YOUNG HEARTS IN CHINATOWN 青心在唐人街 :
ACTIVATING PUBLIC SPACE IN VANCOUVER’S CHINATOWN

by

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B.E.S. (Honours), University of Waterloo, 2010

A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS (PLANNING)

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

School of Community and Regional Planning

We accept this project as conforming
to the required standard

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January 2016
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For all those with hearts in Chinatown, young and old.
Villages are made up of kinship networks and relations that reach across time and space. This project is multi-locational in its inception, implementation and documentation.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the villages that have made me feel welcome me and been a part of my learning in my last two years of living in beautiful Coast Salish territories - Musqueam, UBC’s School of Community and Regional Planning, Vancouver’s Chinatown, Vancouver’s Asian arts and cultural communities, Mount Pleasant, Dunbar, Richmond, Victoria’s Chinatown, and Edmonton-Treaty 6 and Metis Territory. Thank you for teaching me what community-based planning and design looks like in practice. Thank you to the people of these places!

This project was co-conceptualized and enacted by the passionate, good-hearted and committed core team of Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC) organizers: including co-founders Doris Chow, June Chow, and Claudia Li, with vital support along the way from Hua Foundation’s Nicole So and Kevin Huang, as well as our ever-expanding and diverse Chinatown youth “family”.

Thank you to Emily Lennon for in-house edits and tea-time. Thank you to Joe and Wai-Ling Lennon for room and board in the final days of work, and in all the years before.

Thank you to my classmates and friends at SCARP who have constantly inspired and supported me. Thank you to my supervisor, Maged Senbel, and my second reader, Andy Yan for providing insightful feedback. Thank you also to Aftab Erfan and Nora Angeles for additional guidance. Thank you to Camille Lefrancois for reviewing an early draft. Thank you to Justine Cheung for the loan of a laptop in the eleventh hour.

Thank you to those who came before, and those who have yet to be: for your persistence and existence.
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1. North End, Off-Ramp, Arthur Laing Bridge

Silence speaks for itself.

This city
where there is a city before a city
where bones and waterways sing under concrete and cobblestones and grass
where the steel slap clap of pigeon wings echoes off glass
where loneliness oxidizes iron in rain
where difference begets exclusion begets difference begets
disgust
begets displacement begets confusion begets rust.

2. East Georgia Street, 200 Block

Street where young, upright, hipsters
carrying paper coffee cups stride
by old, bent-backed, seniors
carrying plastic grocery bags, shuffling
by construction crews who pound the ground.

Like barnacles,
the grandmothers and grandfathers
cling to habitat,
some more immune to erosion
than others.

They haggle loud
enough that I can hear them through the walls.

3. Powell Street, 400 Block

There are many ways to erase community.

Remove baseball players from home base.
Replace.
Remove baseball diamond from park.
Replace.
Displace
its grandmothers.

Remove benches from park,
bricks from walls.
Replace.
Misplace names.
Forget their names.
Forget their names.
Forget their names.
Rename.
Assimilate.
Replace.
Name it something historic.

4. Ladner Bus Exchange

It’s in the little words.
In the: ands, but, before.
In the: all, is, ors.
In the: these blossoms are beautiful, but it’s only February.
In the: before there were planners there were planners.
In the: this city will be for you and you and you and you and
you and you.

In the: it’s not about belonging or not,
it’s what you do with it,
with your place in it all, that is.
Over the summer of 2015, the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown worked to activate public spaces in Vancouver’s Chinatown in an intergenerational, intercultural manner through a series of events: the “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Socials. On the surface, our goal was simple: to bring back Chinatown’s 熱鬧, or “yeet low” in Cantonese, – literally, “hot and noisy”, or liveliness and energy. Below the surface, we had more complex goals of being able to bring a youth voice to planning processes about the future of Chinatown, and building up political and social capacity of young generations of Chinese Canadians. We decided that our approach to activating public space had several criteria. It needed to be visible. It needed to be collaborative. It needed to demonstrate a cohesive, coordinated effort undertaken by younger generations, with the ability to involve many others. It needed to be intercultural and multilingual. It needed to foster relationships between young and old. It needed to be feasible to implement within a very short time frame. It needed to involve no to low hard costs. And it needed to be possible with the resources and skills we could readily bring to the table, amongst our team of organizers. By temporarily activating a public space, there is an opportunity to both share and transform the stories that we tell ourselves and each other in relation to it, and to create spaces of belonging.

Based on participant observation/action as a member of the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown, I describe the “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Socials as a case study of a youth-driven, grassroots process in public space activation. I discuss lessons learned and the implications for planning, urban design and community organizing.
At 6pm on June 20, 2015, Chinatown Memorial Square was transformed from a quiet plaza into the site of an all-ages mahjong party. And so began a summer-long series of experiments in public space activation in Vancouver’s Chinatown, undertaken by the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC). How did we define the problems, identify opportunities, design a concept, and begin to test and refine it?

1.1 LANGUAGE LESSON
1.2 APPROACH
1.3 WHY CHINATOWN?
1.4 FRAMEWORKS
1.5 OBSERVING SPACES
1.6 DEFINING THE OPPORTUNITIES
1.7 DESIGNING THE CONCEPT
The mural of Lao Tsu, the Chinese philosopher, at East Pender Street and Gore Avenue serves as both a wayfinding device and a community art piece.
1.1 LANGUAGE LESSON

熱鬧

[Cantonese: yitnaau; Mandarin: renao], literally means “hot and noisy” and is a measure of the liveliness of an atmosphere.

唐人街

[Cantonese: tong yun gai; Mandarin: tang ren jie], literally means “Tang People Street”, and is the Chinese name for what is referred to as Chinatown. Tang people is one way that Chinese people describe themselves, and refers to the Tang Dynasty in China.

[Image 64x82 to 193x398]

青心在唐人街

[Cantonese: qing sum jai tong yun gai; Mandarin: qing xin zai tang ren jie], literally, young/fresh/clear/green hearts in Chinatown, or “Young Hearts in Chinatown”. This is the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown’s Chinese name.

[Image 224x235 to 372x543]

[Image 381x92 to 562x381]
I approach this project as an individual stepping between multiple words. I am both a community organizer in the co-creation and ongoing life of a grassroots initiative, and a planning student. Jane Jacobs writes that the most important tactics, or habits of thought, for understanding cities are: to think about processes; to work inductively, reasoning from particulars to the general, rather than the reverse; to seek for “unaverage” clues involving very small quantities, which reveal the way larger and more “average” quantities are operating (Jacobs, 1961, p.574). This project is about praxis in planning: about seeking “unaverage” clues, creating, and reflecting.

How Did I Get Here?
In September 2013, I arrived as a visitor to Coast Salish territories to live and learn. I had previously been involved in projects focused on engaging youth in Edmonton’s Chinatown, and found myself drawn to similar questions here. Curious about the multi-ethnic community histories of Vancouver’s Chinatown, Hogan’s Alley, and Powell Street communities, I began spending time in the area. Through grassroots initiatives around the closure of the century-old Ho Sun Hing Print Shop at 259 East Georgia Street, and efforts to prevent the demolition of the Ming Sun-Uchida Building at 439 Powell Street, I stepped into the spaces and stories of a neighbourhood in transition. I found myself invited into a role of bearing witness to dark and intimate moments of grief, rage, frustration and uncertainty. Balancing it out was the warmth of a new connection, and expressions of mutual gratitude for the sharing and receiving of stories. I began to offer my time as a listener, documenter, communicator, advocate, media liaison, facilitator, networker, community organizer, artist, coordinator, and finally as a creator and project coordinator.

Participant Action Research
In May 2015, together with Doris and June Chow and Claudia Li, I co-founded the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC). We worked together, with an ever-expanding team, over the summer of 2015 to create experiments in public space activation: the “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Socials. In the course of completing this project, many of my would-be research questions were answered in practice through our organizing. As a planning student, I was curious about community-based planning and design, and cross-cultural planning.

Voice
Sometimes I write as “we” because I discuss a collective effort. At other times I use “I” because these are my own opinions. It is nearly impossible to set a complex, living thing down on paper in a linear format. This account is not exhaustive, nor does it represent the views of all involved. It is my attempt to highlight the threads that had the most impact on me. What follows is my version of a story, informed by collaborating with many. There are many stories.

Process
Both as an individual, and as a team, our design process can be illustrated by the figure below.

The Question
What lessons can be learned from a youth-driven, grassroots experiment in temporary public space activation in Vancouver’s Chinatown?
I like to eavesdrop in Vancouver’s Chinatown. Words that I frequently hear optimists (and non-Chinese friends or visitors) use to describe its changing face are: “improving”, “cleaning-up”, “revitalization”, and “edgy”. From pessimists (or realists) and residents, I hear: “gentrification”, “demise”, “death of”, “decline” and “displacement”. From Chinese speakers, I hear: “Chinese people street is becoming western people street”. From activists and historians, I hear: “nostalgia”, “memory”, “heritage”, “honour”, “fight”, “struggle”, “resistance”, “survival”. Words that I would like to hear more often are: “fun”, “alive”, “living”, “family-friendly” and “regenerative”.

Chinatown is vital because it is a living library. It is essential to our identities and well-being as Chinese Canadians of diverse heritages. It is as a hub of information. It is a living, breathing, memory map where we can go to access a historical narrative that validates our existence as people and communities. It is the haunt of nonagenarians and centenarians – living relics of another time and place – businessmen and women with stories about growing up on Keefer Street, of a time when Chinese could not become engineers or vote. It is a place where we can enact and adapt a collective culture. It is a sacred space for a cultural community that does not come together around a regular place of worship, as spiritual practices are diverse and often rooted in ancestor worship. It is a place where we can go to be immersed in our languages, in all their sound and colour, even as many of us worry about barely being able to speak, read or write our ancestral tongues.

It is a village. It is a place beloved by many Vancouverites for providing a taste of the “exotic” without the need to board a plane, making one feel all the more cultured and cosmopolitan. It is a place equally beloved for its ability to provide a taste of “home”, be it for a Musqueam elder, a professional from Toronto, tourists from Seattle, a student from Manila, or a family from Mexico. It is a sanctuary, habitat to Chinese-speaking seniors, working-class and low-income residents, newcomers and homeless.

Chinatown is a site of, and material for, cultural production. For proof of this, look to the many a book that draws inspiration from its people and streets. From Wayson Choy’s, *The Jade Peony*, to Paul Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain*, to the poetry of Rita Wong, Fred Wah, Evelyn Lau and Jim Wong Chu. It is the subject of Julia Kwan’s documentary *Everything Will Be*, and one of the sites of Loretta Sarah Todd’s action-series *Skye and Chang*. Look to the videos, infographics, projects and essays of the students who have come searching for stories: the BCIT, Langara and UBC journalism students; the Simon Fraser University urban studies students; the UBC Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies undergraduates; the School of Landscape Architecture and School of Community Planning students; and many others.
and Regional Planning design studios; the University of California Los Angeles and University of Toronto masters students; and the poetry of literature students. Look to the walking tours of the community historians who haunt its sidewalks.

It is a teleportation device and time machine. A place of expanding and contracting scales of time and space. The grandmothers in their floral prints who painstakingly and proudly manoeuvre the elevation on Keefer Street remind me of my own grandmother, an ocean away. It connects us to things bigger than ourselves. It reminds us that there are things we do not understand: the words of the grandmothers haggling over the price of eggs, what kinds of dried creatures float in the big glass jars in the herbalist, what life was like 100 years ago, what happens inside the society buildings with their recessed balconies and auspicious signage, or why Chinatown is changing so fast. And so, it keeps us humble. It keeps us curious. It keeps us learning.

