

How to Save Chinatown: Preserving Affordability and Community Service Through Ethnic Retail

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Introduction

Small businesses are vital to the economic health and development of our economies, creating local jobs, contributing to local economies, and anchoring communities. It is also undeniable that COVID-19 has impacted small businesses across the US and Canada. In a September 2020 report, Yelp showed almost 100,000 businesses had permanently closed due to pandemic closures (Yelp 2020). A report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in late 2020 also revealed that the largest drop in active business owners was higher among Black, Latinx, and Asian business owners compared to their white counterparts (Mills, n.d.).

Chinatowns in North America have been especially hit hard by COVID-19, with declining business patronage even before major shutdowns in early 2020 during Lunar New Year, typically the busiest time of the year (Bliss 2020; Derworiz 2020; Kang 2020). In the months that have followed, recovery for Asian American and Chinese businesses has been impacted also by xenophobic fears, spurred on by political figures and media conflating the origins of the coronavirus with Asian American communities. In December 2020, CityLab reported data showing that in six major US cities, a greater decline in consumer interests in Chinatown was observed when compared to their surrounding metro areas, in some areas up to 40%.

The disappearance of businesses in ethnic enclaves and Chinatowns have been of major concern in cities across the US and Canada in recent years. As tourism and economic development have adapted in planning policy, ethnic enclaves have become a brand of diversity that modern cities utilize, set on a pedestal to attract tourists and investors alike to a slick, international city (Santos, Belhassen, and Caton 2008). These enclaves are represented as a hub of exotic food, theatrical architecture, or an adventurous foreign experience. The preservation and protection of these cultural hubs has been limited, often focused on traditional historic preservation measures that focus on tangible assets such as urban design, physical structures, or symbolic designations.

Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves alike, however, are often borne from discriminatory housing, zoning, and labor practices (Hom 2020a; Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019; Xie and Batunova 2019). These communities that represent safety and acceptance, supported through enterprises that provide goods, services, and activities. Chinatowns, therefore, represent deep histories of both segregation and cultural belonging, intangible assets that are also deserving of preservation and protection. The value of ethnic business and entrepreneurship within these cultural hubs, therefore, extend beyond marketing potential and attraction potential for economic development.

The desire to preserve and protect the cultural, intangible value of these neighborhoods is a difficult endeavor. Traditionally, historic preservation has been the main mechanism for city governments to protect the character and culture of neighborhoods. However, in the case of ethnic enclaves, decades of structural disinvestment and dismantling of affordable housing, the allowance for retail gentrification, and the gap for small business support have also impacted the ability for these

communities to be preserved. In short – physical design and symbolic designations have not been able to preserve the confluence of factors that enable these enclaves. Years of multi-sectoral disinvestment influence how Chinatowns are surviving, and how they may recover from the pandemic. Recently, some cities have developed initiatives targeted at preserving this value created through enterprises in cultural enclaves. In 2015, the City of San Francisco initiated the Legacy Business Registry and Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund through their Office of Small Business in response to an elevated number of commercial evictions and commercial rents. Additionally, the City seeks to recognize and protect “intangible cultural heritage” through a Cultural Heritage Districts program. Similar initiatives have been explored in Los Angeles and Vancouver, but the programs are either in their early stages or have not been completed. However, the findings from assessment remain as artefacts for analysis.

This study investigates the difference in retail change in Chinatowns in Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles – areas of concentrated ethnic businesses where retail change has been a huge concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrently, this study also examines the impact of retaining a legacy business program on retail landscapes, especially amidst the pandemic. Investigating questions include: What is the value of ethnic retail within urban cores? How have legacy businesses supported the retention of ethnic retail before and during the pandemic? What meanings does disappearing ethnic retail convey and what is needed? The selection of these three cities focuses on major west coast cities with large Chinese populations. The focus on Chinatowns from three cities also enables a comparison between cities that have enacted legacy business and small business protection programs, those that have seriously considered enacting one, and ones that have not enacted any programs. Semi-structured interviews, analysis of public documents, and policy analysis were conducted. The results reveal the cross-cultural value of ethnic retail and implications for affordability within urban centers, a structural deficit in planning for the survivability of affordable community enterprises, and an invaluable loss in cultural heritage through ethnic retail. The findings contribute to understanding the value of enabling affordable retail, protecting ethnic entrepreneurship, and developing policy and planning that can inform municipalities on the future of cultural preservation that can provide material impacts for ethnic enclaves.

Background and Literature Review

Urbanism of ethnic entrepreneurship

Ethnic enclaves like Chinatown grew as segregated neighborhoods within larger metropolitan areas congregated in a single neighborhood due to racism and explicitly racist policies preventing them from living elsewhere in the city. However, this congregation in a space also allowed residents to build community, identity, and place for culturally appropriate goods, services, and activities (Liu and Geron 2008). Rather than being seen solely as a method of self-preservation, other scholars have argued that ethnic enclaves like Chinatown are a valuable source of community assets: Chinatown provides immigrant Chinese with opportunities and resources without enabling the loss of their cultural identities (Zhou 2006), and they are an important source of community institutions and assets (like family associations)(Shieh and Chen 2018).

