

The RCI Plan for an Exceptional Chinatown “Prosperity and Longevity”

The 8 INITIATIVES

As part of the emerging Rebuild Chinatown Initiative (RCI) Plan for Chinatown, we have identified two goals: “**Prosperity**” – to bolster Chinatown as a regional cultural, shopping, tourist and business destination; and “**Longevity**” – to sustain Chinatown as a place where more than one generation of Chinese-Americans will choose to live. The two are inextricably related: without local jobs and services geared to the ethnic community, Chinese-Americans will disperse to other boroughs and the suburbs; without the authenticity created by a vibrant residential community, Chinatown will collapse into a tourist attraction.

In order to maintain Chinatown’s centrality in the City, region, and nation, **eight primary initiatives** were identified, corresponding to the passions of residents and business people, as revealed through a two-year listening, visioning, and problem-solving process. Together, these eight initiatives form a comprehensive plan of interrelated strategies to guide Chinatown’s future preservation and development. Their implementation will not occur all at once; rather, they will respond to conditions in the political and funding environment.

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The eight initiatives are comprehensive. They are not organized by traditional land use categories. But they coalesce around **three types of strategies**, listed in no particular order of importance or implementation:

The first strategy is **Opening Chinatown**. Improved and new transportation connections, the integration of local industries with city, regional and global markets, and development on the waterfront will strengthen Chinatown’s linkages to the Lower East Side, East Village and especially Lower Manhattan. Chinatown should not be hemmed in by gates and walls; the bemoaned (and we trust temporary) closing of Park Row is best viewed in this context. The City’s current transportation and waterfront planning efforts are the key venue within which to press these ideas.

The second strategy is **Anchoring Chinatown**. Chinatown’s foremost asset is its authenticity. But it can no longer rely only on this to remain an economic generator and destination of choice for shoppers, tourists, and Chinese-Americans living in the outer-boroughs and suburbs. Cultural venues, a Hong Kong department store, a vibrant fashion sector, an Asia-oriented office district, a bilingual community college, and training centers for catering and hospitality: all of these can grow Chinatown from an ethnic enclave to a national destination. This will require a commitment of funds and energy by a variety of players, each motivated by their own project priorities as much as the greater vision. The efforts of groups like CREATE (Committee to Revitalize and Enrich the Arts and Tomorrow’s Economy) are to be applauded and supported.

The third strategy is **Uniting Chinatown**. The creation of public spaces that bring people and communities together for respite and recreation, and the promotion of an overall attractive, pedestrian-oriented environment are all physical manifestations of something that is equally political and operational. Cleaning Chinatown's streets, for example, has been named the number one priority since the 1970's, in survey after survey of residents, visitors and merchants. Uniting Chinatown, therefore, embraces community education and beautification campaigns like "Shining Chinatown" that work with neighborhood merchants to maintain clean streets and storefronts.

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Initiative 1

A Family Neighborhood: Housing and Quality of Life

The vision is clear: a mixed-income residential neighborhood of choice, for all Chinese-American generations and income groups. This starts with the better safeguarding of existing affordable housing through an anti-eviction network, and an affordable housing trust fund.

Chinatown is dense and largely built out, so there are limited opportunities for new development. But additional density can be accommodated in areas opposite wide streets and parks. As examples: the RCI Plan envisions additional residential development facing Roosevelt Park, lower Allen/Pike Streets, and Seward Park. A special district employing "inclusionary" zoning laws would require all new, higher-density development to include low- and moderate-income housing units.

Initiative 2

China Village: Shopping, Pedestrians, and Tourism in the Core

For a century now, the Chinatown Core has been defined by Bowery, Baxter, Worth and Canal Streets. Adjoining destinations include Little Italy, the Civic Center, the jewelry district on Canal, the lighting and restaurant supply districts on Bowery, the banks concentrated on Bowery and Canal, and boisterous Chatham Square. Altogether, these areas comprise the Chinatown known to most New Yorkers---here renamed "China Village" to emphasize the need to pull this small, but difficult to navigate area together into a pedestrian-friendly place.

Temporary street closings on weekend evenings, pedestrian-scaled lighting, cultural events, outdoor dining, cleaner streets – these are the ingredients that can create a unique destination – not just for tourists, but for all New Yorkers and especially the Chinese-Americans living in the outer boroughs and New Jersey. There is no shortage of quality Chinese dining and shopping in the region now; but there is only one opportunity for a pedestrian-oriented recreational-dining/shopping experience.

Initiative 3

America's Chinatown: Cultural Destination

Chinatown is not just a place to work and reside: it is a place of the heart. All aspects of Chinese-American culture should be celebrated and enhanced. This includes many small special events (avoiding the problems of the San Gennaro Festival), including outdoor cultural programs (in both Columbus Park and Roosevelt Park). It also includes a Chinatown Cultural Center (providing a performance venue), more informal spaces (like the P.S. 23 building overlooking Columbus Park) and an expanded Museum of the Chinese in the Americas.