Chinatown is a living testament to a different set of truths about urban planning and city-building: not all planning happens in the halls of power or the offices of architects, some of it happens through the persistence of hanging on and hoping for better. It offers an example of a hybrid urban space. One where old and new intermingle, where multi-ethnic immigrant communities and indigenous identities are present. For the future, it offers a living model of what a community shaped from a fusion of worldviews and cultural contexts can look like. It is an intercultural example, in a time of figuring out what planning for cultural difference can look like. It is a complete community, a walkable, transit-accessible, human-scaled neighbourhood that supports food security for the surrounding areas. These are the things we want in our neighbourhoods.

But Chinatown is losing its human scaled streetscape to taller buildings. The elders are passing on. Many second, third, fourth generation Chinese Canadians cannot speak the languages that would grant us access to essential knowledge. We don’t know how to celebrate our festivals. As young Chinese Canadians, we have important roles to play in Chinatown’s future, and Chinatown has an important role to play in our futures, and the future of publicly practiced collective culture. So, what can we do about it? What can you do about it?
In exploring the process of designing a youth-driven, grassroots experiment in temporary public space activation, I learned that we had to activate three intersecting kinds of public space: 1) the concrete, material space of Vancouver’s Chinatown, 2) the social space of networks and community-building, and 3) the abstract, conceived narrative space that exists in the public imagination, both online and in real life.

The Production of Public Spaces

A good public space should be designed and organized to foster social interactions and shared meanings. It requires understandings of social space as “places of imagination, constitutive of identity, and often as sacred (including representing existential threat or survival)” (McEvoy-Levy, 2012, p.2). According to human geographer Henri Lefebvre, the “trialectics of space” recognizes that relationships between space and the social take many forms. Social space is a result of the contradiction of concrete, perceived space (or material spaces) and the abstract, conceived space (or mental spaces). New, lived spaces reflect both the concrete and the abstract by balancing the trialectics of society, history and geography (Teelucksingh, 2006, p.8). Feminist geographers such as Massey (1994) examine the relationship between space and issues of agency and subjectivity, including race, gender and class identities (Teelucksingh, 2006, p.9). James Rojas, in the context of the Latino communities in Los Angeles, argues that space is not built, rather it is enacted, and that “the identity of the place is created through the cultural related behavior patterns of the residents” and that “the enacted environment is made up of individual actions that are ephemeral but are nevertheless part of a persistent process” (Rojas, 1993). Borja and Muxi, in a study of Barcelona’s Las Ramblas areas say that the planning, design and realization (creation and renovation) of urban public spaces have played and continue to play a fundamental role as elements that enhance urban social interaction, contributing to the residents’ quality of life and to the fight against social exclusion based on age and gender (Borja and Muxi, 2001).
In the spring of 2013 I began to connect with number of young Chinatown organizers. We shared a love of Vancouver’s Chinatown neighbourhood, identified as Chinese Canadian (with a diversity of birthplaces, mother tongues, and ancestries), and were involved with a number of different Chinatown-based organizations. As individuals, we were putting our hearts and energy into the community, but were feeling discouraged by the uphill battles we often encountered for various reasons. We shared a desire to collaborate. In person, and over email, we exchanged observations, strategies and ideas about Chinatown. Through an organic process of discussing, observing, and participating in our respective organizations and commitments, we were able to narrow down and define several questions that we would focus our energies on. These questions can be examined as belonging to the realms of material space, social space, and narrative space.

A Question of Material Space
Over the summer of 2015, due to a series of waterworks and road repair projects on Pender and Gore Streets and building construction and renovation projects, the flow of pedestrian and vehicle traffic throughout Chinatown was disrupted, and the quality of public space and activity negatively impacted. There was a lack of public space programming planned for the summer. The absence of the Chinatown Night Market, which had been cancelled in 2014 after a 20-year run, was keenly felt. The face and scale of the built environment was changing with the closing of long-time businesses, opening of new ones, and construction of new condominium developments. How could we activate and enliven Chinatown’s public spaces?

A Question of Social Space
To date, City of Vancouver Chinatown planning processes have had limited youth input. While the Chinatown Vision Directions (2002), Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan (2012), and Chinatown Economic Revitalization Strategy (2012) do contain a handful of youth-oriented recommendations, little progress has been made on implementing them. Chinatown’s traditional and cultural organizations have limited opportunities for young people to step into leadership roles. Younger generations feel that we have little voice when it comes to making decisions about Chinatown. We are concerned about the future of the neighbourhood, yet have few recognized formal or informal channels through which to organize and contribute. How, as younger generations, could we contribute to the future of Chinatown, and strengthen our capacity for leadership and civic engagement?

A Question of Narrative Space
Since Chinese first began migrating to the Pacific Northwest, negative narratives have been associated with Chinese Canadian people and the urban spaces and places where they have carried out their daily activities. How could we transform the negative stories about Chinatown and Chinese Canadians that are rooted in government-sanctioned exclusion and racism, to stories of resilience and belonging?
Once we had established that we were united by shared values and that there were common problems we could work together on solving, the next step was to seek feedback from those with more experience. We sought input from a wide variety of people including Chinatown researchers, community elders, current and former activists, and current and former Chinatown planners. We decided that we needed to do more than talk about our vision as young people. We needed to demonstrate and enact our ideas. We saw several opportunities to do something and decided that we would:

1. Identify actionable parts of the Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan and Chinatown Vision Directions that we could implement with the resources and skills we had immediately available to us. Our primary interest was in Section 7: Youth Connection and Community Development. Secondarily, we decided to address aspects of Section 3: Public Realm Improvements and Section 11: A Hub of Social and Cultural Activities.
2. Activate public space in Chinatown in an intergenerational and intercultural manner.
3. Formalize a loose network of engaged youth and unite as a publicly established entity with an on-line and in-real-life presence. This would allow individuals to collaborate more easily across our existing silos.
4. Contribute our voices and visions to the story of Chinatown’s future.

“For Chinatown to continue to remain relevant in a more multicultural Vancouver, it must strive to connect to younger generations and to reach out to people of all backgrounds. To remain economically competitive, it must do so without losing its culture and heritage - assets that define its identity and set it apart from other neighbourhoods”.

One of the reasons I first got involved in Chinatown organizing was because I heard Chinatown leaders in both Edmonton and Vancouver ask over and over again, “how can we engage younger generations?”. The question of succession and how to foster intergenerational involvement in the neighbourhood is an ongoing one. I also felt that Chinatown was a crucial space for understanding Chinese Canadian and Canadian history, culture, and identity. It was exciting to meet others who shared these interests, and combine our creative energies. Collectively, we came up with a concept.

**The Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC)**
We would pull together the young people doing work in, for, and with Chinatown, and create a network called the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC). We would support each other in the work we were doing and strive to collaborate where possible. We would establish ourselves as a point of contact for other youth who wanted to get engaged with, or informed about, Chinatown happenings. We decided to describe ourselves as “a network of youth doing awesome stuff in, for, and with Chinatown”. YCC’s Chinese name, 青心在唐人街, means: “young/clear hearts in Chinatown”.

**Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Socials**
Over the summer 2015, YCC would organize a series of public events to reactivate Chinatown’s spaces and places, in intergenerational and collaborative ways. We would bring back a “hot and noisy” (熱鬧) atmosphere to Chinatown. On June 20, 2015, we would launch the first of four summer “Chinatown Mahjong Socials”: an all-ages, family-friendly outdoor mahjong party.

**About Mahjong**
If you walk around Vancouver’s Chinatown, or a Chinatown in any city, you will hear the clackety clack of mahjong tiles being shuffled. Mahjong is typically played on a hard surface, with 4 players seated around a square board. Mahjong is a popular game familiar to most Chinese families, most often associated with Hong Kong and China, but played in Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and enjoyed by many. In recent Vancouver Chinatown history, outdoor mahjong tournaments were tested in 2013, during the last summer of the Chinatown Night Market, when event organizers worked with the UBC Mahjong Club to host a mahjong night. In 2014, the art gallery Centre A and artist Yule Ken Lum set up a “One Man Nightmarket” with one mahjong table in Chinatown Memorial Square.
In order to do public space activation in ways that we felt were relevant to Chinatown’s material, social and narrative spaces, YCC had to learn to navigate many contexts. We needed to learn about the history of Chinatown and Chinese Canadians in order to understand the informal community planning context. We needed to learn to navigate the web of social and political relationships that our work would sit within. We needed to familiarize ourselves with Chinatown urban planning history and policies in order to understand the formal, institutional contexts. We had to learn about the site of our public space activation activities - Chinatown Memorial Square – and what permits or permissions were required on order for us to be there...
“As the Chinese-Canadian community has developed, Chinatown has come to mean different things to different people. It is a place where Chinese-Canadians come to shop for Chinese goods, eat Chinese food, see Chinese movies, learn Chinese language, or meet their friends and relatives at family gatherings, banquets, weddings, and cultural events” (1979, Introducing the Chinese Cultural Centre. Brochure).

The maps and images and images above reflect some of the different borders, definitions and spaces of Vancouver’s Chinatown.
Locally, regionally and globally, Chinatowns have been the subject of planning, geography, history, and legal research over the last several decades, as well as the subject and site of many artistic interventions and community advocacy efforts. There are different ways that Chinatowns are understand by planning practice and theory.

Years of past research on traditional Chinatowns were based on the assumption that Chinatowns were homogeneous ethnic enclaves (Luk and Phan, 2005). In this view, Chinatown is a bounded territory and “ethnic enclave”. This tends to be the prevalent framework through which urban design and planning practice operates. The Chicago School ecological model portrays the city as an ecology or mosaic of bounded territories, in which ethnic enclaves are self-sufficient “little worlds” with clear boundaries (Suttles, 1968; Castells, 1989, in Abramson, Manzo and Hou, 2006). “Urban design and planning practice continues to be influenced by the territorial view of ethnic landscapes. Clearly defined neighbourhoods are not only more easily studied and planned for (Jones, 1990, in Abramson, Manzo and Hou, 2006), they are also more easily administered. Celebration of diverse cultural and historic identities is also more easily advocated when these identities can be correlated with “complete” neighbourhoods (Greinacher, 1998; Sen, 2000, in Abramson, Manzo and Hou, 2006). Even the way that Chinatown pressures are understood tends to be within this idea of Chinatown as a bounded territory. For example, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) embarked on a three-city land-use study of Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. They found that in each city, “local governments drove areas of accelerated gentrification and have encouraged and assisted the gutting of Chinatowns” (AALDEF, 2013, p. 2). The approach of examining land-use works within the idea of Chinatown as a bounded territory.

Chinatown is also defined along socially constructed borders. Anderson describes Vancouver’s Chinatown as originating and existing through push and pull factors, and as being a product of “white man’s ideas about the Orient” (Anderson, 1987). “Chinatown was reviled as Vancouver’s public nuisance, promoted in the mid-1930s as its “Little Corner of the Far East,” reconstructed in the 1950s and 1960s as a “slum,” and finally under the aegis of multiculturalism courted by the state in the 1970s precisely for its perceived “Chineseness” (Anderson, 1987). Socially constructed borders of ‘belonging’ and ‘not-belonging’ can also frame a spatial understanding of a neighbourhood. Chinatowns’ demographic changes are often described as shifting along race and class lines, as in the AALDEF study, which says: “government policies have changed these traditionally working class, Asian, family household neighborhoods into communities that are now composed...
of more affluent, White, and non-family households” (AALDEF, 2013, p. 2).

In another view, Chinatown is seen as a translocal network in a “space of flows”. Chinatown represents a complex web of relationships, and cities are “spaces of flows” in a “network society” (Abramson, Manzo and Hou, 2006). The idea that these social networks are valuable is put forward by Robert Putnam’s concept of social capital, which he defines as social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. "The core insight of this approach is extremely simple: like tools (physical capital) and training (human capital), social networks have value. Networks have value, first, to people who are in the networks…. What makes social networks even more interesting, however, is that they also have implications for bystanders…. In the language of economics, social networks often have powerful externalities” (Putnam, 2007, p.137-138). Chinatown can also be understood as where Chinese Canadians are, and as Paul Yee writes, “Today Vancouver’s Chinese Canadians can best be seen as a community of communities. They are a monolithic unit only to outsiders who persist in viewing all Chinese Canadians as the same (Yee, 1988, p.166).

