
Building Trust

The challenge of 9/11 brought Chinatown's organizations, long riven by deep-seated differences, together to plan for recovery.

By Robert Weber

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Nothing about the history and culture of New York City's Chinatown prepared it to deal effectively with the catastrophe of September 11, 2001.

Ironically, Chinatown's inability to mobilize itself effectively was not due to a dearth of community organizations or underdeveloped social and political networks. The community had an abundance of both, but most organizations did not speak to one another and they certainly did not work together. Competition for funding, ideological and cultural differences, and turf wars all contributed to a history of factionalism within the neighborhood.

The challenge was to bring a historically fractious community together by putting aside old and recent rivalries and creating an atmosphere of trust. Beyond that, there was also a need to build consensus, forge collaborative partnerships and create a community-wide agenda to respond to the economic devastation created by this tragic

event.

An Emergency Situation

Located roughly 10 blocks from the World Trade Center, the community was barricaded within a militarized security zone for many weeks after 9/11. Its infrastructure was damaged, utilities were shut off, and communications with government agencies were poor. This bustling, densely populated community of 82,000 residents and 4,000 small businesses resembled a ghost town.

As this community-wide crisis was unfolding, city, state and federal officials were so focused on the Financial District's disaster recovery that the problems of Chinatown were completely overlooked. The initial business and residential recovery programs designed by the [Lower Manhattan Development Corporation](#) (LMDC), the city-state agency in charge of recovery efforts, did not extend into Chinatown. It was only after local civic and community organizations waged a widespread advocacy effort that the government focused some attention on this low-income immigrant community. Protest rallies led by local groups and a community-wide letter writing campaign helped bring government attention to

Chinatown's plight.

By winter 2001, a majority of Chinatown's businesses, especially those heavily dependent on tourists and visitors, were suffering revenue losses of between 30 and 70 percent, causing thousands of workers to be laid off. Workers who were fortunate enough still to be employed were reduced to part-time status. By the summer of 2002, most of the local workforce, already traumatized by the destruction of the Twin Towers, was now in danger of losing their jobs and perhaps their apartments if work could not be found soon.

The area's largest employer, the garment industry, which in the 1980s employed almost 20,000 people, was shedding jobs at an alarming rate. Overseas competition and high real estate costs had already led to the loss of about 200 factories over the last decade. After 9/11, the pace quickened as several closed their doors each week; within a year, the number of factories dropped from 270 to approximately 150. Today, there are fewer than 100 in operation.

A Complex Fabric

Like Chinatowns in many parts of

the world, New York's Chinatown formed as a defense against frequent and widespread anti-Asian sentiments. It grew steadily over the years, keeping residents safe in a community shut off in many ways to non-Chinese "outsiders." The community is a complex and delicately balanced mosaic of many different languages, ethnic identities, work experiences, worldviews and economic circumstances. Chinatown is a place where an elaborate and idiosyncratic social structure has evolved, linking non-English speaking immigrants from Asia with their American-born neighbors, many of whom speak *only* English.

The leadership structure of Chinatown is divided along political, social and ethnic lines. For example, the [Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association](#) (CCBA), a century-old coalition of 64 family associations and other groups, is considered the traditional leadership group representing the Cantonese community. The most recent immigrants, from the Fujian province in the People's Republic of China, are represented by a number of their own organizations and are located primarily along two boulevards in the eastern part of Chinatown.

The dialects that the two groups speak are as disparate as English and German. Furthermore, while both groups read Chinese, they often get their news from different sources, reflecting their own ties with either Hong Kong or mainland China.

Within Chinatown, a number of activist organizations emerged during the political turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s amidst the Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movements. The young activists were in stark contrast to the traditional local leadership, which leaned towards more conservative positions or remained politically neutral. The two most prominent community-based organizations whose roots extend back to those days are the [Chinese American Planning Council](#) and [Asian Americans for Equality](#) (AAFE), a community development corporation. Both organizations have multi-million dollar budgets, manage complex programs and projects, and have satellite offices outside Chinatown in other Asian-American communities in the city.

In addition, a number of legal advocacy, small business and public policy organizations, including the [Asian American Legal Defense Fund](#), the [Asian](#)

[American Business Development Center](#) and [Asian American Federation of New York](#), serve the Chinatown community, but they are all located outside Chinatown and do not organize. Recently, groups like the [Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence](#) and the [Chinese Staff and Workers Association](#) have organized residents and workers around tenants' rights and better treatment for low-wage workers, but they too are located outside Chinatown and are relatively small.

