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The Flaneur Looks Up: Reading Chinatown Verticalities

Gary W. McDonogh and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong

Abstract

While verticality seems intrinsic to the fabric of the modern city—a concrete second nature—understanding this dimension involves negotiations of people, functions, scale, and representations, especially as mobile people transform existing cityscapes. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in Chinatowns worldwide, where generations of Chinese, interacting with complex cities around them, have created places for varied immigrants and dispersed descendants in public and private spaces above and below the street. Verticality here is both intimate and performative, internal and external, “real” and imagined, as this walk through the Chinatown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA) illustrates. Deciphering layers and dimensions of verticality, at the same time, expands our perceptions of both Chinatowns as places and the growth and structure of modern cities.

The smells of barbecued meats wafting out to the streets...the flashes and percussion of a New Year's *Lion Dance* echoing against the bricks of aging buildings...the noises of children on their way to school...a profusion of fresh fruits, vegetables, and seafood spilling out onto the sidewalk...old people drinking tea in the quiet bakeries or basking in the winter sun...the neon signs inviting us indoors to eat, to sing...the Maneki-neko cats—Japanese intruders—waving paws rhythmically in windows or the red shrines with fruits and incense beside the door...Moments of quiet in the morning as the neighborhood awakes...late night lights, crowds, noise, and trash. While Chinatowns worldwide vary in their histories, configurations, peoples, power, and imagery, they are invariably lived on the street level (McDonogh and Wong 273-296). For both Chinese and non-Chinese, whether residents, workers, visitors or officials, the ground floor businesses of Chinatowns have emerged as the primary spaces of interaction that define them as visible ethnic enclaves. Whether stereotyped as different or recognized as a locus of everyday interactions, this literal plane of ground floor existence marks each Chinatown as a place and a process; connects it to the city around it; and makes it recognizable as such. While the larger built environment may consist of squat shop houses, multi-story tenements or soaring skyscrapers, these street-level interactions mean that our eyes stray upwards only momentarily to arches, signs, or cornices or downward to half-hidden shops (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Streetscape of San Francisco Chinatown 2017. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

Nonetheless, as the work of many people who have dealt with the architecture and societies of varied Chinatowns remind us, what we see at first embodies only part of the complexity of Chinatowns, as such places are also enacted vertically in both social formations and imaginations. Indeed, for more than a century, as Ivan Light has pointed out in "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction: The Moral Career of American Chinatowns, 1880-1940," Chinatown

residents themselves learned how to concentrate global services in accessible spaces and move other, more private activities to more discrete upper floors (Light 387-394). Chinese associations, businesses, and residents make use of generally pre-existing built environments, including upper stories and subterranean floors for storage and labor. Rising upward, buildings in Chinatowns are adorned with signs and images, while interiors harbor not only residences but also businesses, factories, social gathering places, and even temples. Their external facades, moreover, may be marked by proud signs boasting the ownership of regional societies or the architectural imposition of Chinese features on pre-existing industrial buildings—roofs, balconies, and decorations, as our initial photo of San Francisco's Chinatown shows. At the same time, these upper stories have often become battlegrounds over the limits of Chinese presence, whether in the conflicts between Chinese newcomers and indigenous owners or the problematic contemporary gentrification of many North American Chinatowns. Meanwhile, Chinatowns as mythic places often are linked to icons of distant pagodas and legends of underground mysteries from film and literature that contribute to the global imaginary of Chinatowns.