In a report discussing issues of common concern among nine American Chinatowns in 1992, Hum writes: “Chinatown represents a complex network of institutional supports and relationships which sustain community life, often in the face of external antagonistic forces” (Hum, 1992, p.8). Hum describes Chinatowns as having five distinct evolutionary phases: a) formation, b) isolation, c) family society, d) revitalization, and e) diversity”. Community-based organizations have operated on the premise that the Chinatown community is worthy of preservation and improvement. This commitment is premised on a definition of Chinatown which extends beyond its bricks and mortar and role as an ethnic marketplace (Hum, 1992).

More recently, some argue that multiple ethnicities can coexist in an enclave (Luk and Phan, 2005). Luk and Phan describe the Vietnamization process in Toronto’s Chinatown West. Chinatown can be conceived of as a “multiethnic space”, as in Abramson, Manzo and Hou’s 2006 case study of Seattle’s historic Chinatown-International District. They found that successful planning in multi-ethnic communities that allows for multiple cultural identities to be acknowledged and represented without any one group’s history or identity being undermined or sacrificed should do three things. Firstly, planning should explicitly recognize the various cultural identities within the community. Secondly, planning should account for differences between resident and non-resident stakeholders. Finally, planning in multi-ethnic communities should focus design attention on accentuating community “cores” rather than on defining boundaries of territories. This last point of accentuating community “cores” is key to considering public space activation in Chinatowns.
For the purposes of this case study, “Chinatown” is considered to be the Chinatown Plan Area within the City of Vancouver, as defined in the 2012 Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan. It is a centrally located, mixed-use neighbourhood, covering approximately 10 blocks, or a total area of 45 acres. Downtown lies to its west, the residential and historic Strathcona neighbourhood to its east, Gastown and the port to its north, and the Georgia Street Viaduct to its south. It is comprised of the zoning districts of Historia Area-1 (HA-1) and Historic Area-1A (HA-1A), as well as four Comprehensive Development (CD-1) zoning districts. The Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan recognizes that Chinatown’s significance extends beyond the 10 blocks of its physical boundaries.

The relevant planning documents are the HA-1 and HA-1A Districts Schedule in Vancouver’s Zoning and Development Bylaw, the Chinatown Vision Directions (2002), the Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan and Economic Revitalization Strategy (2012), the Chinatown HA-1 Design Guidelines and the Chinatown HA-1A Design Guidelines (2011), the Rezoning Policy for Chinatown South (2011), and the Downtown Eastside Local Area Plan (2014). The intent of the Historic Area-1 (HA-1) and Historic Area-1A (HA-1A) district schedule in Vancouver’s Zoning and Development Bylaw is to “encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of the significant early buildings of Chinatown, while recognizing that the evolving activities that make this district an asset to the city need to be accommodated contextually” (City of Vancouver HA-1 and HA-1A Zoning and Development By-law 1 April 2013). The Chinatown HA-1 Design Guidelines and Chinatown HA-1A Design Guidelines are used in conjunction with the respective zoning districts.

The area within HA-1 is a National Historic Site. In 2010, the 3 blocks covering Pender Street from Gore Avenue to Taylor Street, were designated as a National Historic Site of Canada by Parks Canada. The area includes 24 buildings listed on Vancouver’s Heritage Registrar. The National Historic Site designation recognizes Chinatown’s characteristic elements as physical, social and cultural: “Its physical fabric, its development as a self-segregated enclave, due in part to racially motivated hostility elsewhere in the city prior to the Second World War, and its ongoing uses reflect the many contributions and struggles of Chinese Canadians throughout most of their history in this country (Parks Canada, 2012). The HA-1A Zoning District was established in 1994, to encourage more development of low to mid-rise scale in Chinatown South, where fewer heritage buildings are located.
2.3 THE HISTORIC AREA HEIGHT REVIEW (HAHR)

In 2011, Council approved the final implementation of the Historic Area Height Review for the Chinatown Historic Area (HA-1 and HA-1A zones), which recommended the Rezoning Policy for Chinatown South (HA-1A). In order to “maintain an appropriate scale” the policy does not apply to HA-1A. The intention of the policy is to “support economic revitalization and residential intensification of Chinatown (HA-1 and HA-1A) as well as to support innovative heritage, cultural and affordable and social housing projects in the Chinatown area”. Under the Rezoning Policy, sites in HA-1A (Chinatown South) may be rezoned to permit additional height beyond the provisions in the Zoning and Development Bylaw. The original zoning by-law permitted heights of 50-65 feet for HA-1, and 70-90 feet for HA-1A. The HAHR and Rezoning Policy amended the height limits in HA-1 to 50-75 feet and the height limits that could be considered for rezonings in HA-1A (Chinatown South) to a maximum of 120 feet. It also created a micro-district in the Main Street Sub-area where a maximum of 150 feet is allowed, puncturing the continuity of the historic area zone. There is no floor area density provision in the HA-1 and HA-1A Districts Schedule, therefore no real guidelines for appropriate massing. There are urban design provisions concerning the composition of facades and setbacks to achieve a “sawtooth building heights” and an “asymmetrical streetwall character”.
2.3 HISTORICAL DEFINITIONS OF CHINATOWN

Chinatown is “a place that tells the history with its physical environment, a place that serves the needs of residents, youth and visitors, and a hub of commercial, social and cultural activities.”

Vancouver Chinatown Vision Directions, 2002

In the mid-nineteenth century, before Vancouver was incorporated as a city, merchants, peasants and labourers from southern China’s Guangdong province began migrating between the sub-tropical, mountain-backed port city of Guangzhou (Canton), at the mouth of the Pearl River, and the mountain-ringed, temperate rainforest and swamp-land between inlet and river, in (British Columbia). They came via California at first, then later directly from China, following the gold-rush trail, working the mining sites that whites had abandoned. Later, they filled other gaps in the frontier economy: operating laundries, restaurants and vegetable farms. They worked alongside First Nations and Japanese Canadians in fish canneries. Between 1881 and 1885, with the construction of the British Columbia section of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) another wave of 17,000 Chinese migrated, many worked on the railway (Yee, 1988, p. 17). When the CPR was completed in 1885, some Chinese remained in the area around Burrard Inlet, and Saltwater City, or Hahm-Sui-Fau sprang up. A few years later, Chinatown sprang up on the shores of False Creek, then up to Pender Street, along Carall (Yee, 1988, p. 31).

“Chinatown” was first formally identified as a geographic area by Vancouver City Council in the mid-1890s, when “in a significant act of neighbourhood definition Council formally designated “Chinatown” as an official entity in the medical health officer rounds and health committee reports (see CVA, Health Committee Minutes, 1899-1906). Along with water, sewage, scavenging, infections disease, slaughter houses, and pig ranches, Chinatown was listed as a separate category and appointed “a special officer to supervise [it] under the bylaws” (CVA, In Correspondence, Vol.17, November 26, 1990: 13292, in Anderson, 1987, p. 11).

Over the years, although Vancouver’s municipal charter did not historically grant authority to Council to discriminate against particular nationalities or individuals (for example, by denying them business licenses), Vancouver decision-makers have found creative ways to circumvent this (Anderson, 1987) including: framing Chinatown as a public health and safety hazard, a site of immorality, and a slum; a 1893 bylaw that prohibited washhouses and laundries (almost exclusively owned by Chinese merchants) from being erected outside specified spatial limits ” (CVA, Bylaws, 1893, in Anderson, 1987); a 1968 health bylaw that came with a campaign to shut down Chinatown’s BBQ meat businesses (Wai, 1998); and urban renewal and freeway plans that were to be routed through Strathcona and Chinatown. In response, Chinatown has long been a site of community organizing and political engagement. In recent years Chinatown has become the site of revitalization and heritage efforts.

There are Chinatowns all over the world, first settled by early migrants from southern China. In Canada, Chinese have settled across the country.
Early Chinatown Days*

- **1886** - Vancouver’s charter specifically barred Chinese and indigenous peoples from voting in Vancouver’s first municipal election.
- **1893** - City Hall proclaimed that wash-houses could only be built in Chinatown, on Pender Street between Carall and Columbia.
- **1896** - 6,000 Chinese greeted China’s visiting statesman Li Hung Chang, asking him to negotiate a reduction in the $50 head tax paid by Chinese to gain entry into Canada.
- **1906** - the Sai Wah Tong, the Chinese Laundry Association was formed. The 90-member union advocated for a thirteen-hour workday with two hours for meals and no Sunday labour.
- **Late 1910s** - white farmers in BC launched a campaign to prevent Chinese from owning or leasing farmland. Storekeepers, supported by the Retail Merchants Association, the Vancouver Board of Trade, and local newspapers, protested the movement of Chinese grocers into white neighbourhoods and the longer working hours they put in. Continual police raids on gambling, drugs, and liquor in Chinatown.
- **1915** – City Hall levied high fees against Chinese pedlars.
- **1921** - the Vancouver Asiatic Exclusion League was formed, with a goal of ending Asian immigration into Canada.
- **1921** - Vancouver General Hospital dropped its discriminatory policy of diverting all Chinese patients to the basement.
- **July 1, 1923** – Pressured by BC politicians, the new federal Chinese Immigration Act came into effect. Only four kinds of Chinese immigrants were allowed – diplomats, children born in Canada, students, and merchants. In response, Chinese Canadians called July 1st Humiliation Day and refused to join Dominion Day activities.


Recent Chinatown Urban Planning Decisions

- **2002** - Council approves the Chinatown Vision Directions.
- **2003** - Council approves heritage incentives for Gastown and Chinatown, including the Heritage Façade Rehabilitation Program and the Heritage Building Rehabilitation Program.
- **2005** - Council approves a three-year work program to develop and implement a Chinatown Community Plan as a part of the Chinatown Revitalization Program.
- **2009** - HA-1A District Schedule is created.
- **2008-2011** - The Historic Area Height Review is conducted relating to the Chinatown Historic Area (HA-1 and HA-1A zones).
- **2010** - As part of the Historic Area Height Review, Council directs staff to engage the Vancouver Economic Commission, Vancouver Chinatown Business Improvement Association, Vancouver Chinatown Merchants Association and other organizations in the creation of an Economic Revitalization Strategy for Chinatown.
- **2011** - Council approves the Chinatown HA-1A Design Guidelines.
- **2011** - Council approves the final implementation of the Historic Area Height Review and the Rezoning Policy for Chinatown South (HA-1A).
- **2012** - The Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan is developed.
- **2012** - The Chinatown Economic Revitalization Action Strategy is developed.
- **2014** - Council approves the DTES Local Area Plan, Rezoning Policy, Micro Dwelling Unit Policies and Guidelines.
- **2014** - The Downtown Eastside Social Impact Assessment report is produced.
- **2014** - Council approves the Chinese Society Buildings Matching Grant Program.
2.4 YOUTH IN CHINATOWN PLANS

Chinatown Vision Directions (City of Vancouver, 2002)*
Section 7: Improve Youth Connection and Community Development

7.1. Improve co-ordination of youth initiatives in Chinatown.
7.2. Encourage youth to establish recreational / educational programs and services to attract young people, especially those of Chinese and Asian descent.
7.3. Encourage community involvement and leadership development of youth.
7.4. Establish formal relationships with educational institutions.
7.5. Develop succession plans for Chinatown organizations.
7.6. Encourage youth-oriented retail services

*See Appendix for the complete Chinatown Vision Directions.

