RICE UNIVERSITY

Strip Culture:
Emergent Identities in the Suburban Landscape

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Architecture

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Houston, Texas
April 2009
ABSTRACT

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The history of the ethnic enclave as urban phenomena exhibits innovative use of existing space and infrastructure. Adaptability becomes second nature for survival. In the suburban neighborhood of Alief, a large ethnic population has rendered the neighborhood into a fascinating and dynamic international microcosm.

Coined the new Chinatown, this multi-cultural neighborhood is a dynamic place, as one moves through the urban scape they are confronted with street signs in Chinese, Middle Eastern Cafes, Spanish Newspapers, and Buddhist Temples.

Signs and graphics label, however they insufficiently capture the energy of the community, and instead create caricature negating the uniqueness and dynamism of the neighborhood. Culture here, is a layered experience of the senses.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to:

Blair Satterfield, Eva Franch, & Fares el Dah-dah
Vien Duc Ma and Hoa Ngoc Trinh
and finally to Ngoc, Hung, Tiffany, & Richard
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The History of the Ethnic Enclave</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Target: Houston, Texas</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban Chinatown: Bellaire Blvd.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anatomy of a Strip Center</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal for a Method of Design</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood 01: The High [Rise] School</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood 02: The Mega-Church</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood 03: The Drive-Up Theater</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ethnic enclave is an important product of our mobile culture and society, this pattern is an international one, but nowhere is this phenomena more prevalent than in the United States. Most cities in the United States reflect the vision of the Founding Fathers, an amalgamation of the world in clusters and concentrations. Different races, ethnicities, and cultures moving, mixing, and always changing. At times in seemingly random places these spectacular populations grow. Attracted to job opportunities with the advantages of surrounding oneself with families that share in certain core values, these pockets grow to full fledged, self-sustaining, and colorful communities. The U.S. city is a vision come true.
There is a conflict however, that plagues these neighborhoods. The conflict of the ethnic enclave is that while it provides a safe haven it can also be a vehicle for isolation. It is within this tension that this thesis proposal takes place.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the belief that the ethnic enclave aids in the preservation of a cultural identity. The neighborhood and its residents play a big part in helping to retain the character and history that is present in such areas.

It is easy to understand why one may see voluntary segregation as form of preservation, but simultaneously view any form of segregation as a social, political, and economic method of control with negative effects on the residents and city.
The ethnic enclave in the United States is not exclusive to any one particular race however, Chinese and other Asian immigrants have consistently carved their identities into existing city fabrics. Sometimes these neighborhoods or collection of businesses occur out of need, other times such as in the case of San Francisco, the neighborhood was a result of legislative acts which prohibited Chinese from owning property with the exception of several blocks. Inevitably this area became Chinatown.
San Francisco, New York City, and other large metropolitan Chinatowns are examples of a type of segregation. Chinatown is unique, not only do smells, sounds, and sights vary, but the visual difference between signage in Chinese versus English is so vast that it often intrigues as much as it isolates. As people browse through the shops or sit in restaurants, they enjoy the novelty but suspect that the workers are talking about them as they chatter behind cash registers.
Threshold (threshold) noun
1: gate door
2: the place or point of entering or beginning: outset
3: the point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced
4: a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not
Houston provides this thesis and its inhabitants with a unique breeding ground and situation. Often described as a sprawling city of roadways connecting one distant point to another, the city can be very unconnected when it comes to its people. A suburban town to its core, Houston’s ethnic population, often times characterized by lower income households are dependant on businesses and services that are close in proximity to their residences.
The city has a history of segregation, the Ward system originated from lines drawn as a political/voting designations and were structured soon after the city was founded in 1837. Even though the demise of the ward system was quick lasting approximately 60 years, the identities created as a result of still remain today. The population of the Wards remains majority minority.

These neighborhoods are tied to the people that occupy them, for example the Second Ward is known as El Segundo Barrio and the Third Ward's current population is 90% Black. African-American and Hispanic-American minorities were not the only group to make significant contributions on the urban scape. Today's concept of diversity in Houston and other large metropolitan areas encompasses of a multitude of ethnicities and is not about divisions of Black, White, and Hispanic alone.
These groups of ‘others’ have grown in number and are carving out pockets of commercial and residential zones. The first Chinese came to Houston during World War II, making the population of Chinese grow to 240. New immigrant populations fostered new needs, and creating an identity in Downtown was their first step. The first Chinese that called Houston home bought land and opened businesses in Downtown.
Suburban Chinatown: Bellaire Blvd.

