the relative scale and specificity of the location and issue, each of the proposals can be adopted by a community organization as a pilot project. The approach would allow the local organizations to become more engaged in the planning and design process. It would facilitate and encourage more diverse expressions of cultural and place identities in the District and closer attention to issues that are particularly important to a specific part of the community. In addition, in the context of the studio, the approach would allow for individual student creativity and avoid duplicating the work of the formal design team.

In a diverse neighborhood such as the Chinatown-International District, the process of creating meaningful places and a livable community requires more than a technical design exercise alone. It needs to involve a continually evolving process in building of social relations, articulation of shared goals and values, and mobilization of resources. While an urban design master plan would provide opportunities for debating and creating an overall vision of the neighborhood and serves as a useful step in obtaining outside resources for implementation, we believe that a decentralized approach as presented in this report would complement an urban design master plan by facilitating a broader community process, allowing the community members to take ownership, and make urban design a meaningful action in the process of community building and placemaking.