To date, City of Vancouver Chinatown planning processes have had limited youth input. While the Chinatown Vision Directions (2002), Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan (2012), and Chinatown Economic Revitalization Strategy (2012) do contain a handful of youth-oriented recommendations, little progress has been made on implementing them.

Youth are represented in the 2002 Chinatown Vision Directions, Section 7: Youth Connection and Community Development. In 2006, acting on these directions, the City of Vancouver supported several youth-oriented events in Chinatown. One of these was ChinatownNext, a youth subcommittee of the VCRC, worked with existing Chinatown organizations to improve their programming and attract younger people to the Chinatown Festival and the Chinatown Night Market (Chen-Adams, Ma, 2006). The 2012 Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan identifies the lack of youth presence in Chinatown as a problem: “The Chinatown community, through the planning process, identified a perception that the area is not for the young. Drawing youth back to the community will help revitalize the community and develop the next generation of leaders.” Formal efforts to develop youth programs focusing on leadership training and volunteerism, as documented in the plan include: work by the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee (VCRC), S.U.C.C.E.S.S., the Chinese Cultural Centre and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden Society (Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan, 2012, p.44). Youth-oriented programming is also mentioned as a component of heritage and cultural promotion. The Chinatown Economic Revitalization Strategy recognizes that the revitalization of Chinatown as a historic neighbourhood cannot happen without youth leadership development. One of the proposed actions for Strategy 2: Historic Neighbourhood Revitalization is “Leadership Development: Identify opportunities to support youth leadership and capacity development in local organizations”, working with Parks Board, Neighbourhood Houses, SUCCESS and Benevolent Societies (Chinatown Economic Revitalization Action Strategy, 2012, p.51). The Chinatown Marketing Plan (2003) identifies the importance of attracting four emerging client groups: local residents and workers; local visitors; tourists; and, youth and seniors (Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan, 2012, p.45).
Let your feet take you to Chinatown,
to the bakery recommended to your mother by the owner of a Chinese bookshop.
Stare at the many flavors of moon cakes through the glass case as customers jostle you, speaking Mandarin and Cantonese.
Try to decipher the price-tags.
Ask for two moon cakes. You can’t eat a whole box alone.
When asked if it’s a gift, say, oh no, it’s just for you. No need to wrap it. They don’t take debit, you have no cash.
Wander the surrounding blocks until you find an ATM.
Withdraw money. With gratitude.

Return.
The server will ask if you speak Cantonese.
You wonder if it’s because you are wearing the jade pendant your grandmother gave you because you wanted to see what it would feel like to be visibly Chinese.
It seems to be working.
You respond, siu siu, gong siu siu. I speak a little.
She calls you lang lui, pretty girl, says you are ho lek, very clever.
She is impressed that you cho dan che, rode your bike.
Take the moon cakes, stuff them into your backpack, carry on with your errands.

Let your feet take you to the neighbourhood greasy spoon with all day breakfasts and authentic Xi-an cuisine.
Eat lunch.
Wish the owners a zhong qiu jie kwai le, happy mid-autumn festival.
Let your feet take you grocery shopping, to the corner grocer.
They have pomelos dressed in red ribbons.
Buy one.
Don’t stop to ask yourself how you will eat it all by yourself.
Stuff it in your backpack, and carry on with your errands.

Ask a friend if she wants to eat moon cakes with you.
She’s busy.
Wonder how you will eat one alone.
They’re too sweet.

Return,
to your house.

Ask the internet to teach you your traditions.
It will tell you that tonight is the autumnal equinox, the harvest moon.
A moon bright enough to harvest by.
That this is the second most important Chinese festival.
That moon cakes and round fruit symbolize completeness and unity.
That this festival is about gathering with family, giving thanks for the harvest, and praying.
Together.

Follow a Facebook link about the origins of the festival.
The story of the woman who swallowed the elixir of immortality and flew up to the moon to become a goddess.
You had forgotten, but now you recall your mother telling you this story when you were a child, can hear her voice.
You learn that fruit and moon cakes must be laid out for the Earth God and the Moon Goddess and that people should share moon cakes, one slice for each member of a family.
But you are alone right now.
And you have no incense.
You look out your bedroom window.
The moon is bright and round.

Let your feet take you to the kitchen.
Take dragon eyeballs (long an), three candles, and the small moon cake your cousin brought you from Hong Kong.
Place on a tray.

Let your feet take you outside, into your backyard.
Light the candles.
Lift your head and look up at the bright moon.
Lower your head and think about home, wherever that is.

Lift your head, and wonder how to pray.
Think of heaven and earth.
Break the moon cake in half.
Eat. Tell yourself you should enjoy it.
Once we had situated ourselves within Chinatown’s historical, social and planning contexts, we translated this knowledge into action. On June 20, 2015, we launched the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC) with our first “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Social”, an all-ages, family-friendly outdoor mahjong party at Chinatown Memorial Plaza. In parallel to this, we launched a website, and created a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This first event was meant to be a pilot. We received so much positive feedback from the community, that we had no choice but to organize three more events: on July 11, August 15 and September 12, 2015.

So, what were the elements that went into the YCC’s experiments in public space activation?

3.1 MATERIAL SPACE: PROTOTYPING
3.2 MATERIAL SPACE: SITE CONTEXT
3.3 SOCIAL SPACE: ASSEMBLING A TEAM
3.4 SOCIAL SPACE: ACTIVITIES FOR STAYING
3.5 NARRATIVE SPACE: COMMUNICATIONS
The banner was created by local artist Yule Ken Lum for YCC’s July 11 “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Social.”
I n exploring the process of designing a youth-driven, grassroots experiment in temporary public space activation, I learned that we had to activate three intersecting kinds of public space: 1) the concrete, material space of Vancouver’s Chinatown, 2) the social space of networks and community-building, and 3) the abstract, conceived narrative space that exists in the public imagination, both online and in real life. I use these three kinds of public space to organize some of the key components of the approach YCC took to activating public space through the 2015 “Hot and Noisy Chinatown Mahjong Social” summer series. As such, we learned that the process of planning is not a straight path: it requires trial and error, patience, and learning.

We decided that our approach to activating public space in Chinatown had several criteria. It needed to be visible. It needed to be collaborative. It needed to demonstrate a cohesive, coordinated effort undertaken by younger generations, with the ability to involve many others. It needed to be intercultural and multilingual. It needed to be intergenerational and foster relationships between young and old. It needed to be feasible to implement within a very short time frame. It needed to involve no to low hard costs. And it needed to be possible with the resources and skills we could readily bring to the table, amongst our team of organizers.

Originally, we had planned to organize one event per month, each time activating a different public space in Chinatown, and testing out a different activity. Our ideas included: film nights, activating Chinatown’s alleyways, dumpling dinners, street basketball, and walking tours. However, the first “Hot and Noisy Chinatown Mahjong Social” was met with so much enthusiasm, including demands that we make it a weekly event, that we decided to stick with it. We also realized that if we continued to experiment with the same model, of organizing mahjong and games activities, in the same site, we would be able to continue to experiment, improve, and gradually introduce other layers of programming.

In the process of organizing the “Hot and Noisy Chinatown Mahjong Social” summer series, we uncovered some real community needs: a craving for regular social activity in a central, accessible public space, a desire among other young people to express their cultural identities and the everyday family activities associated with them, and a love for Chinatown shared by people of all walks of life.
For the summer of 2015, the main focus of our public space activation was been Chinatown Memorial Square. However, we also brought mahjong to several spaces in and around the Chinatown neighbourhood. This has allowed us to test how effective different spaces are, and has also allowed us to build relationships of mutual support and benefit with those we collaborate with.

**Test 1: Gauging Interest**
We first tested the idea of using mahjong to engage people in relation to Chinatown by setting up in front of a film screening of Julia Kwan’s film, *Everything Will Be*, at the SFU Goldcorp Centre for the Arts. At this site, we recruited some of our first volunteers, and tested interest in our concept among a wider audience of people interested in Chinatown issues.

**Test 2: On Site at Chinatown Memorial Square**
Next, on a weeknight in June, we brought two mahjong tables and 6 people to Chinatown Memorial Square and played a round of mahjong before getting into the business of our meeting. We found that it was easy to attract passersby, who would approach and engage in conversation. Passersby were both neighbourhood residents and visitors. They expressed interest in having regular activities in the space, as well as having a chance to learn and play mahjong.

**Ongoing Tests**
In support of one of our collaborating organizations, Youth for Chinese Seniors, we brought mahjong tables and tiles to an event for seniors and youth at Crab Park on July 4, 2015. We did an impromptu test of a rain-out location when rain threatened our July event. We re-located to Chinatown Plaza Mall and found it to be an excellent, semi-public indoor space. We also facilitated mahjong play at the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Garden for their Mid-Autumn Moon Festival on September 27.

**Test 3: Parking Stall Pop-Up**
We activated two parking stalls on East Georgia Street, where we collaborated with Centre A and Treasure Green Tea to organize a smaller pop-up event for the City of Vancouver’s Patio Day on August 3. Here, we learned that a mid-afternoon activity at a different location attracts a different crowd. Many passersby lived, worked, visited or shopped on East Georgia Street.
“Public Open Spaces: Chinatown Memorial Square is the primary public open space in HA-1A. The Square accommodates activities from passive recreation, community events, festivals to memorial services. Buildings flanking Chinatown Memorial Square should include uses that offer general pedestrian interest.” (Chinatown HA-1A Design Guidelines, 2011, City of Vancouver, p.3).

Chinatown Memorial Square is situated at the intersection of Columbia Street and Keefer Street. It falls within Chinatown’s Historic Area-1A Zoning District, and borders on Chinatown’s Historic Area-1 Zoning District, within the Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan Area. It is opposite the Chinatown Plaza Parkade, the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Park and Garden, and the Chinese Cultural Centre, and kitty-corner to the Andy Livingstone Sports Fields.

**Site Selection**

We had several criteria that led us to select Chinatown Memorial Square as our first site, and then to continue to plan for the space. Symbolically, it is located in the heart of Chinatown. Secondly, it is highly visible, has an open location, and flexible design (Chen-Adams and Ma 2006, p.8). Thirdly, it has high connectivity, is physically accessible to seniors and is close to a variety of transit options, and parking. Most importantly, it is a public space. There is no fee to use it, and no permits or permissions were required. We are fortunate to have access to such an ideal space at the heart of Chinatown.

**Site Uses**

On an ordinary day, Chinatown Memorial Square is not a lively space. The main source of activity is seniors lining up to board the casino-bound bus. Tourists will wander through, maps in hand. Weekend evenings, young professionals may stroll by on their way to and from Chinatown or Gastown restaurants. Neighbourhood residents may stop and rest on a bench for a while. Occasionally, a tour group will come through on foot, or by bike, and stop at the foot of the sculpture to learn its story.

For special events, there are several times of year when
the square is used. Community members join Chinese Canadian war veterans to observe Remembrance Day ceremonies. In August, the Chinatown Business Improvement Association organizes the Chinatown Festival, which is centred around Chinatown Memorial Square and the corner of Keefer and Columbia. Prior to 2013, the Chinatown Night Market enlivened Keefer Street on weekend evenings throughout the summer months, stretching down Keefer Street, between Main and Columbia Streets, and spilling into the square.

The Creation of Chinatown Memorial Square
Since time immemorial, this has been the territories of the Coast Salish peoples. The waters of False Creek used to run right up to the intersection of Keefer and Columbia streets. “There were boats tied up there as late as 1971” (John Atkin, 2014). Formerly known as the Keefer Triangle, the square was created in 1995 in conjunction with the construction of the Chinatown Parkade and the diversion of Keefer Street to its current alignment, following the construction of Keefer Place. The intention of the design was to provide “an attractive pedestrian-friendly public space close to the Chinatown Plaza Parkade, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Park and Garden, Chinatown Museum and Chinese Cultural Centre. In 1997, a design for a flexible, hard-surfaced, treed public open space was developed by Chinatown merchants, property owners, City staff and consultants, with the intention that a tourist kiosk, public art project, commemorative monument or other projects be incorporated into the plaza’s flexible design” (Au, W., Edelson, N. July 23, 2001). Initially, this design manifested as grass and several benches. In 2002, in the spirit of beautifying Chinatown, a public art competition was conducted by a committee and selection panel, with a budget of $100,000 from City Council. The original design was rejected for being too expensive. Instead, a proposal came forward to install a sculpture to commemorate the historical contributions made by Chinese veterans and rail workers.