As the Asian population grew in the late 70's and early 80's, many found themselves starting off in housing projects and low-income neighborhoods within downtown. As is fitting with large metropolitan areas such as San Francisco and New York City this original Chinatown of Houston provided a new beginning and stood as a symbolic gateway to success.

It was during this time as well that a large Vietnamese population began to filter into the city. This migration brought with it a larger need and greater opportunities to fulfill those needs. Simultaneously the sprawl of Houston inspired a movement outwards of this ethnic population.

The map above illustrates these neighborhoods. Fulfilling needs, seeking success, and looking to carve out a distinct identity combined with an untapped resource in low land prices found in an area known as Alief in the Southwest portion of Houston, the Houston Asian population staked their territory.
Integral to identity and success is the ability for one to own private property, whether it is a home or a business, the entrepreneurial spirit within the Asian community is strong.

All these factors combined to effectively and nearly permanently move the typical downtown Chinatown to its atypical suburban offspring. This neighborhood is defined by a major commercial road, Bellaire Boulevard. This is where the road has lead, to a stretch of road 4 miles long lined completely in one-story strip centers.
Intersection (in·ter·sec·tion) noun

1: a place or area where two or more things (as streets) intersect
2a: the set of elements common to two or more sets; especially: the set of points common to two geometric configurations
2b: the operation of finding the intersection of two or more sets
The Intersection Model defined by these characteristics:
1- Immigrant population embedded outside of the city center
2- Boundaries are implied through signage
3- Circulation through the neighborhood is with a car or public transportation.

Examples:
Monterrey Park, CA and
Houston, TX

The Threshold Model traditional Chinatown defined by these characteristics:
1- Immigrant population embedded into an existing urban fabric.
2- A threshold is introduced to announce and/or celebrate this segregation.
3- Travel in this neighborhood is typically on foot.

Examples:
New York City, NY
San Francisco, CA
Chicago, IL
Anatomy of a Strip Center
Catalog of Parts

36 Points of Vehicle
Exit and Entry

63 Points of Pedestrian
Exit and Entry

Roads

Parking Lots

Front of House

Back of House

Back of House Threshold

Front of House Threshold

Active Green Space
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalog of Parts - Simplified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>active green space - 1,300,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parking lots - 1,200,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roadways - 400,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total building area - 400,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>front of house - 200,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back of house - 120,000 sf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back of house threshold 4,000 lf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>front of house threshold 6,000 lf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strip Mall - Dissected

Spatial Relationships

Use Relationships
Scent Dispersal

Auditory Levels

Rhythm and Meter
Proposal for a Method of Design
Programmatic Reshuffle

Efficiency Model
Streamlined efficiency provides for visual clarity between layers of program
Hyper extends the vehicular surface

Modulate
Repeated Efficiency creates zones and neighborhoods
Breaks up the visual plane into layers

Trajectory
Trajectories direct a user's view and movement
The relationships of scale and density vary along the trajectory

Jacob's Ladder
The connection between fractured program serves as a pivot
Programmatic hierarchies shift from 'back' to 'front'
Programmatic Hierarchies

- Commercial or Front of House
- Utility or Back of House
- Active Green Space
- Front of House Threshold
- Back of House Threshold

The Consumer
Average duration of stay, 20 min - 2 hours

The Pedestrian
6 mph, average duration of stay, 20 min +

The Driver
35 mph plus, duration of stay, 15 minutes

The Owner & Employee
Average duration of stay, 4 - 12 hours +

User Types and Classifications
Elements of Experience - Shift the mode of representation from the sign or the visual to the experiential using the following elements

- Sound
- Smell
- Views
- Rhythm
1 - The High [Rise] School Neighborhood
2 - The Mega-Church Neighborhood
3 - The Drive-In Theater Neighborhood
4 - Swim facilities
5 - Sporting Facilities
6 - Housing
7 - Parking
8 - Community Gardens

* all other spaces are designated for commercial use
☐ - pedestrian walk-ways

Proposal for New Chinatown
The Hi-Rise School

Estacionamiento
restaurant supply

Mr. Transmission
Auto Zone
Burger King
Church's Chicken
Long John Silver's

FURNITURE
foot massage

title & taxes
Banco

audio & video
presbyterian church
tattoo

insurance
photo studio

Neighborhood 01: The High[Rise] School
Neighborhood 02: The Mega-Church
Neighborhood 03: The Drive-Up Theater