It also includes a design ethic that promotes interpretations of traditional Chinese vernaculars. Imitation and fakery are not preferred; and zoning-enforced design guidelines would regulate the vibrant riot of signage and forms. But within the public realm, the RCI plan foresees night-lighting important edifices, modern interpretations of traditional Chinese vernacular in public buildings, and streetscape and park designs that learn from Feng Shui's emphasis on balance, flow, sequence, and color.

Initiative 4

Industrious Chinatown: Pacific Rim Offices, Fashion, Hospitality

Chinatown's economy can, and should, gain strength and diversify. The outerwear garment industry can no longer be relied upon, and workers want more opportunities than those offered by small restaurants. These sectors need to be broadened.

The RCI plan starts with building off of existing strengths. The first opportunity embraced is bolstering the fashion/garment industry linkage (with incubators and design centers). The second is growing the dining sector to encompass catering and hospitality (with new catering and hotel development and job training). And the third is shaping the concentration of banks and import/exporters into a "Pacific Rim" commercial and cultural district (with new development along Canal and lower Bowery).

Initiative 5

Chinatown Main Streets: East Broadway, Division, East Canal, Grand

As Chinatown has grown, so has its other shopping districts. These now address the shopping needs not only of local residents, but also suburban and outer-borough Chinese-Americans. These districts include Grand Street, East Broadway, East Canal Street, and Upper Mott Street.

The most important of these "Main Streets" is East Broadway---the main center of the Fukienese ethnic group, and a major destination thanks to the regional buses and vans that stop nearby. East Broadway's biggest problem is simply congestion: there are too few cross streets for easy circulation; too narrow sidewalks for pedestrians; and too little

parking for convenience. The plan envisions mid-block crossings, through street arcades to Division and Henry, a night Market below the Manhattan Bridge, new pedestrian-scaled lighting, bump-outs at the corners, sidewalk widening, street trees, added parking along Allen Street – all of the ingredients of a successful “Main Street” program.

Initiative 6

Chinatown Harbor: The Chinatown Waterfront

Chinatown is notorious for its old tenements and teaming streets. It has among the highest concentrations of workers/residents/visitors in the United States. Dating back to before the time of Jacob Riis, it has had an appalling lack of parks and amenities. Yet it is only feet from a waterfront that is, in fact, easy to get to (the FDR highway is elevated), but inaccessible (due to fencing and a Sanitation Department vehicular repair facility).

The Plan is to create a major, continuous new park along the river. But this would be no ordinary promenade. Between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges it would feature Chinatown Harbor – a flotilla of reused boats and barges, including a much wanted catering hall. At the repair facility, it would feature Lower East Riverside Park – and a connection to East River Park. Chinatown would be redefined from a dense warren to a quality waterfront neighborhood.

Initiative 7

Learning Campus: Education and Job Training

The priority placed on education is as great in Chinatown as anywhere else in the region. There is further recognition that many Chinatown residents and workers need to be re-trained for more diverse and better-paying jobs.

The vision is to create a unified campus for education and job training in the area framed by the courts, Brooklyn Bridge, St. James and Worth Street. This campus would be the physical expression of joint programs between Pace University, Manhattan Community College, an expanded job-training program at Chatham Square, an existing vocational high school (Murry Bergtraum High School), a possible culinary institute, and more. The idea is to create a virtual community college by linking existing and potential learning institutions in a virtual campus.

Initiative 8

Avenue of the Immigrants: The Boulevarding of Allen Avenue

Chinatown has now expanded and moved east and north. Whereas the centers of gravity were once Mott Street and then Chatham Square, it is now Allen Street (inclusive of Pike Street south to the river). The vision is to redefine Allen Street from a

Robert Moses arterial (he is responsible for its current configuration), to a Frederick Law Olmsted boulevard (drawing inspiration from Eastern Parkway).

The RCI Plan calls for widening the center median to the west; easier traffic crossings; curbside parking to create a safe barrier – implemented over time. It also calls for a “virtual” town hall along Pike; a daily public market in the mall next to the East Broadway “Main Street”; new housing development; and a major linkage to a new riverfront park. Allen is intended to be the grand promenade of Chinatown: a meeting place, as well as the central arterial of the new Chinatown.

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Two goals, eight initiatives, and three types of strategies: Flexible coordination is the essential glue to make sure that the Plan’s elements are implemented in a meaningful way. RCI foresees that different groups or stakeholders will take the lead on different elements. This plan is not the province of any one group or constituency, although Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) played a leadership role in sponsoring the plan, and might play a similar role in making it real. Perhaps the most important thing about the RCI Plan is not its individual components, but the opportunity that it has provided for so many elements of the community to take the time out and think as a group about a shared vision. Further cooperation with other groups should be promoted.

Over time, it is expected that elements of the plan should and will change. But the essentials should not: **Prosperity**---a vibrant Chinatown anchored by cultural attractions, as well as industry, dining and shopping; **Longevity**---an authentic Chinatown, that Chinese-Americans of different generations, backgrounds, and incomes all call home. Together, these are the ingredients of an Exceptional Chinatown.

Summarized from a working draft prepared by Phillips Preiss Shapiro Associates, to be released and revised in fall 2003.

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