Chinatowns as global spaces embody multiple meanings across cities that transcend any individual enclaves. At the same time, they raise questions about the parallel evolution of other Chinese architectures. Traditional Chinese architecture, in fact, was more horizontal than vertical although with changing modernities in China and its diaspora, experimentations with verticality and modernity appear in the 19th and 20th century. These range from the construction of newly modern schools and other buildings in Mainland China later characterized as "Chinese Renaissance" to the fanciful towers (*diaolou*) of the Kaiping of southern China, which imported echoes of European martial towers to village strongholds in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 20th and 21st centuries, burgeoning cities of Greater China, from Hong Kong to Shanghai to Taipei, have become cauldrons of verticality where 40 to 128 -story buildings map vertical neighborhoods of public and private usage from public housing to multi-story shopping podia to aerial restaurants with commanding views of the city, with cinemas, hotels, and residences in between. These processes are independent of Chinatowns that emerged in the 19th century around the Pacific Rim and then spread across the Americas and Europe, although they may converge anew when Chinese multinationals build new skyscrapers in non-Chinese cities, inside or outside of Chinatowns.

Instead of exploring this trajectory, this essay explores multiple layers of Chinatowns outside Greater China, where Chinese multinationals fit into other existing cityscapes. To do so, we draw on a decade of ethnographic study in scores of cities and Chinatowns worldwide as well as historical and urbanistic readings across even more cases where Chinese multinationals have engaged in opportunities and constraints provided by the built environment. We anchor this analysis by walking through and closely reading our "local" Chinatown in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, although similar processes of social construction recur worldwide. Pointing out both shared questions and divergent resources

and solutions, we speak not only to Chinatowns as a global laboratory for the understanding of modernity but also to other readings of vertical cities that can profit from knowing the intimacy and structures of global Chinatowns.

At the same time, we wish to raise more general questions about verticality itself as a theme for anthropological investigation. First, we continue to work with and for a vocabulary of social verticality that can be sensitive to nuances that rely not only on architectural divisions like floors, basements, and roofs, but also on experience and gaze. Even the “street-level” of flat social sciences, for example, must include layers of streets and sidewalks, interactions at a middle level with vendors and goods, eye level attractions (and other sensory experiences of smell, sound, and taste) and those cues that move our gaze up and down, invoking mobility and connection as well as height. Second, we question dimensions of public and private that are negotiated around different scales of verticality, including semi-private spaces of transition and questions of ownership. At the same time, as a third point, public verticality is linked to performance as a way of claiming Chinese space in the city, which can introduce a larger question of the control and meaning of the skyline itself. Finally, as in all studies of Chinatown, we must grapple with the interplay of social structure and myth that imbue space for Chinese multinationals and others.

To explore these layers, we first look downward from the street to the real and mythic space of underground Chinatown. In the next section, our gaze travels upwards to the second floor and its role as a transitional, semi-public space, still attached to street-level activities. This allows us to draw contrasts with spaces of privacy and conflict above, on the third, fourth, and fifth floors. We end with the roofs and spires of Chinatown as markers and statements within the community and the city as a whole. While rapid and suggestive, these notes underscore the intimacy and centrality of verticality to the life and performance of Chinatown within the city that should raise similar questions from Paris to Johannesburg, Lima to Yokohama, as well as in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Toronto and other famous Chinese enclaves across North America.

Visibility on the Streets: *Flaneurs* in Chinatown

As our impressionistic opening paragraph suggests, Chinatown streetscapes offer deeply evocative and sensorial routes, even though they are the most ordinary spaces of encounter between Chinatowns and others, both resident and visitors. Nevertheless, in countless walks for research or everyday affairs, alone and with others, we have witnessed how the sheer variety of Chinatown streets has underscored the ways in which even the streetscape embodies complex elements of verticality that are constitutive of the Chinese multinationals’ claims to space, formal and informal, and need to be disentangled.

One distinctive elements of street-level experience, for example, emerges through the horizontal, physical bounding of Chinatowns—the edges of this district that divide urban social claims and activities, often along major thoroughfares and through monumental constructions. Philadelphia’s Chinatown has literal walls to the north, where construction of the Vine Street Expressway cut through the dense fabric of the neighborhood. Chinatown activists fought this project for years, eventually forcing planners to change its route so as to spare a historic Catholic Church and school as well as pushing the expressway below ground level to control traffic and noise. A sound barrier wall was eventually added, marked with Chinese characters, which frames openings for those driving into the core blocks. Across the highway, another wall girds the historic Roman Catholic Church and School of Holy Redeemer, which has served the Philadelphia Chinese community for decades and now anchors “North” Chinatown as a community (Figure 2).