Future
Upgrades are proposed to the site as part of a development proposal put forward for the 105 Keefer/544 Colombia Site. What will future development mean for shadowing, pedestrian and vehicle traffic, site-lines? What will the removal of the Georgia Street Viaduct mean for the connectivity and activity in this site? What could the possibility of future flooding events mean for this site situated in a tidal mudflat?
青心在唐人街, means: “young/clear hearts in Chinatown”. It is the Chinese name we chose for the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC). We describe ourselves as a network of youth doing awesome stuff in, for, and with Chinatown. We did not begin with much financial or political capital: we had no funding, and no formal organizational status. What we did have was social and cultural capital: a diversity of skills, networks, and relationships with both Chinatown-based organizations. Some of us were members of clan and society associations, some of us were staff or board members with non-profit community and arts organizations. What we shared was a desire to do something to dispel feelings of frustration and sadness that we all felt about the changes in Chinatown, a desire to share our perspectives as youth, and a desire to contribute to Chinatown’s continued existence as a healthy, lively neighbourhood.

On arriving at Chinatown Memorial Square, we would sweep and pick-up trash. We would then unload mahjong tables, mahjong tile sets, folding chairs, plastic stools, and decorations and proceed to set-up. In under an hour, we transformed a little-loved plaza into a colourful, festive space. Assembling a team was both necessary for success, and a success in itself in that we developed a sense of community and belonging through our activities. The points that follow illustrate how we did it.
Together-Help
Part of YCC’s mission is to foster a spirit of “together-help”. Rather than an attitude of “self-help”, we choose to frame it as, if we all help together, we can do anything! Building a team of collaborators was key: our work is a result of a large team of people, all contributing what they are able to. With this approach, we have been able to connect with, and work with many individuals and organizations, which have all brought something unique to the Chinatown Mahjong Socials. Among our team, we had English, Cantonese, and Mandarin language skills, essential for working in a multi-lingual community.

Planning in Place
We took a place-based approach to all our work, believing in the importance of spending time in the neighbourhood we were working for and with. We held planning meetings at locations in Chinatown. We began by prioritizing relationships with Chinatown-based organizations and businesses. Our initial outreach targeted Chinatown residents and Chinese-speaking seniors. Art supplies, decorations and refreshments for volunteers were primarily sourced from neighbourhood businesses. We have begun to broaden our outreach beyond Chinatown and beyond the Chinese Canadian community, but we do not lose sight of these roots.

Use Heart
We did not have much financial or political capital: we had no formal funding, and no official organizational status. What we did have was social and cultural capital: a diversity of skills, networks, and relationships with both Chinatown-based organizations. Some of us were members of clan and society associations, some of us were staff or board members with non-profit community and arts organizations. Between us, we had many existing relationships, and a willingness to broker new relationships, as well as a common love for Chinatown.

Building a Games Library: Ask, Borrow, Return
Our approach to materials, supplies and equipment was first to see if we could simplify our needs, second to ask if we could borrow the item, third to re-use and re-purpose, fourth to re-consider if it was necessary, and finally, if all else failed, to purchase. Mahjong tables and tile sets are ubiquitous in many Chinese Canadian households. By crowd-sourcing from our networks, we were able to build up an inventory of requisite equipment. We also borrowed chairs and stools from several Chinatown-based organizations. Finally, we purchased some games second hand, or at Chinatown stores. A major challenge was finding storage space in the neighbourhood, but this was resolved when one neighbourhood-based organization offered us free, semi-permanent storage space.
3.4 SOCIAL SPACE: ACTIVITIES FOR STAYING

Another key part of our success was that we provided a variety of activities that encouraged people to spend time in Chinatown Memorial Square.

Modular Mahjong
Key to the success of our model was the game itself: mahjong. Mahjong is the perfect game for activating public space. It is loud – the clacking of tiles and the banter between players. It is visually interesting – the tiles are colourful, our plastic chairs and tables were colourful, and the movement of shuffling or “washing the tiles” results in a flurry of arms. When we invited people to play mahjong, we would get several different reactions: people’s eyes would light up and they would share a story about playing with their family, they would ask if we were playing for money, or they would shoo us away because of the gambling connotations associated with the game. Differences aside, the game itself was a major attraction. Finally, mahjong is modular. It is easy to scale up or down a mahjong party. One mahjong table seats 4 people. Once we had built up a “games library” with enough mahjong tables and sets of mahjong tiles, as well as a team of volunteers, it was relatively easy to adjust the number of tables to fit the space available.

All Ages and Abilities
It was important to ensure that all kinds of people of all ages would feel welcome. There were several factors that we considered. We selected sites that were physically accessible to seniors, and worked to make sure there was enough seating for them. We considered what times of day seniors were most comfortable with walking to sites in Chinatown. We tested the idea of offering “seniors’ chaperones” to walk seniors home. On the other end of the age spectrum, we learned it was important to provide child-friendly activities. We heard from families that they felt motivated to come out when they knew there would be lantern-making crafts to keep their kids entertained. We found that by offering a variety of activities, and teaching people how to play games, participants felt that the events were welcoming and accessible to all. We continue to ask for feedback and collect ideas about the types of public activities that people would like to see in public spaces in Chinatown.
**Start with Art**

Arts and crafts activities, facilitated by collaborating community artists, became an essential part of our model. The mosaic above was an ongoing project created by artist Yule Ken Lum. He completed it with the help of event participants at the June 20 Chinatown Mahjong Social. We positioned the arts and crafts table at the entrance to the space because it functioned as a natural welcoming activity for participants who were too shy to jump into a game with strangers, or for those who were waiting for a spot at a mahjong table. Arts-based activities also made it possible to bring ceremonial and cultural aspects activities into public space in an inclusive way. We connected with several community-based artists with a love of Chinatown who, in addition to designing and facilitating activities, contributed their skills to poster, leaflet and banner designs. Art also created space for a storytelling and emotional outlet for participants and organizers.

**Create Opportunities for Learning and Teaching, Acknowledge Difference**

There are different styles of play, and participants ranged from beginners to expert. There are differences in the rules of the game, between families, between regions, and between countries. For example, mahjong is common in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines, and beyond. In order to make the game accessible for everyone, we prepared a mahjong-scoring sheet and mahjong rule sheet. This included explanations of the meaning of the Chinese characters on the tiles. We recruited volunteer teachers who facilitated play. We also offered other board games that are more familiar to children.

**Integrating Ceremony and Celebration**

Creating grassroots and low-cost opportunities to gather in public space to celebrate traditional Chinese festivals is an important part of culturally-based placemaking. By designing public space activation activities around culturally important dates, these events can support revitalizing cultural knowledge, community resilience, and the transfer of knowledge between generations. This also makes these activities more relevant to Chinatown sites. For example, our September 17 summer finale was a week before the Mid-Autumn Festival, a traditional Chinese celebration of family, togetherness, and the full moon. Artists Vanessa Grondin and Yule Ken Lum led lantern-making activities and a storyteller from the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden shared traditional tales about the significance of the festival. We will continue to look for opportunities to incorporate cultural celebrations.
3.5. NARRATIVE SPACE: A LIVING LIBRARY

Through YCC’s public space activations, we also created a space for stories - both online and in real life - centred on the material space of Chinatown Memorial Square, and the social spaces of community-building. It became a living library for sharing cultural and community knowledge. At our events, I would find myself chatting with participants, and exchanging many stories. Some of these were stories about the past. People would share memories about Chinatown, stories about their families, stories about playing mahjong, stories about roots and migration. Some of these were stories about the present. Chit-chat exchanged in catching up with friends. Stories about the desire to learn or fear of forgetting ancestral languages. Information about neighbourhood changes, critiques of proposed developments, and upcoming planning processes to participate in. Some of these stories were about the future. Concerns that Chinatown would cease to exist. Enthusiasm and inspiration for future possibilities for public space activation. After the events, the story sharing would continue online, through the sharing of photos, links, blog posts, media pieces, and personal comments.

Spread It Through the Grapevine
YCC worked with limited resources and extremely short timelines. We had four weeks to plan the first event, and subsequent events were no more than four weeks apart. It was possible to promote our events with limited resources thanks to several factors. Firstly, we were able to use free and low-cost online space. We set-up, populated and maintained a simple website. We also relied on Facebook, and to a lesser extent, Twitter and Instagram. We also drew upon our web of existing and diverse networks. We used email, posters, flyers, and word of mouth to spread the word. We became a network of networks.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words
We had graphic designers contribute their talents to designing posters. We also created our own graphics. We had designated photographers at each event, and had several people offer to create short videos. We used Facebook, Instagram and our blog to share visually rich and compelling images.

Talking to Media
Traditional Media
We wrote and distributed press releases, and contacted print, radio and television media. We developed media talking points, and had several team members act as media spokespersons. Our approach has been to encourage media to attend an event, so we can show them rather than tell them.

Independent Media and Journalism Students
We had journalism students, and collaborators within our networks approach us. This was mutually beneficial. They helped us, and we helped them refine their budding media skills.

Chinese Media
We translated press releases into traditional Chinese, distributed them to Chinese-language media in the lower mainland, and had a Cantonese and Mandarin speaking team member act as media spokesperson.

Social Media
We used Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to promote the events and discussion on Chinatown-related topics. Team members also wrote blog posts on our own websites.
“There was a lady at my table who told me that she and the younger woman she was with were just walking by and when she (the older woman) saw that it was mahjong she got extremely excited because it reminded her of when she and her family used to play in the Philippines when she was a little girl. So even though they were heading back to Richmond, they stopped in to join us and stuck around until we got kicked out. I was so amazed and felt so many emotions just hearing her talk about how they used to play and the words they used like “chow” for eating someone’s tile to make a run, it was mystifying that we were able to share and connect over mahjong with strangers! Aaaaaah!”

(Event Participant, blog post on YCC website)

“Over the past two months, our community’s creatives Kathryn Gwun-Yeen Lennon, Doris Chow, June Chow, Ken Tsui, Edmund Ma, and Nicole So have brought the click clacking sense of home and same fun relief to Chinatown. Tapping into something deeper than the cultural tradition of the game itself, their public street mahjong nights affectionately titled “Hot + Noisy” are hosting a physical place for connection to grow between the young and old, those that know and don’t know, and most importantly, they are drawing out the [熱鬧] / “hot and noisy” / vibrant life that is Chinatown, and for all of us to experience it with our hands. Watching the fifty something folks from all walks of life gather at the Chinatown War Memorial to share a hand of mahjong froze me as the feelings and memories of home swelled inside my head like a rushing of water from a new well”. (Claudia Li, blog post on hua foundation website)

“At one point, I had to briefly fill in a seat at a table. When I sat down and we started ‘washing’ the tiles, one of the poh poh’s at the table said, ‘are you poh poh Chow’s granddaughter?’ She lives in the Chau Luen building and was friends with my grandma. Even though our grandma has passed away over 2 years ago, she still recognized us. In fact, I saw her again this morning in Chinatown on the way to work and we stopped to chat. If it wasn’t for the MJ social, I would have never recognized her or known her. :)

(Event Organizer, blog post on YCC website)
As young Chinese Canadians, Chinatown has offered us a test site where we have been able to learn how to do public space activation, community organizing, placemaking and small-scale planning and implementation that is rooted in Chinese Canadian history, language and worldviews. Chinatown’s material, social and narrative spaces have served as the spaces in which we are able to shape our own ideas about blending old and new to define what a “Chinese Canadian” worldview might look like for ourselves. It is a space where we have been able to come together and develop self-pride, a sense of belonging and kinship. It is a place where we can decide what it means to enact collective culture, and to experiment with it.