Many of the progressive organizations, while sharing similar political and social missions, have not collaborated with one another in recent years. The cause often can be traced back to personal or political differences that arose during various community campaigns for social justice. And the more traditional organizations looked upon these newcomers with a wary eye. In the past, when government agencies or politicians wanted to do something in Chinatown or were trolling for votes, they turned to the traditional family associations for support, since the average resident or small business often took their cue from powerful organizations like the CCBA. To this day, the elected chairman of

CCBA is widely considered to be the “mayor of Chinatown.”

A Coordinated Response

Naturally, each organization sought funding to strengthen and expand its own programs and services to meet the growing needs created by 9/11. But there was no community-wide consensus on either short- or long-term priorities for rebuilding this historic neighborhood. In addition, while government agencies had come around to appreciating the impact on Chinatown, they were reluctant to fund any of the proposals coming from Chinatown agencies for fear that unless the whole community supported them, some organizations would protest.

Recognizing the stalemate between community groups and funding sources, Asian Americans for Equality understood that the community’s response needed to be comprehensive and better coordinated. AAFE’s reputation as a leader in affordable housing development and advocacy was undisputed. However, over the years, the organization had differences with other groups in Chinatown over various policy and political issues, and believed that some groups would reflexively oppose its effort to

lead this process.

AAFE decided to form the [Rebuild Chinatown Initiative](#) (RCI) as a community-based planning project to bring the neighborhood together around a common agenda. It was successful in securing a start-up grant from the [Freddie Mac Corporation](#) and quickly set up two levels of oversight: a community leadership council of local stakeholders from Chinatown, the Lower East Side and Little Italy, as well as a national advisory board made up of renowned experts in community development and financial and economic leaders. By immediately establishing the community leadership council, comprised of local activists, academics, business people, artists and others who had real oversight of the planning process, AAFE signaled to the community, including its detractors, that it did not have designs on turning RCI into a showcase for itself. It would be a collaborative effort that encouraged and supported differences of opinions, approaches and solutions.

Since AAFE's experience in community planning was limited, it hired two staff members with backgrounds in urban planning, community organizing and

government affairs, and a local planning firm with technical expertise. I began as the project director for RCI in May 2002 by organizing a series of community meetings in churches, schools, outdoor festivals and large apartment complexes. We wanted to know what local stakeholders thought were the main priorities for helping Chinatown recover. We also created an overall framework for RCI by breaking the project into three stages: the first phase would be to learn and listen; the second phase would focus on finding solutions by linking issues, resources, visions and short-term implementation; and the third phase would create sustainable entities to lead this effort over the next decade and beyond.

Not surprisingly, there was considerable pressure from public and private funders for Chinatown to speak with one voice to avoid controversy. However, our intention was not to find only those solutions that were safe or politically palatable. Of course, we were looking for solutions that would engender wide support, but in a large, diverse community there would also be some dissension. Our approach was to build consensus slowly and when we could not reach agreement with other

stakeholders, we would not personalize the disagreement but look for areas where we might be able to partner. We often compared our process to a train leaving the station, which would stop anywhere along the way to pick up fellow passengers. In the end, it didn't matter where or when you got on.

From July through October 2002, RCI staff collected opinions and concerns of Chinatown residents, workers and community leaders to identify how they thought the neighborhood should develop. We conducted household surveys in English and Chinese, one-on-one interviews and open community meetings. The survey was created by a professional planning firm in collaboration with residents and community leaders. It was organized around three topic areas: demographics; attitudes, concerns and priorities for the community; and employment and income generation. The third area was designed to map individual and household skills that would help the planning team identify opportunities for job training and economic growth. Catering services and the construction trades were identified as potential growth areas, since many residents had some experience in these professions and fluent

command of English was not a prerequisite.

RCI conducted almost 100 interviews with business, community, civic and labor leaders, as well as students, workers, artists and retirees. We wanted to hear what they thought Chinatown's strengths and weaknesses were and how the issues could be resolved. The interviews helped start a dialogue with people who would not attend a public meeting, but could be helpful in the eventual implementation of the community plan. Not only did we obtain invaluable information and advice, but by taking the time to listen we were slowly building support and credibility in the community before we had even formulated recommendations.

This six-month grassroots effort resulted in our first report, "The Community Speaks," which provided a comprehensive snapshot of stakeholders' concerns. Three major community needs were identified: sanitation; affordable housing; and employment and income generation. These issues were followed by parking and transportation. We cross-tabulated the findings with key demographic factors of length of residency, age and livelihood and

saw that the top community needs remained constant among all subgroups.

The report outlined a number of recommendations to address these needs, but while we understood the community's priorities, we had not built consensus regarding the solutions. The next phase would concentrate on providing the stakeholders with a "tool kit" of possible solutions, and forming alliances within Chinatown and with the adjacent neighborhoods to bring people and resources together.