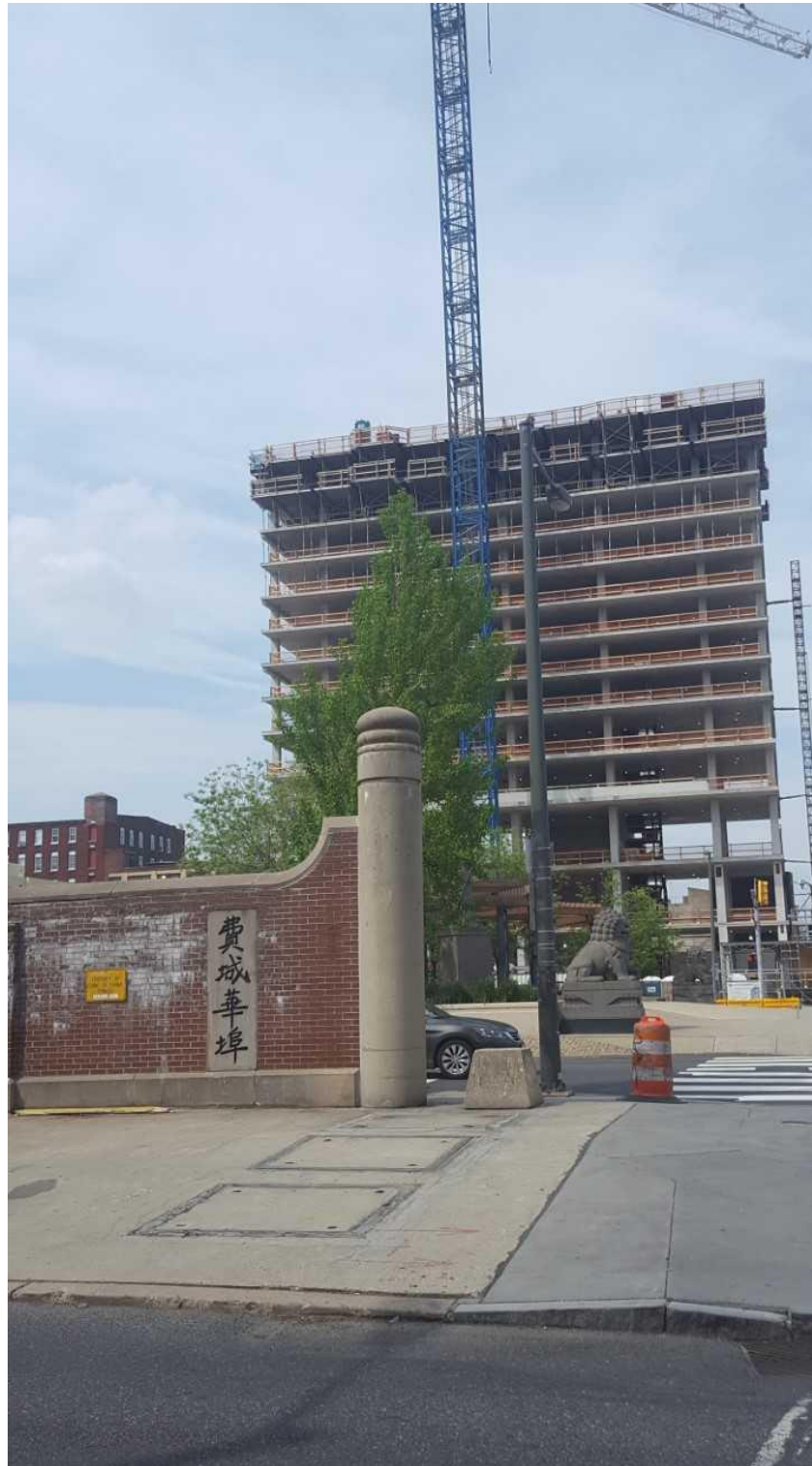


Fig. 2. Sound wall separating Philadelphia Chinatown and I-476 with Eastern Tower under construction in the background, 2018. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