- Karaoke
- Hair & make up
- Real estate
- Photography
- Health insurance
- Driving school
- Paint supply
- Car wash
- McDonald's
- CVS
- Van Auto Service
- Home Depot

- Sala de belleza
- Empleo
- Inmobiliaria
- Fotografía
- Servicios de guardería
- Servicios de salud
- Escuela
- Servicio de limpieza
- CVS
- Dentista
- Café y panadería
- McDonald's
- Oficina de correos
- Impuesto a la renta
- Two Ways
- Driving school
- Paint supply
- Car wash
- McDonald's
- CVS
- Dentista
- Café y panadería
- McDonald's
- Oficina de correos
- Impuesto a la renta
- Two Ways
- Driving school
- Paint supply
- Car wash
Live music at the drive-in theater
Annotated Bibliography

Hester, Randy, *Design for Ecological Democracy*
pp. 229, 259, 263, 297 limited extent diagram, flexible building form diagram, adaptable arrangements diagram, streets inside diagram
pp. 292-297 Chavis Heights Revitalization

Fong, P. Timothy, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California*
pp. 29 global patterns in the immigration of Asians to the West
pp. 66 different immigrant subgroups, new rich versus established families, gang violence as a result of new immigrants, violence against immigrants
pp. 69 constant concern of being accepted, rejection, and community backlash
pp. 174 types of businesses and problems of growth in regards to new Asian owners
pp. 177 no longer just a black, white, and Hispanic issue, but one of Asian v. Hispanic, political dissonance and patterns of racial distrust

Saito, T. Leland, *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in Suburban Los Angeles*
pp. 41 reasserting 'whiteness' into Monterey Park, CA through architecture and the ensuing battle to 'reclaiming' a commercial mall, how a cultural identity of 'American' was established. resolution for building style was to incorporate a 'Mediterranean' style, it was not overtly western and colonial to satisfy the minorities, but it was still within the realm of western as to satisfy the white population.
pp. 46 pitting minorities against each other, material and symbolic control
pp. 52 cultural celebrations have to distinguish as well as not exclude and cultural celebrations create an hierarchy
pp. 53 Monterey Park (suburban) growth was so threatening because it was indefinite.

pp. 6 different stratifications of within Chinatown. Generational (young vs. old), Class (working vs. professional), Sex (gender roles), Familial (traditional roles of the family), and Political (elite vs. grass roots)
pp. 7 Civil rights activism within the New York City Chinatown was in concert with Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's.
pp. 13 Issues facing the first generation of Chinese, picking up the type of jobs that white American's did not want during the Gold Rush. Jobs which Chinese would take included building the railroads, levees, reclaiming marshlands, textile mill work, factory jobs, and cigar rolling. 1875 Chinese population grew to 105,000 in the West. 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Barring all Chinese Immigration to the US.
Original NYC Chinatown was a 6 block area with 15,000 people. 1977, 22% of the total US Chinese population resided in NYC.

Problems of NYC Chinatown, growth was difficult in Chinatown because of physical constraints of existing urban fabric and dilapidated buildings.

The Garment industry as a business became appealing similar to the restaurant business through the "multiplier affect". Chinese manufacturers of industrial grade sewing machines. Thus, the economic spine of Chinatown became these industries.

As rental rates increased in Chinatown, vendors would start to rent space outside of buildings, on sidewalks, creating an interesting market vernacular. Newspaper stands pop up under stairs, side walk rent forces vendors to use hatch doors as the 'behind the counter' space. 80's marked a shift in the industrial dependent economy of Chinatown, because of rental hikes and increased interest by non-Chinese the economy shifted to one of a professional services / post-industrial economy. Gentrification becomes a concern. Old factory spaces are being converted to office spaces, thus a shift in clientele occurs.

Labor issues are increasing in Chinatown, excessive hours with less pay. The illusion that the Chinese are all upwardly mobile can start to be dispelled. Entrepreneurs cannot rely on familial support as they did thus class unification becomes stronger, leading to more friction between classes as well.

The popularity of gambling, a form of social interaction, a means to escape, a way of resolv­ing savings/monetary issues.

Building of a prison extension on the perimeter of Chinatown causes uproar in community. Research NYC's Chinatown planning council.

Fight for equality by Chinese overlaps and picks up steam from Civil Rights events of the 60's. 1974 Confucious Plaza, NYC. Low income housing project in Chinatown. RAIN - Rehabilitation in action for the Improvement of the Neighborhood. Housing development rebuilding and managed by residents. Housing provided by need and not race.

Employment of individuals in an underground economy.

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