In exploring the case study of designing a youth-driven, grassroots experiment in temporary public space activation, I learned that there were three intersecting kinds of public space that needed to be activated: 1) the concrete, material space of Vancouver’s Chinatown, 2) the social space of networks and community-building, and 3) the abstract, conceived narrative space that exists in the public imagination, both online and in real life. In activating material space, social space and narrative space in Chinatown, I found that we have begun to create spaces of belonging for ourselves.

4.1. A GOOD PUBLIC SPACE?
4.2. APPROACHES TO GRASSROOTS PUBLIC SPACE ACTIVATION
4.3. SHOW ME, DON’T TELL ME: ENACTING PUBLIC SPACE
4.4. APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURALISM
4.5. ACTIVATING SPACES OF BELONGING
Magic happened at YCC’s Summer Finale. The sounds of tiles clacking, grandparents joking, kids playing, storytelling, mid-autumn greetings, and friends catching up transformed a little-loved plaza into the heart of a village.
**Experience**

Through our public space activations, Chinatown Memorial Square became a good public space. We were able to meet a real need for social interaction, within an existing public space, without making any permanent or costly urban design interventions.

**Literature**

The United Nations Human Settlement Program defines ‘public open space’ as the “sum of the areas of the built-up areas of cities devoted to streets and boulevards—including walkways, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes—and the areas devoted to public parks, squares, recreational green areas, public playgrounds and open areas of public facilities (UN Human Settlements Program)”.

A public space is also a “socially-constructed territory or terrain that represents, shapes, controls, manages or guides social interactions and is distinguishable from both private space and from wilderness” (McEvoy-Levy, 2012, p.1). They can be privatized, and they can be designed or organized to encourage some uses and interactions and discourage others.

Some essential ideas about what makes good public spaces come from William H. Whyte’s *The Life of Plazas* (1980), Jan Gehl’s *Cities for People* (2010) and Ray Oldenburg’s *The Character of Third Places* (1989). Through YCC’s programming activities, Chinatown Memorial Square became a space that provided “temptations to stay”, a requisite of a good cities for staying (Gehl, 2010). Part of the success of the Chinatown Mahjong Socials is that they offered a variety of activities that provided invitations to stay – activities that required people to see a process through – whether it was to play a game, do some art, people watch, or socialize with friends or strangers. Whyte’s rule that “people attract people” (Whyte, 1980) proved true. Once we started to set up tables, and people could see that something out of the ordinary was happening, they would stop to observe and inquire, then play a game, and then stay awhile and socialize. Finally, Chinatown Memorial Square became a “third place”, that is a place that “exists on neutral ground and serve[s] to level [its] guests to a condition of social equality. Oldenburg writes that in third spaces, “conversation is the main activity. They are accessible and accommodating. They are dominated by, and dependent on their regulars. In terms of physical structure, they are plain and low-profile. The mood is playful, and they serve as a home away from home “(Oldenburg, 1989).
Experience

YCC’s work, in hindsight, can be characterized as tactical urbanism or DIY Urbanism. This is one of many names for the grassroots creation, enhancement and activation of public space. Because our financial costs were low and we did not require permits or permission to play mahjong in Chinatown Memorial Square, we had low-risks, and thus had freedom to experiment. We were able to learn through trial and error. This low-cost approach did present some small challenges, as we did have costs, albeit minimal ones, and as we move forward we need to come up with ways to finance and fund YCC’s work. Because YCC was a new, grassroots entity, we were nimble, and were not limited by bureaucracy or politics. The challenge this presented was that we still needed to interact with formalized, institutionalized processes, as well as established and traditional organizations and attitudes, and thus needed to work thoughtfully in order to balance a respect for what had been done before us, with the gumption to challenge or critique status quo.

Literature

The goal of DIY Urbanism efforts is theoretically “a more user-friendly urban environment” (Finn, 2014, p. 383). The common principle among these approaches is that they involve low-cost, and low-risk improvements to a space, in which individuals and ad-hoc groups take it upon themselves to meet local needs that urban governments will not, or cannot address. These activities range from being carried out with institutional support, to being anti-establishment, illegal acts. DIY urbanism can be an effective tool and process that can be used to create spaces of belonging, if the design of public space activation is centered on the community, and allows for residents to participate in the production of their own spaces. These public space interventions tend to circumvent official processes and permits, and are often “often innovative, sophisticated, and low-cost solutions to difficult or unaddressed urban problems” such as a lack of public seating, a lack of bike lanes, or a need to supplement municipal wayfinding signage (Finn, 2014, p. 382). DIY Urbanism solutions are characterized in three ways according to Finn. Firstly, they are instigated, designed, created, paid for and implemented by single users or small voluntary groups and not municipalities or corporations. Secondly, efforts generally attempt to emulate or augment official municipal infrastructure in public space. Finally, the beneficiary of these DIY interventions is, at least rhetorically, the general public. Projects are positioned as having no direct fiscal benefit to a specific user or set of users and there is usually no gatekeeping mechanism such as a usage fee (Finn, 2014).

A similar approach is the “Lighter, Quicker, Cheap-
4.3. Show Me, Don’t Tell Me: Enacting Public Space

Ever” (LQC) approach. Also known as action-planning, guerilla urbanism, pop-up projects, city repair, D.I.Y. Urbanism, and Tactical Urbanism, LQC is a collective and participatory process that emerges from the larger “Placemaking” framework, championed by the organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS). PPS describes it as an implementation process for simple, short-term, and low-cost improvements to public spaces that help empower communities to create sustainable places, highlight local assets, and attract people, at a neighbourhood, city, or regional scale. It takes an incremental and grassroots approach to long-term improvements to public space. There are four core principles: 1) community vision, 2) cost-effectiveness, 3) collaboration and 4) citizen-led change (Project for Public Spaces, 2015).

Limitations of DIY Urbanism
Some argue that “[t]actical urbanism and other forms of experimental placemaking simply can’t address the systemic, structural conditions that produce inequalities in access to the public realm and the differential involvement of cultures and classes in the enterprise of city building” (Saitta, 2015). And that DIY urbanism runs the risk of creating or perpetuating inequity in many urban neighborhoods (Finn, 2014, p. 392) and may simultaneously hasten gentrification and displacement in much the same way that publicly-funded infrastructure upgrades and other investments have been shown to do (Hackworth 2007; Douglas 2012, in Finn, 2014, p. 392). Finn cautions that DIY projects may, as a trigger for gentrification or other dynamics, have trickle-down economic implications, but direct economic benefits are not generally the impetus for DIY Urbanism interventions. PPS acknowledges that LQC approaches work best in well-linked sites where accessibility, connectivity, safety, and overall comfort have already been addressed, and that large-scale infrastructure improvements may be beyond the principle and scope of these approaches (PPS, 2015).

4.3. SHOW ME, DON’T TELL ME: ENACTING PUBLIC SPACE

Experience
I found that through YCC’s public space activation, we had a whole range of media to work with, and in multi-dimensions. We had the ability to visualize alternatives and counter-narratives, by demonstrating these alternatives. Common communication tools used by planners, urban designers, architects and landscape architects are models, sketches, street sections, visioning exercises, and visualization techniques. What these often lack is an accurate or relatable representation of the people who will use a public space, a street or a building. By enacting the vision for public space that we wanted to see, we created an opportunity for the public to experience the vision of a lively Chinatown, in all its sensory details. We were able to visualize counter narratives and alternatives to the story of a dying Chinatown, devoid of a youthful presence. Instead, we presented loud, lively, colourful evenings in Chinatown, where people of all ages
were spending time around a mahjong table together, in the same space. We were able to demonstrate how the plaza could work if it was activated by the public. I hope that one day, Chinatown Memorial Plaza will fall into a regular everyday rhythm of use: that it becomes a place where people know they can bring a board game, and some chairs on a summer evening, and find some neighbours to play with.

**Literature**

James Rojas, in the context of the Latino communities in Los Angeles, argues that space is not built, rather it is enacted, and that “the identity of the place is created through the cultural related behavior patterns of the residents” and that “the enacted environment is made up of individual actions that are ephemeral but are nevertheless part of a persistent process” (1993).

### 4.4. APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURALISM

**Experience**

Through YCC’s work, I found that we were able to demonstrate how public space activation could be intercultural and intergenerational. Vancouver is a city that is considered highly multicultural in make-up, yet there is lack of urban spaces that facilitate intercultural, intergenerational, transformative dialogue.

**Literature**

Now, more than ever, planners need to find ways to create spaces of belonging in cities. This requires a broader conception of culture, and a broad approach to planning for interculturalism (Agyeman and Sien Erickson, 2012; Sandercock, 2000; Wood, 2006; Bloomfield, Bianchi, 2002). “Intercultural” cities are cities that see their cultural diversity as an asset, and further enable and explore diversity to stimulate creativity, economic activity, and an improved quality of life (Council of Europe and the European Commission). Recent trends in globalization have brought mass movements of people and culture, with implications for urban planning, architecture and citizenship (Sandercock, 2000; Luk & Phan, 2005). “Ethnic diversity will increase substantially in virtually all modern societies over the next several decades, in part because of immigration” (Putnam, 2007, p.138). If the cities of the future are to be equitable, sustainable, and accommodate difference, and not become sites of distrust, conflict and segregation, this requires policies and practice (Sandercock, 2000; Agyeman, 2003), and it is necessary to plan for diversity, which requires going beyond simply multiculturalism, ‘tolerance’ and ‘sensitivity’ (Qadeer, 2000).

Diversity is not necessarily a positive thing. In the short to medium run immigration and ethnic diversity may create challenges for “social solidarity and inhibit social capital” (Putnam, 2007, p.138). In a study of cities in the United States Robert Putnam found that ethnic diversity causes what he calls the “hunker down” reaction. In more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, people tend to withdraw more from public life, have less trust in each other, less altruism and community cooperation, and fewer friends. How-
ever, this does not mean diversity is always a negative thing. Putnam also found that in the medium to long run, “successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of ‘we’”. (Putnam, 2007, p.138). One approach to creating this broader sense of ‘we’ is to enable urban public spaces to function as spaces of belonging. This would require an intercultural approach to planning that “goes beyond opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences, to the pluralist transformation of public space, civic culture and institutions (Bloomfield and Bianchini, 2002).

4.5. ACTIVATING SPACES OF BELONGING

Literature

However, we cannot talk about creating space of belonging or a “broader sense of we” without first understanding how spaces of non-belonging, and a narrower sense of ‘we’ played a role in the city and nation-building of the Pacific Northwest, both in Canada and the United States. City building cannot be separated from exclusionary policies that have historically targeted specific racialized communities. “The subjects of historical wrongdoings and redress, healing, and reconciliation have many localized variants, among them the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War and the demolition of Africville in the 1960s, for examples” (Mathur, Dewar, DeGagné, 2011). The impacts have had direct and indirect hurtful and traumatic intergenerational impacts. In the Vancouver area, these historical wrongdoings have included: the dispossession of indigenous lands and displacement of indigenous communities, the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act, the internment and forced displacement of Japanese Canadians during WWII, the Indian Residential School system, the turning away of Indian migrants on the Komagata Maru ship, and the general excluding of First Nations, Chinese, Japanese and South Asians from the right to vote, work certain jobs, and other aspects of public life.