To the South stands the massive Friendship Arch, at 10th and Arch Street. This polychrome gateway, derived from a traditional Chinese memorial as well as other examples worldwide, is often taken as an entry point by those coming to Chinatown on foot from Center City. This arch also represents a concrete claim to place, as Kathryn Wilson notes in her book *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia Chinatown.*, as well as linking Philadelphia to other Chinatowns worldwide where arches of varied scale and ornament have become iconic markers of place identity (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. 10th Street, Philadelphia and Chinatown Arch, 2018. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

To the East, another “soft” wall appears, with squat residential developments facing Chinatown on 9th street, girded by more parking lots and urban public services, including the main police station and health services. Further east stands Independence Mall, an open green space framing Independence Hall. This “emptied” park, primarily lawn, was also carved out of row houses and business buildings of the Tenderloin that were once not dissimilar to the built environment of Chinatown itself. Finally, to the West, the Philadelphia Convention Center, which opened in 1993, now offers 1,000,000 square feet of exhibition space and holds more than 250 events annually. Certainly, Conventioneers have enriched Chinatown restaurants and shops on their own strolls, although mega-events essentially collapse Chinatown parking for regular visitors for church or dim sum. But the Convention Center building itself offers only scattered first floor openings in its brick walls facing Chinatown.

This walling process already incorporates multiple scales of verticality, realized as multi-story gates, tall, blank walls, and emptiness. As we noted in the introduction, even the streetscape includes multiple layers of activity and marking, from the zodiac medallions that claim Chinatown sidewalks to the signs and doors pulling us upward. Philadelphia’s Chinatown also occupies the pre-existing residential and commercial fabric of the city, which means buildings with basements, and thus participates in the subterranean urbanism of many modern Western cities (In a few cases, these edifices have been opened up as

stores accessed by staircases from the street—housing a souvenir business, a closed nail salon, and a store that specializes in gilt for Chinese interiors.) Most Philadelphia basements, more prosaically, function as sites of storage or kitchens for restaurants, visible primarily as gaping maws for delivery that open along Chinatown's main streets. One grocery store does have a major section downstairs (although high turnover items like fresh vegetable, fruits, meat, and seafood are on the main street level). Similarly, a multi-story garage includes a small Chinese Mall on its subterranean level that includes a large grocery store and cheap luncheonette.

The prosaic nature of this basement Chinatown contrasts with the mythic quality associated with undergrounds in Chinatowns worldwide, especially in mass media. This vision of the underground (with its mysterious criminal associations) embodies longstanding fears of the Chinese as mysterious and even dangerous others in the city. An early reification of this imagery appeared with the Underground China exhibit of San Francisco's Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915. Alongside the Somali Village and other attractions of its Joy Zone was an exhibit called Underground Chinatown, which featured opium dens, secret passages, and even scenes of white slavery—until protests by the Chinese Consulate forced the closure of the exhibit. While varied underground Chinatown spaces did exist "in reality," their evocation is much more powerful and generalized across fictional Chinatowns. From the heroes and heroines of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels and films to the 1986 John Carpenter action-fantasy film, *Big Trouble in Little China*, this mystical underworld has evoked malevolent Chinese power. Hence, while the underground spaces we approach in Philadelphia and other Chinatowns are resolutely ordinary, the "idea" and associations of the underground remind us how powerfully Chinatown is an imagined space in popular culture, where truth and fiction mingle and images flow from cinema to history to tourism.