The Way Forward

Over the next year we conducted over a dozen workshops, focus groups and community-wide meetings on housing, land use and zoning, recreation, public and open spaces, transportation, parking, culture and entertainment. Most workshops involved a 30 minute presentation with strong visual images, including photos, renderings, and sketches of concepts that were to be the focus of the discussion. The images sparked lively discussions among the participants, and since English was the second or third language for some people, the use of imagery turned out to be an effective communications tool. For example, a discussion about

the creation of a new park near the East River was not getting traction until the workshop leader showed a photo of a baseball field. The participants immediately responded that there were plenty of ballfields in a nearby park and that they wanted a place that all members of the family could visit and enjoy together. They wanted tables, benches and open space to have picnics. They also preferred a landscaping design that encourages a series of discreet, semi-private spaces as opposed to one, large, open expanse of land.

In addition to community leadership council members, others were invited from within and outside Chinatown according to their areas of expertise, such as urban planning, public space and parks, affordable housing and economic development. Many of them joined our national advisory board. Through the networking that occurred at the workshops, staff of outside organizations met people who they could work with in Chinatown, and local organizations developed contacts that could provide new technical or financial resources.

This iterative planning process resulted in the publication in 2004 of “America’s Chinatown” – the first comprehensive community

plan for the neighborhood, which provided a road map for recovery and renaissance.

Conceived as a 10-year plan and a 20-year vision for Chinatown, it outlined strategic initiatives to help the neighborhood leverage its role as a center for Chinese-American commerce and culture; strengthen its economic, political and physical connections to its Lower Manhattan neighbors; and bring prosperity for its residents while maintaining its authenticity as an immigrant community.

Moving to Action

In 2005, community leaders acted on one of the plan's chief recommendations by forming the Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation (CPLDC). This new organization aims to create and manage projects that enjoy broad support and improve the business climate and quality of life for residents. With a board of directors that includes leaders from most of Chinatown's major nonprofits as well as top business people and residents, CPLDC is an unprecedented achievement. In some cases, individuals representing rival entities have joined the CPLDC to advance a shared goal. The partnership secured \$10 million in funding from the Lower Manhattan

Development Corporation, the [September 11th Fund](#) and the [Red Cross](#) and is starting to receive donations from local businesses and individuals.

Major programs in the coming years include the Clean Streets Program, a partnership with the city to provide uniformed clean-up crews to service the neighborhood seven days a week. New street signs will be developed to better connect Chinatown to adjacent neighborhoods like the South Street Seaport, Little Italy, SoHo, TriBeCa, Wall Street and Nolita. Widening that reach is the award-winning [Explore Chinatown](#) campaign that has given the neighborhood a visitors information center, an official Web site and media attention tied in with other citywide tourism efforts. Also in the works is a community resource guide for residents, improved street lighting, test piloting of a night market and more public cultural events to bring residents out into the streets during the summer months.

Longer-range projects include the development of a new cultural and performance center in Chinatown for local arts organizations and to attract artists and performers from around the

world, but especially from China, Hong Kong, Korea and other Asian countries. The project is also expected to act as a catalyst for attracting new investment into Chinatown for hotels, conference and exhibition centers and commercial space.

The LMDC allocated \$16 million to preserve 160 units of affordable housing in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. The program will be open to qualified nonprofit and for-profit developers that are interested in purchasing and rehabbing older multi-unit buildings. It will provide generous subsidies and loans at below-market interest rates. There are also discussions with the [Department of City Planning](#) to introduce inclusionary zoning for Chinatown, which allows private developers to build additional square footage or convert a commercial property into a residential one in exchange for creating affordable units.

Finally, the Fashion Space Project was designed to preserve affordable manufacturing space in Chinatown while providing new venues for emerging designers. The goal is to support niche manufacturing in the community while promoting fashion, culture,

and entertainment. This project enjoys broad support among community members who are concerned about the lack of entry-level jobs, in particular for newly arriving immigrants.

Efforts are underway to plan and implement several public space projects, such as the \$150 million East River waterfront park and esplanade and the reconfiguration of the Chatham Square and Park Row area, which has been closed to traffic since the 9/11 attacks. The LMDC has set aside \$28 million to support traffic and engineering studies, planning and construction that will result in a new link between Chinatown and the Financial District. On the eastern end of Chinatown, local arts and community organizations have banded together to revitalize an abandoned strip of center medians that now form a scar between Chinatown and the Lower East Side. The coalition, United Neighborhoods to Revitalize Pike and Allen streets, was able to get the street co-named Avenue of the Immigrants and successfully advocated for new bicycle lanes, bus shelters and the reconstruction of the dilapidated medians. Work is expected to begin next year.

While most businesses have yet to fully recover from the September

11 crisis and many residents are still struggling to earn a decent living, a new mood of optimism, collaboration and creativity has emerged, opening up fresh possibilities for New York's Chinatown.

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Robert Weber is project director for the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative.

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