

Moving Out

Alternatives to Manhattan's Chinatown Are Causing the Area to Border on Extinction

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Residents of Chinatown are frustrated, and with good reason.

Business remains 30 to 40 percent below what it was before Sept. 11, 2001. And last fall, two of the community's retail icons, 32 Mott Street General Store and Kam Kuo, the six-story supermarket located across the street at 7 Mott, closed.

There is no leadership in Chinatown, residents say. There's no 5- or 10-year plan to indicate the economic situation is going to change. The poverty level is so low and the situation is so bad, they claim, that senior women have resorted to looking through the trash, searching for deposit-yielding bottles and cans.

There is homelessness now too. Chinese people are sleeping on the streets and in Columbus Park.

"You never saw Chinese people sleeping outside before," said one woman who has lived in the neighborhood for nearly 30 years.

Though government leaders at all levels say they are working to reverse some of these trends, many residents have given up on Chinatown and have moved to the satellite communities of Flushing, Queens, or Sunset Park in Brooklyn, where better services are being offered.

But City Councilmember John Liu of Flushing stressed that Flushing is not a Chinatown.

"People may think they are fairly similar," he said during an interview in his Manhattan office, "but in terms of ethnic origin, Flushing is vastly different. There is a completely different community speaking to one another. In Flushing, there is a huge presence of Korean Asians, South Bangladeshi, and Pakistani."

Of the 66 percent of the population that is of Asian descent in Chinatown, 96 percent were Chinese according to the 2000 census — Chinatown is by and large Cantonese and Fugianese, Liu pointed out — and slightly more than one percent were of Asian Indian heritage.

Kay Xu, a reporter for the online Chinese-language news service Chinesenewsnet.com, said there has been a tremendous discussion in Chinese-language papers about the influx of Chinese immigrants into these outer-borough communities.

"It has not been reported in many of the English-language papers," she said, "but it is a big topic in the Chinese papers. Everyone writes about how people are moving to Flushing more and more."

Flushing does differ from Chinatown, however, in ways that extend beyond the region in Asia from which its residents immigrate. Namely, there is a strong eco-

nomie growth, which has been absent in Chinatown for nearly three years.

In November, the City Council established a Business Improvement District there, and Liu is "looking to make Flushing a destination of choice, where people come to shop and go for a vast array of different cuisines.

"We want to make this community a vibrant financial center that is very commercial rather than industrial," Liu said with contained excitement. "We are hoping the area would complement Chinatown. We do not want Flushing to be a second Chinatown. We want Chinatown to come back; we don't want to compete with it."

These communities, which were seen as temporary alternatives to Manhattan's Chinatown when transportation arteries closed after the attacks on the World Trade Center prohibited many



Still Suffering: Next generation tries to revive an ailing neighborhood

from coming in and out of the area, are now becoming permanent communities, said H.M. Choy, the owner of the Silk Road Mocha Café, a community outpost at 30 Mott St.

"Chinatown is becoming extinct," he told *New York Resident*. "People are moving out to other communities where their needs are better met."

Despite this, Choy, a resident of the predominately immigrant neighborhood for more than three decades, and a number of young artists are not budging. The semiretired certified public accountant opened the coffee shop last May, and over the last few months he has added an upstairs exhibition space and a basement that resembles a teenager's rec room for poetry readings, art installations, and open mic nights.

The coffee shop, opened in the former rectory of the Transfiguration Church, is bright and airy with exposed brick, blonde wood trim, and the typical coffee-shop décor of small café tables and chairs lining one wall. Upstairs is a cultural space that currently features "History of Chinatown," a photography exhibit organized by the Museum of Chinese in the Americas.

The collection of black-and-white photographs, many of which resemble the grainy cinematic graphic finish of Martin Scorsese's 2002 film, *Gangs of New York*, and date back to the late 19th century, tell the story of Chinatown.

"I want to show the community they have experienced even worse things since Chinatown was developed," Choy said, pointing to a photograph taken during the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, when the area was in its initial growing stages. "Seeing this heritage makes us feel at ease in light of the current situation. We are trying to bring back the value of Chinatown."

Jami Gong, founder and host of Take-Out Comedy, the monthly stand-up show at the new club Yello at 32 Mulberry St., is part of a young generation promoting the area. His goal is to revive the neighborhood through entertainment. "I don't care where you eat — if you eat in Harlem, Chelsea, the Upper West Side," he said passionately, "but if I can bring you down to Chinatown for entertainment, I've done my job."

Gong participated in the city's comedy club circuit for three years at such clubs as Gotham, Don't Tell Mama, and the New York Comedy Club. Then, in December 2002, while flying to Hong Kong to visit his ailing

grandmother, he had a vision of re-creating the scene in Chinatown. His grandmother died while he was in flight; he feels the idea was a gift from her.

Frequently using words such as "awesome" and "fantastic" to express his enthusiasm for the neighborhood where he grew up, Gong feels he is "single-handedly bringing people to Chinatown." TakeOut Comedy's first anniversary show, scheduled for Jan. 23, is already sold out.

Business owners, however, continue to blame Park Row, which government officials closed immediately after Sept. 11 and a stretch of which remains closed, for the economic downturn. The area has been used as a police parking lot instead.

And many are not convinced the Silk Road Mocha Café and Gong's TakeOut Comedy are enough to re-suscitate the neighborhood. The Asian American Federation of New York delivered a presentation on Jan. 13 on the census profiles of Chinatown to expand public understanding of some of the problems plaguing the area and to begin a dialogue within the community.

According to the information discussed, culled from the 2000 census, 45 percent of all Chinatown households earn a yearly income of less than \$20,000, and almost one-third live below the poverty level, compared with 21 percent of all city residents, researchers at the federation said.

But the response to such stark findings was indifferent, with many saying, "So now what?"

While residents of the area that comprises 50 percent of Lower Manhattan complain that help has not been forthcoming, it seems many characteristics associated with a neighborhood of a predominately foreign-born population creates an environment shrouded in fear of immigration laws and resistance of assimilation.

Tammy To, a constituent liaison for Councilmember Alan Gerson, who represents the district, said local merchants opposed proposals for a development corporation or Business Improvement District in Chinatown because it would increase taxes.

Many of the storefronts in the area are located in tenement buildings with upstairs apartments, she said. Business owners don't want to have to transfer those taxes to tenants.

"We are trying to develop a way to fulfill the same function without adding taxes," To said. "We are meeting with the business community next month to deal with the issue."

And the large cash economy that exists underground in Chinatown, developed because integrating into the formal labor economy has been difficult as a result of language problems and lack of training assistance and access to city services, prohibits many from seeking formal help.

"Persistent language barriers make it difficult to communicate needs to welfare organizations," said Helen Fang, a benefits counselor for the Center for the Independence of the Disabled of New York. "And social assistance tends to be low because enrollment in the program makes it more difficult to support families immigrating into the city."

City leaders such as Manhattan borough president C. Virginia Fields reached out to FIMA to diminish these barriers by encouraging them to simplify the application process so non-English speakers could receive the aid they needed.

Still, according to a study of 153 businesses in Lower Manhattan and Chinatown conducted last July by the Asian American Business Development Center, a significant number of them had still not received any grant assistance.

Both To and Dan Wilson, a spokesman for Fields, said the councilmember and the borough president intend to continue to promote programs that encourage job development in the area. Specifically, Gerson plans to initiate a partnership with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation to sponsor an incubator for garment workers to ensure jobs.

Chinatown is hoping it's not too little, too late. ■