Looking Upwards

As noted, even street level interactions in Chinatown often draw our eye upwards just as fanciful lions rise to snatch lettuce (*choy*) from above the doors of local businesses. Most Chinatown gateways are 2-3 stories tall: Philadelphia's is 40 feet tall, with many details underneath that reward our inspection. Similarly, murals around Philadelphia Chinatown draw our eyes upwards, especially when they tell historical stories that claim space for generations of Chinese occupation, like the Philadelphia mural whose historical narrative flows downward from early migration to the 1960's struggles (Figure 4).



Fig. 4: Multi-story historical mural in Philadelphia Chinatown, 2018. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

More insistently, commercial signage playing with neon and various Chinese and Western calligraphies claim our attention above eye level. In fact, the celebration of signage is one of the characteristic images of Chinatowns on posters at the same time as it heightens the commercial interactions of the street, drawing us into restaurants, bubble tea stores, or Karaoke clubs (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Layers of meaning: street level and signage climbing upper floors in Philadelphia Chinatown. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

The vivid commercial signage that bombards us across multiple facades and floors in Chinatowns coexists with a more official vertical recognition of the legitimacy of Chinese space. While a Chinatown arch, as McDonogh has argued in "Open Portals: Gateways and Chinatowns," is the most soaring multi-government-sponsored vertical symbol of many Chinatowns worldwide (McDonogh 252-263), in many cities official street signs may also include Chinese translations and calligraphy. Street furniture such as the red lantern light poles of parts of Philadelphia Chinatown also involve government legitimization as does a Pennsylvania State Historical Marker on Race Street (in English) commemorating the birth of Philadelphia's Chinatown. Ironically, another plaque in English *and* Chinese on the first-floor wall of a nearby restaurant restates this claim as made by a competing Chinese organization.

Meanwhile, in the interior of the commercial buildings lining the streets, the second floor often provides an intermediate space intimately connected to the first (as in Chinese and non-Chinese shop houses worldwide). For Philadelphia restaurants and Karaoke bars, this floor sometimes entails the extension and privatization of first floor activities. For larger restaurants, it is relatively common to have a banquet space for weddings and other ceremonies, sometimes with a separate entrance and staircase. Here scores of round tables can be set up around a dragon-phoenix stage for the wedding couple. Even if this space may be opened for overflowing weekend dim sum crowds, it will be set apart with flowers and tulle on May and June weekends. In smaller restaurants that adapt a single row house, rooms repurpose the floor plans of domestic space to create private rooms for parties and Karaoke. Here, the second and even third floors remain connected by once-domestic interior staircases.

Other second floor services and spaces are more clearly separated from street level activities although visible and linked to street traffic. Common categories in this regard in the Philadelphia Chinatown include offices for lawyers and doctors, educational facilities (daycare and senior care) and massage spas. These are generally “public” destinations with clear clienteles. Thus, medical and legal services have more reserved signage than the colorful announcements of daycare centers or the more provocative mixture of health and sensuality seen in first floor announcements of massage services above.

By their sheer need for connection, these and other upper floors intrude on the street level—usually with a bland separate entry that connects to stairs and elevators that reach higher floors. This creates a syncopated rhythm on the street level, where flashy open doors of street-level enterprises alternate with ordinary, closed ones, overlooked by passersby. Yet, these intermediate spaces, accessible to the *flaneur*, mediate spaces of privacy and separation that become more complex above (Figure 9, for example).

The Forbidden *Flaneur*: Above the Second Floor

Second floors in many urban configurations constitute intermediate zones, especially in high-rise buildings, whether the generally 3-6 story buildings of Philadelphia or taller buildings that we have seen in other American and European Chinatowns. Above the second floor offices and services, inside and outside of Chinatown, spaces tend to be more private whether as residences or semi-private businesses or associations. At the same time, in both recent Chinatowns and older ones facing gentrification, the conflict between active Chinese businesses on the first floor and non-Chinese residents and complaints above marks a vertical negotiation of Chinatown itself, in private rather than public spaces (Figure 6)



Fig. 6. Vertical mapping in a Philadelphia Chinatown building: restaurant, 2nd floor salon, 3rd floor residence, and 4th floor Dong An Association. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

Most buildings remain Chinese on the upper floors as well. Often, as befitting a space that is both the first stop and final stop for immigrants, residential spaces are occupied and even divided and subdivided to serve the needs of workers sending money home or old people living on fixed incomes. These are private spaces in terms of rights, yet encompass relations of both ownership and multiple users that may make them active spaces.