If part of belonging involves feeling a sense of agency and trust, then being able to participate in the production of space can be necessary and empowering. Public space design has the potential to contribute to healing past wrongs and “create the circumstances that erode the divisions between different societies and allow people to find the common ground that will allow them to move towards reconciliation” (Donovan, 2010). There is much to be gained out of being actively engaged in shaping the urban environments in which we spend time. Donovan says that urban environments can create the circumstances which give people the best possible chances to meet their needs and fulfill their potential by “providing opportunities that enable people to do what they need to do to support their well-being, develop their skills, forge social bonds and live lives congruent to their principles” (2010). It is important that urban designers “leave room for a popular tradition of design that allows for urban dwellers to more fully participate in the production of their own spaces, spaces that they care to sustain”, rather than as the profession has in the past, assume that “they will conceive all aspects of built environments” (Milgrom, 2003).

Experience

Playing mahjong in public is both an ordinary and a radical act. For Chinese Canadians and Chinatown, and other communities that were historically excluded from aspects of public life, transporting social interactions that typically occurred in private spaces out into public spaces can be a way to assert a right to belong.
So, how do we shape spaces in which everyone has the right to belong? How do we include the voices of younger generations, who have a stake in the future but lack authority in the present? How do we work within a context shaped by historical and continued colonization and government-sanctioned race-based exclusionary policies? Undoing this history of exclusion requires us to find ways to create spaces of belonging. Through YCC’s public space activations, we are learning (or remembering) how to use public space.

1. We must ask ourselves, what right do we have to claim and shape public spaces in a space that is not ours to claim, within the unceded traditional and ancestral territories of Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish Nations?
2. We must have knowledge of the past and respect for elders, in the present we must build upon community strengths and not replicate the inequalities of the past, and we must think of the future and the generations yet to come.
3. We must participate in more regular, informal, non-commercial uses of public spaces that don’t take too many resources to implement.
4. We must build capacity for younger generations to work within our own cultural communities.
5. We must blend old and new ways to activate public space.
6. We must create spaces for the sharing of community knowledge. We can do this by incorporating playfulness, ceremony, ritual, celebration, and re-interpreting community traditions.
7. Through this, we are working towards cultural revitalization and re-generation.
Based on what I have learned through YCC’s experiments in activating public space through the Chinatown Mahjong Socials, what lessons can be shared for planners, urban designers and community organizers?
You can’t hold a neighbourhood in the palm of your hand, like a snowglobe. You can’t shake it to see generations yet to come.

You can’t freeze it in a state of red-cheeked celebration hands clasped in eternal new year’s greetings performing stiff-legged routines. to an emptying room.

It would be kinder to let it unravel.

Let its grandchildren bear witness as memories shutter their doors and nostalgia papers over its windows.

Let them come forward oranges in hand to light incense at the altars of re-zoning applications.

They will re-develop postures of defiance. They will grow their hair long, revitalize roots.

They will swim upstream, through grief, and love and rage, shedding skins, swallowing water, in search of the source.
Perhaps YCC’s experiments in public space activation are fleeting. But realizing that we can have a sense of purpose that is rooted in feeling confident and proud and united around our identities as Chinese Canadians, and that this sense of purpose can translate into contributing to Chinatown in meaningful, concrete ways that respond to real community needs – this is an outcome that has the potential to last a lifetime. I think of YCC’s experiments in public space activation as a means to an end. The end, in my mind is an intangible one: activating our agency, as young people of diverse Chinese Canadian heritages, to participate in determining the life of a neighbourhood that supports our ability to practice a collective culture. Material public space is crucial, and works in symbiosis with social space and narrative space. By activating a material space, we have been able to strengthen ourselves, and hopefully the communities we live in relationship with. Formal planning and revitalization processes cannot work unless individuals involves themselves.

**Sustainability and Success**

In my mind, YCC’s public space activation projects were always meant to be temporary. This is why we took an approach of experimenting, and small-scale incremental developments. We have been firm in not wanting to grow too big too fast. From YCC’s beginnings, we have intentionally created a volunteer-powered effort and kept our costs low. A key part of our strategy has been to foster a culture of collaboration and “together-help”. To emphasize that we will not do this for you, but we will do this with you. And that if you like what we are doing, help us make it happen!

However, in logistical reality, the task of coordinating this growing team of volunteers is a large one that is handled by our core team. Other large, crucial roles handled by our core team are building and managing relationships, liaising with media, and maintaining our website and social media presence. Our committed core team that has dedicated countless volunteer hours to bringing YCC’s vision to life. The bulk of work often falls on the shoulders of those who are more stable in their careers. We are all people with the education, financial means, personal support networks, health and social networks to give our evenings and weekends to this effort. In one view, this is not a socially sustainable situation. In another view, part of being an urban person means factoring in time to participate in civic life to create and care for the neighbourhoods we rely upon. The core team or organizers now does not need to be the core team forever. We can leave space for ourselves to come and go, and for new leadership to come forward.

There are many things we are able to accomplish, and many we were not able to accomplish through YCC’s Chinatown Mahjong Socials. In the case of YCC, we are not able to accomplish, or direct what happens next for Chinatown. We are not organizers who are able to organize a protest march. We are not able to purchase land or rent space. We are not able to convene all of Chinatown’s stakeholders and lead them in a vision for the future. We are not able to provide essential services to seniors. We cannot directly slow the pace of development. We do not yet have the capacity, or desire, to become regular programmers of neighbourhood recreational activities. We are struggling to be able to manage and organize all the relationships and opportunities that come our way.

Part of framing success is about being realistic about what is within our scope and ability to influence, and recognizing where our power and intelligence lie. Our power lies in our being able to activate. Imagine a button that says, “Push to activate”. We are able to
push that button and spark an idea to get enthusiasm rolling. A major accomplishment in organizing the Chinatown Mahjong Socials has been that we have been able to create a small but impactful cultural shift for ourselves, and starting with ourselves. Arguably, this might be a fleeting shift. Nevertheless, its importance is not a measure of its duration or continuation. We have created a space for ourselves as young people to participate, and in doing so have opened a crack for other young people who are curious about Chinatown but otherwise have no means to get engaged to connect through us. We have made it more “normal” for youth to be present in Chinatown. We have worked hard to get past some of the barriers we encountered as young people organizing in Chinatown: a sense of distrust, a lack of willingness to work together, a stifling of young people’s energies and ideas, a lack of confidence among young generations to participate in Chinatown’s life or in connecting a broader Chinese Canadian identity to this specific neighbourhood. We have worked hard to create “third spaces” for much needed social interactions where those involved in making decisions and implementing plans about the future of Chinatown can mingle alongside residents, activists, artists, mahjong lovers and passersby. These interactions, albeit temporary, only once a month, and with no guarantee of a repeat, have had ripple effects. They strengthen, refresh and expand the social networks of Chinatown.

**Succession**

Abstractly, we need to continue to be present in the life of Chinatown. If Chinatown is to survive, it is not just the bricks and mortar that need to be cared for, not just its elders that need to be cared for, not just its businesses – Chinatown’s social life and networks also need to be cared for. We can keep showing up and spending time in Chinatown’s spaces and places. If we are present, we can learn and build relationships and share information. We need to involve ourselves, and offer help, support, time and money to existing community organizations and institutions. We need to blend old and new: we need to be bold enough to create our own ways of doing things, but still work in relationship with the old.

Concretely, we need to maintain an online and on-the-ground presence. In order to do this, we need dedicated volunteer capacity to maintain our online platforms (website, social media, etc.) as well as dedicated volunteer capacity to coordinate volunteers and engage new ones. We may need to consider seeking out funding to create a paid coordinator position, while maintaining other capacities as volunteer-powered. Volunteerism is not always appropriate, but in the case of YCC’s model, it is crucial. We are trying to activate a cultural shift: one in which we take collective and collaborative responsibility for enacting the things we want to see happen in Chinatown. As we go forward, we continually re-evaluate suggestions that we should apply for funding or create a budget that factors in paid positions. We also need to identify the roles and responsibilities that could potentially be assumed by more permanent, institutional actors. For example, could it be the responsibility of the City of Vancouver or Parks Board to coordinate permanent culturally appropriate recreational programming in Chinatown’s public spaces?

**Planning as a Visitor**

My position in Vancouver has always been that of a visitor. I have always been self-conscious of my insider/outsider role. I am someone born and raised in Edmonton-Treaty 6 and Metis Territory, only temporarily living in Vancouver-Coast Salish territories. I am a settler of mixed ancestry – my mother is an immigrant from Hong Kong and my father is a fourth-generation Irish Canadian - living, learning
and benefiting off lands that I have no right to own or occupy. I only recently connected with Chinatown’s social organizations. I only recently began learning about the history of Chinese Canadians, and there is so much to learn. I only recently began to learn about relationships between Chinese Canadians and indigenous communities, and Chinese Canadians and other “visible minority” communities. I often feel that I have no legitimate right to claim a Chinese Canadian identity. I barely speak, read or write Cantonese, my mother’s mother tongue, but can string together a few sentences of Mandarin. I do not live in Chinatown. I have no connection to Chinatown’s clan and society associations, as membership is based on family name or your family’s ancestral village. More often that not, I see my position as a weakness. However, I am coming to understand this hybrid insider/outsider position as strength. I am learning if you are curious, willing to learn, and willing to work for and with a particular community, you can do meaningful work.

There is a delicate balancing act between broadening scope in order to built strength, and stretching oneself too thin. I have encouraged our team to remain inclusive to “non-Chinese” people. This is essential if we are to broaden our base, and build support and enthusiasm. As an Edmontonian, I encouraged us to see how we could learn from what Chinese Canadian youth are doing there, as well as in other Chinatowns. As somebody curious about the overlapping histories of other racialized cultural communities, I was interested to see how we could learn from the organizing and cultural regeneration efforts of Japanese Canadian youth, indigenous youth, and Filipino youth. As planners, we are always visitors and outsiders. There are times where we may also be insiders, or be able to relate to the communities we work with on a deeper level, but our role is not a permanent one. Thus, action and implementation needs to be incorporated into the planning process, not something that happens after the planning is complete. There is no guarantee that once a planner finishes planning, the plan will get implemented. Planners too need succession plans for their own work.

**Top-Down and Bottom Up**

*SICINIUS: What is the city but the people? Citizens: True, / the people are the city.*

Coriolanus, Act III, Scene I, William Shakespeare, Lines 244-246.

Top-down and bottom-up planning and urban design processes need to work together. Citizens need to participate in everyday life, and planners need to meet communities where they are at. YCC’s experiments in public space activation were conducted in spite of, in relationship with, and occasionally in opposition to, formal local government planning processes. We had to create both informal grassroots community processes and also interact with formal municipal planning processes. We are neither helpless in the face of formal planning processes, nor can we achieve everything through grassroots planning processes. There are areas where YCC has power, and other areas for formal institutions have power. At the same time that we wished to work in respectful relationship with City of Vancouver planning processes, we needed to be able to critique them for their lack of youth input, and subsequent lack of implementation and meaningful outcomes on the youth-specific directions. This meant we had to demonstrate alternatives. For example, City of Vancouver staff planners recognize that while “public realm projects enhance the physical elements of the cultural quarter, on-going community participation and stewardship is critical to the long-term success of public spaces and events.
programming in Chinatown” (Chen-Adams and Ma, 2006, p.8). In previous City of Vancouver planning processes, formal efforts to develop youth programs focusing on leadership training and volunteerism, have included: work by the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee (VCRC), S.U.C.C.E.S.S., the Chinese Cultural Centre and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden Society (Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan, 2012, p.44). In a 2006 Chinatown Community Plan: Progress Report prepared for City Council, City of Vancouver staff planners reported that, “future improvements will focus on introducing year-round programming to promote day-to-day use of the Square, adding amenities to strengthen its role as a civic public square with a commemoration focus and encouraging uses that can bring pedestrian activities from adjacent areas”. However, there has been no implementation of this programming. This absence of formal programming became an opportunity that we stepped into.