Other uses may defy zoning norms (although some of these buildings were certainly created as commercial rather than residential real estate). Businesses, including at least some sweatshops, have been concealed on upper floors in Philadelphia, New York, and other cities. In Philadelphia, at least one Buddhist temple also has been ensconced on upper floors of a ten-story building. While open to a range of people as employees, faithful, and even regular visitors, these spaces are also more likely to seem invisible to passersby on the street below.

More visible semi-public occupants are the varied Chinese societies that own and operate community facilities, including Chinese Benevolent Associations, tongs, surname, and regional associations. Their presence is often marked in Chinese lettering on the outside as well. The Ling Yeong Association on Race Street, for example, has an ornamental balcony bearing the inscription *Ging Yip Lok Kwan—Respect Your Profession* (see Figure 9). At the same time, these associations often manipulate interior spaces to create large meeting rooms or *fongs*, club rooms that could double as spaces of housing and sickcare, central hubs, which Kathryn Wilson has stressed in Philadelphia Chinatown buildings at the turn of the 19th/20th century (Wilson). Today, these rooms often host social gamblers in a semi-private setting almost exclusively for Chinese occupancy; verticality allows distance from the surveillance of the street (and its laws about gambling or closure) and identification of shared interests. In short, McDonogh stands out more on these levels than Wong, much less her elderly father who enjoys his mah jong.

While the divisions of lower and higher levels can structure Chinese zones of privacy and function, this point can also mark a break in populations. Across Chinatowns of the Northeastern United States, elegant older buildings in Chinese neighborhoods have attracted developers targeting gentrifying Center Cities crowd drawn by space rather than place. Some years ago, for example, in Philadelphia, a nuisance complaint was filed by condo dwellers in one gentrified residence against the multi-story sign of a Chinese business on the ground floor which they felt intruded into their space. Complaints of noise and odors emanating from below belie the multiculturalism that attracted gentrifiers to the urban frontier in the first place.

A different version of this vertical conflict over the ownership of space has emerged in new Chinatowns in Europe and other areas where Chinese multinationals have established businesses in the fluid commercial market of the street but do not have access to the more staid residential property markets of upper floors (or may not wish to live there). In the Sedaine-Popincort district of Paris, for example, French neighbors have complained that Chinese wholesalers have turned all traditional street-level businesses, whether bakeries, stationeries, or boutiques into showrooms for clients from Eastern Europe and Africa. Verticality here is a template but meanings can be inverted by social history and social construction—and challenged by changing values of

property and location for Chinatowns that are, as we have shown, often located near booming downtowns.

Whether creating places of labor, association, or residence for Chinese multinationals, or defining a non-Chinese space above Chinatown, these upper floors illustrate the complexities of verticality in their sheer variety as well as the interplay of external lights, signs, and representation with the dramas or retreats within.

Rooftops of Chinatown: Claiming the Sky

The *flaneur* in Chinatown must also look further up from the street to where the streetscape ends. In general, the height of buildings in global Chinatowns follows the pattern of local architecture and the access of Chinese migrants to these properties as residents and owners rather than drawing on Chinese traditional or modern models. (You can read further about architectural styles as expressions of Chinese identity in Anne-Marie Brodehoux' "Learning from Chinatown: The Search for a Modern Chinese Architectural Identity, 1911-1998.")

Perhaps the only exception to this would be free-standing Chinese temples which do not exist in Philadelphia's Chinatown although they might be found in Los Angeles or other settings. This bricolage with existing built environments produces striking variations in form while confirming processes of adaptation and use. Thus, the Chinese community in Paris took over the multi-level *Les Olympiades* development that had opened around the time many Chinese left French colonial possessions in Indochina. Parisians themselves had found it too tall and sterile (resembling the hated towers of the *banlieues*). Figure 7 shows the lively Sinicized cityscape established on a platform two stories above the busy Chinese streetscape on Avenue d'Ivry. In the towers, residences mingle with consultancies and other usages, with a population of Chinese and other immigrants as well as older French citizens.



Fig. 7. Platform level and skyscrapers in *Les Olympiades* in one of Paris' Chinatowns (13th Arrondissement), 2017. Photo credit: G. McDonogh.

In Latin American Chinatowns like in Havana and Lima, by contrast, most buildings rise only 2-3 stories like nearby buildings of the historic center; the same can be said for the shop houses of Singapore's somewhat artificial Chinatown. In the U.S., Chinatowns vary with the general fabric of their surrounding—2 to 3 stories in central Los Angeles, but reaching 4, 6, or more stories in San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York's multiple Chinatowns. New suburban malls by Chinese multinationals for Chinese multinationals, are often the most sprawling and horizontal Chinatowns, although multi-story Hispano-Chinese towers can be found in enclaves like San Gabriel, near Los Angeles.

However, since most Chinatown buildings were *not* built for Chinese migrants by Chinese migrants, their ornamentation above the more actively engaged bottom floors is often minimal and appended to existing construction. Even so, the entire façade may be turned into a cultural statement. This happened within Philadelphia's Chinatown with regard to several restaurants and a failed community center (Figure 8). Here color and features like the red balconies also guide our eyes up to the striking Chinese references of the multi-tiered roof, sloping outwards, with colorful glazed tiles, and a slight upward curl at the end.



Fig. 8. Sinicizing a building through Chinese ornament and roof, Philadelphia 2018. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

The use of this crowning feature, in fact, has been well-explored by Philip Choy in his 2012 survey of the architecture of San Francisco's Chinatown. By the mid-nineteenth century he noted that metal overhangs, balconies, lanterns, and signs were added to Victorian buildings. When rebuilding Chinatown despite urban opposition after the 1906 Earthquake, elites made their buildings become

more obviously Chinese. The Sing Chong and Sing Fat buildings, for example, were incongruously topped with modified pagodas—Buddhist religious structures turned into commercial markers. As Choy adds, upper stories and rooftops reshaped lower levels in the following manner: “The need for commercial ground-floor space left room for only one entrance to the upper floors, so it was necessary to have fire escapes as a second means of exit for each floor” (Choy). Continues Choy, “On the top floor these fire escapes were often transformed into loggias supported by brackets of neoclassical design. The top floor was recessed to allow for a deep overhang simulating an Oriental roof.” This was a “false roof,” which was “supported by columns with Corinthian or composite-type columns. The capitals in turn supported a coffer soffit, often painted bright red, yellow, or green. The ceramic tile roof was of simulated pressed galvanized iron. Neoclassical shapes and cornices profiled the parapet at the roof line” (Choy). These adaptations can be seen as well in Philadelphia buildings (Figure 9), complicating the mapping from street to sky.



Fig. 9. Interplay of fire escapes, balconies, and roof in Philadelphia Chinatown, Race Street, 2018. Note contrast of commercial entries and doors to upper floors. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

Despite—or because of—the generally lower scale of buildings in Chinatowns across the northeastern United States, other meanings are evoked when high-rise Chinese buildings soar above the landscape. The sheer verticality of such projects, built with capital and support from local and global Chinese multinationals, makes visible statements about Chinese presence within the larger city. The 44 story (433 feet/132 meters high) Confucius Plaza cooperative apartment in Manhattan's Chinatown, for example, while scarcely rivalling the great skyscrapers of the city, nonetheless soars distinctively above surrounding neighborhoods and is visible from the distance of many blocks. Similarly, in the Philadelphia's North Chinatown, an area of conflict between Chinatown

expansion and gentrification of an older warehouse district, the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation is now (2018) constructing the Eastern Tower Community Center, work of the Korean-American architect Tejoon Jung. This building, which will include community areas, sports facilities, and subsidized housing, makes a powerful statement in an area of shorter buildings and businesses claimed by Chinese migrants but threatened by more luxurious apartments for yuppies seeking to live near Center City, Philadelphia (Figure 10).