Planners need to grapple with this conundrum – how to ensure that implementation is tied to community groups, however, being realistic about the capacity of these often ad-hoc and under-resourced entities. For example, as YCC gains a voice as stakeholders, we find that we are increasingly approached by community members and professionals alike, and encouraged to become a more formal entity. We need to be clear that we do not have the capacity to commit to long-term initiatives.

**Planning for Past, Present and Future**

A limitation of planning processes is that they are not good at including the young and the old in their processes, thus it is hard to plan for leadership succession, for future implementation, and for plans that truly meet the needs of the young and the elderly. Not for lack of effort, the planning processes that have been applied to Chinatown (from the City) have been more successful at implementing hard infrastructure upgrades, but the intangibles, of community development tend to fall by the wayside. How can there be ownership and follow through the people who do the visioning and planning are not the people who will also do the implementing?

Planning needs to be done in overlapping scales of time and space. Planners need to work like accordions and plan from the micro to the macro, and from the immediate, to the short-term, to the mid-term, to the long-term. We need to plan for the next few days, next week, next month, next several months, two years, five years, ten years, 30 years, 100 years, 500 years, and beyond. We also need to reach backward for our knowledge and context: to those who came a few days before us, a week, a month, several months, two years, five years, ten years, 30 years, 100 years, 500 years, and before. Planning also has to be immediate and present. To get past the paralysis that can come from over-thinking and over-p-planning, planners could benefit from YCC’s approach of “just do it!” One of the greatest lessons from YCC’s public space activations for planners is that once people can see and experience a concrete example of an idea, they can give real feedback that will only help make it stronger and more relevant. Planners could benefit from trying this approach when it comes to testing out ideas. YCC did not start from a place of overwhelming support. People were mildly interested and intrigued, but people only started coming forward to offer support and encouragement once they saw our model and that we could get things done in a fun, effective way.

**Inspiring the Intangibles**

Ideally, YCC will not be organizing Chinatown Mahjong Socials forever. Ideally, by regularly and temporarily activating public spaces in Chinatown
we can inspire a different rhythm and possibility for what one can spend time doing in Chinatown specifically, and how one can enjoy public space differently in Vancouver. Ideally, this will inspire others to find ways that they can enact their own ideas too. And we can support each other. Planners could learn from this approach. Planners should work to inspire cultural shifts, and support others who are undertaking such initiatives.

Planning with Flux, Regenerative Planning

“Dull, inert cities, it is true, do contain the seeds of their own destruction and little else. But lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves”. (p.585, 1961, Jacobs).

From Vancouver to Manila, Athens to Liverpool, Singapore to Winnipeg, the fact that Chinatowns the world over still exist after hundreds of years is testament to the fact that they must contain in themselves viable seeds of regeneration. We still don’t quite understand what these seeds are, thus, it is vital that we take the time to observe the Chinatowns that do exist, and understand what makes them work. Planners need to build succession planning into the very beginning of planning processes. From the moment a project is initiated, planners need to recognize and nurture in cities the “seeds of their own regeneration”. Planners need to look for the existing assets, identify the places where social capital exists, and do what we can to remove barriers for community-members who are working to plan for themselves. A tiny amount of resources that are simply a drop-in-the-bucket for a municipal budget can go a long way when combined with the powerful externalities of social capital that may already exist at a grassroots level. Planners also need to recognize that communities are planning and implementing futures for themselves, and the role of the planner is to help channel resources and remove barriers that would otherwise limit them.

In truth, everyone and everything is in flux. For YCC, volunteers have come and gone over the last 6 months, as they move between school and work. Many of those involved in past Chinatown planning and revitalization processes are no longer involved, be they professional planners or community members. Some of the youth organizations named in the Chinatown Neighbourhood Plan, such as Chinatown-Next, no longer exist. Some of the keystone neighbourhood programming no longer exists, such as the Chinatown Night Market. Long-time businesses no longer exist. The shoreline of False Creek has changed over time. Parts of Chinatown were once swamp, tidal mudflat, waterway, forest.

Is it a challenge working with young people who are transient and in transition? Absolutely. But as a person approaching 30 years old, I know no other way of life. As I write this, I am preparing to move back to Edmonton for work. I have spent the last 13 years of my life balancing a passion for grassroots community-building with a rhythm of living two to four years each in a series of different cities. Weeks before I moved to Vancouver, I was a core-organizer and founding member of Edmonton’s first 97th Street Night Market, a one-off night market in a parking lot in Edmonton’s Chinatown, with the goal of activating public space and engaging young people in Chinatown. Our team had no sustainability or succession plan. We burnt out. I left the city to start my masters at UBC. Several other organizers continued the idea for the next year, but with lesser degree of success. Could we call this a failure? Sure. In that it no longer exists. But we could also call it a great success; it sparked a concept, and awakened an idea among young people that Chinatown is a neighbourhood we can rally around and contribute to as communi-
ty-minded Chinese Canadians. It was hard work. But it was fun. It was meaningful. It re-invigorated older generations. The transience and mobility of youth organizers is also a strength. As young people we are in a position where the experience of being involved in a project like the Chinatown Mahjong Socials can be something that influences that way we carry out our lives and work as we go forward.

For planners, this flux means that it is essential that when we initiate projects we ask ourselves – do we intend this to be permanent or temporary? What is our succession plan? Part of succession planning, for professional planners and community organizers alike is to make sure we plan ourselves out of a job. That we make ourselves “replaceable”. This means constantly working to engage new people. In concrete terms, this means that we need to share information and opportunities widely so others might choose to take up parts of the task of caring for Chinatown. We need to mentor, support and encourage “younger youth” in developing their own initiatives, and create spaces and roles that are easy to take on for those who want to get involved. This has meant coming up with a more streamlined volunteer coordination process. Going forward, YCC plans to create a “user orientation manual” that details the tasks that have been involved thus far in our organizing so that new people can easily get involved, but still have freedom to bring their own ideas into the mix. This requires us to portion off clear tasks that can be taken up by others: for example, we now have a reliable volunteer who has taken on the task of facilitating the arts and crafts component of events, we have another few reliable volunteers who are responsible for taking photos and videos at events.

Planning for flux also means that planners and community organizers need to design processes and concepts that are compelling and expansive enough that they inspire through their story alone. These stories need to be relatable and universal enough that everyone can be a part of them. Stories will outlast any public space activation project. YCC has been successful at telling our story through the channels of social media, Chinese media, mainstream media, and word of mouth. The next step is to share this story with an even wider audience – to make it relatable to a universal audience – not just Chinese Canadians, not just Vancouverites. I tested this out by presenting at the Canadian Institute of Planners conference in Saskatoon, to a small audience of non-Chinese planners and planning students. The idea was warmly received. People related it to their own experiences, to indigenous youth communities, to other cultural communities.

Planning for flux means that we need to design processes to be imperfect, unfinished and living. It needs to be fun and easy for new people to step in, and be able to contribute their own ideas. This freedom needs to be built in. If the goal is to engage more people and build momentum, there needs to be a space for people to feel that their contributions of time, skills and resources are necessary. Thus, if YCC were to amass a large operating budget and staff, it would fundamentally change this approach.

Finally, planning for flux also means that we need to design processes that could be replicated by anyone. In the case of Chinatown Mahjong Socials, should YCC cease to exist for some reason, anyone with a mahjong set (or any other board game) could show up in Chinatown Memorial Square (a public space that does not require any permits or permissions) or a few square meters of space (sidewalk, boulevard, alley, front lawn, park, patio, etc.). Try it yourself. If you start playing, they will come!
The Chinatown Mahjong Socials were many things: village gathering, games night, photo op, and destination. We enacted a collaboratively created vision for Chinatown’s public life. In order to activate public space, we needed to activate material space, social space, and narrative space. As young Chinese Canadians, Chinatown has offered us a test site where we have been able to learn how to do public space activation, community organizing, placemaking and small-scale planning and implementation that is rooted in Chinese Canadian history, language and worldviews. We have been able to shape our own ideas about to blend old and new to define what a “Chinese Canadian” worldview might look like for ourselves. Chinatown is a space where we have been able to come together and develop self-pride, a sense of belonging and kinship. It is a place where we can decide what it means to enact collective culture, and to experiment with it.

So, what next? Through direct solicitation, keeping our ears open in our everyday interactions, and conversations within our volunteer team, we continue to collect ideas about the types of public activities that people would like to see in Chinatown. After a hot and noisy summer of experimenting with public space activation in Vancouver’s Chinatown, YCC considered taking a break to reflect and recharge. However, the pause was short-lived. Through brokering relationships with the Merchants Association at Chinatown Plaza Mall, an opportunity came up to use the indoor mall space throughout the winter months, once a month. So, now we are taking our lessons learnt and transferring them indoors to experiment with activating an indoor, semi-public space. Ultimately, by temporarily activating physical space, there is an opportunity to transform social and narrative space, and in the process create a cultural shift where everyone who has participated in the activation of these public spaces belongs.

This poem is used with permission from its author, Yao Xiao, 2015. This style in Chinese is called “藏頭詩”. The first words of each line make up the phrase “青心在唐人街”, or in English, Young Hearts in Chinatown.
EVERYTHING WILL BE...

Inspired by Julia Kwan’s 2013 documentary *Everything Will Be*, we created a wish tree at the first “Hot and Noisy” (熱鬧) Chinatown Mahjong Social. We asked people to complete the sentence: “Everything will be...” on a lucky red envelope. Wishes were hung on the largest tree in Chinatown Memorial Square.
REFERENCES


City of Vancouver. (2013). HA-1 and HA-1A Zoning and Development By-law.


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Translation
Original materials were translated by Zoe Lam and Yao Xiao. Additional translation support was provided by Wai-Ling Lennon.

Learn more at http://ycc-yvr.com
### The Chinatown Vision Directions (2002)

**A Place That Tells the History With Its Physical Environment ...**

| 1. Heritage Building Preservation | 1.1. Create incentives to preserve heritage buildings  
1.2. Strengthen architectural, historic and cultural tours  
1.3. Enhance awareness of heritage buildings |

| 2. Commemoration of Chinese-Canadian and Chinatown History | 2.1. Foster the understanding of Chinese-Canadian and Chinatown History  
2.2. Develop monuments and destinations to commemorate Chinese-Canadian history  
2.3. Form partnerships with educational institutions |

| 3. Public Realm Improvements | 3.1. Improve pedestrian lighting  
3.2. Encourage restoration of neon signs  
3.3. Keep the lanes and sidewalks clean  
3.4. Beautify public spaces  
3.5. Strengthen graffiti removal initiatives  
3.6. Improve and beautify building façades |

| 4. Convenient Transportation and Pedestrian Comfort | 4.1. Develop a parking strategy, which includes communication, education and signage initiatives  
4.2. Provide more pedestrian comforts, such as benches, plantings and public washrooms  
4.3. Create efficient transit and safe cycling connections  
4.4. Develop linkages to nearby neighbourhoods through transportation measures |

| 5. A Sense of Security | 5.1. Partner with other neighbourhoods to work on the social issues faced by the community  
5.2. Enhance public education on social issues  
5.3. Reduce the impact of the illegal drug trade  
5.4. Increase the sense of public safety and security  
5.5. Encourage more positive street activities  
5.6. Develop a strategy for safe parking |

**A Place That Serves the Needs of Residents, Youth and Visitors ...**

| 6. Linkage to the Nearby Neighbourhoods and Downtown | 6.1. Enhance walking corridors between Chinatown and downtown  
6.2. Develop walking corridors between Chinatown and surrounding neighbourhoods - Gastown, City Gate, North False Creek, Science World  
6.3. Provide services and products that draw in people from neighbouring communities |

| 7. Youth Connection and Community Development | 7.1. Improve co-ordination of youth initiatives in Chinatown  
7.2. Encourage youth to establish recreational / educational programs and services to attract young people, especially those of Chinese and Asian descent |
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