As the local Philadelphia *The Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron noted in 2016, the Eastern Tower will not only anchor and change the Chinese presence in the neighborhood, but may also transform the cultural readings of the lower depths of the expressway that separates the two sections of the Chinese enclave. As she concludes: “A busy highway may not sound like the most desirable location for an apartment house. But the architects think about the environment as a landscape, with the expressway as a fast-flowing river... Feng shui, a Chinese practice historically used to orient buildings, favors locations facing water,” (Saffron). Again, the claims of verticality transform our geography and imaginary of the city as a whole.



Fig. 10. Eastern Tower seen past the protective wall surrounding the Chinese Roman Catholic Parish and School of Holy Redeemer, Philadelphia, 2018. Photo credit: G. McDonogh and C. H-Y. Wong.

Conclusions: Reframing Chinatown Verticality

As urbanist Stephen Graham exclaimed in his 2016 book *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers*, “‘Flat traditions’ in geography and urbanism clearly need to be overturned,” (Graham 9). Through our walk and reflections, we have explored some of the everyday verticalities of Chinatowns we know, primarily in Philadelphia, with occasional references to other cities where we have studied these social and cultural formations. Certainly, other variations could be elaborated in different contexts—the relation and claims of territories in

underground transportation in New York City and Paris, for example, or the meaning of monumental claims in statuary, advertising, and free-standing religious buildings found in other settings. Rather than comprehensive, this essay remains evocative and provocative, as is Chinatown itself.

At the same time, we argue that Chinatown verticality offers important lessons for reading other neighborhoods and cities. As we have shown, verticality is both intimate and performative, involving multi-scalar spatial relationships that conceal as well as reveal. Certainly, Chinatown verticality often becomes a performative statement just as it is in the soaring heights of modern Chinese cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Taipei. These buildings, however, situate urban identities within global competitions completely different from the experience of immigrant Chinatowns despite flows of people, ideas, and investments. And other neighborhoods in Philadelphia might also be mapped in terms of changing activities across floors, without, perhaps, the striking ornamentation or cultural baggage associated with Chinatowns. Yet, in both cases, the creative meaning of verticality—as construction and site of meaning—is paramount.

Within this framework, the boundaries, functions, interactions, and myths of Chinatown prove especially compelling since they involve multiple and distinctive interactions of people and spaces over time. Chinese multinationals in Chinatowns have claimed and refurbished rather than built anew, defending places as often as they have expanded and recreated them. Their verticalities also force us to reconsider the fundamental urban domains of public and private (and semi-public/private) as well as the conflicts that emerge both on the streets and on the floors above. Moreover, these verticalities are intricately layered, perceived in use and hidden from view, dependent on position and knowledge.

As we have also shown, verticality has often been entwined with myth, whether underworld hells or claims for exalted power in the heavens. Curiously, these spaces seem to take us back to human cultural formations of height and depth that preceded and shaped the city itself, even if distilled in very concrete local and historical terms.

Finally, this very panorama of verticalities and meanings suggested by a single case again posits that Chinatowns themselves should be central to the anthropological study of urban space and meaning. In these constantly changing enclaves, creativity, conflict, and negotiation occur beneath our feet and above our head as well as in the everyday streetscapes that draw us into the lives of these changing communities. Together, these features and the people who use and recreate them, constitute the urban theaters we stroll through and study.

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