Ethnic-owned businesses are critical for these communities. Min Zhou (2006) introduces the concept of “enclave entrepreneurs”, which are entrepreneurs bound by shared ethnic backgrounds, social structures, and location, and can extend beyond commercial activities, and at a consumer market. These enclave economies can encourage residents of a specific enclave and others from the same ethnic background from outside of the enclave to meet and create social networks between each other that otherwise may have been disrupted by immigration (Zhou 2006). Many of these relationships extend beyond monetary relationships, and on reciprocal relationships that are more flexible and inclusive; as an example, in Los Angeles Chinatown, hours can be more flexible and employers can be more tolerant of children because workers may also be wives and mothers (Zhou 2006). These businesses may also provide employment benefits, hiring those from the community, and providing other benefits in the development of these communities. Ethnic, immigrant and minority businesses, for example, can act as economic, social and cultural centers for their community (Schuch and Wang, 2015; Liu, Miller and Wang, 2013).

However, many of these immigrant and community-oriented businesses are located in neighborhoods facing distinct challenges. Many of these businesses are in neighborhoods threatened by neighborhood change driven by development (Zukin, 2009), like Chinatown in Los Angeles (Lin, 2008). Many may also experience lower cash flows and are smaller than non-ethnic entrepreneurs (Chaganti and Greene, 2002; Perricone, Earle and Taplin, 2001), and many, which are family-owned businesses, may face potential sources of failure in the unwillingness of family members to continue the business down family lines, or may simply be unable to adapt to changing markets (Perricone, Earle, and Taplin, 2001). The loss of these businesses are therefore felt beyond the loss of a typical business. Also found was that businesses located in ethnic communities are more likely to have longevity when they have greater access to capital; however, capital for many of these entrepreneurs can be difficult to access due to many of existing socioeconomic conditions of the owners, a distrust from entrepreneurs to accessing banks, and existing discriminatory barriers to capital (Bates and Robb 2013).

With the positive impacts that these businesses have on their co-ethnic community as a whole, there have been recent attempts to build out support systems to allow these businesses to sustain themselves. With many of these small ethnic businesses being integral to the institutional completeness of a community (Zhou 2006), and with how the disappearance of these businesses signaling gentrification and changing the face of the neighborhood within which they reside (Zukin 2009), it is notable that many of them struggle to survive long (Bates and Robb 2013), though there have been recent efforts to support those that have survived and become important parts of the communities they serve.

Preserving ethnic retail

The literature shows that there has been some analysis on policy support for small businesses in Europe (Dhaliwal 2006; Ram and Smallbone 2003), but less has been written on policy support for ethnic small businesses in the United States. Taking the lead from European cities, the City of San Francisco has studied and pioneered two programs to support the maintenance of legacy businesses and preserve cultural heritage. These programs attempt to move beyond traditional historic preservation strategies that looked to preserve physical and tangible assets (like a building facade) over the intangible cultural assets located within (Buckley and Graves 2016). The dispute

within historic preservation between tangible and intangible assets has been a tension that has existed for decades, particularly in communities with a significant number of ethnic residents. One study looking at this issue in San Francisco Chinatown showed that members in the business community disagreed with policies determined to “iconize” Chinatown by maintaining restrictions on the physical structure by not allowing building alteration plans that did not conform to “traditional” Chinese design, not allowing the businesses to improve the quality of the buildings or renovate (Chuo 2011). This conflict continues to this day through balance between the material supports that may be provided to help a business survive, offsetting supports that are more symbolic in nature (such as a historic preservation register, or marketing).

Many cities in the United States have begun to grapple with the necessity of preserving ethnic retail and culturally invaluable businesses. As this topic falls jointly between economic development and historic preservation, there has been little academic study and few practical programs.

A handful of cities have begun to employ strategies ranging from those more focused on preserving the tangible assets mentioned above to improving the prospects of the businesses located *in* the tangible assets. In all, understanding these differences, one can identify that strategies can broadly fit into two categories: those that provide *material support*, (where resources actively affect the longevity and survival of a business), or *symbolic supports* (where resources don’t impact the survivability of a business, instead impacting the physical elements like the facade). Table 1 below describes these supports in greater detail.

Table 1. Summary of municipal preservation mechanisms

	Type of Support	Example
Material Support	Funding or Grant	San Francisco’s Legacy Business program provided a rent stabilization grant and a business assistance (though the latter was unable during the pandemic) (City of San Francisco)
	Ordinances	Sonoma City has specific Use Permit requirements related to diversity, balance, and community character, and restricts larger chain businesses (like large-scale formula restaurants with more than 250 outlets, from settling in the Sonoma Plaza area) (Sonoma City)
	Technical Assistance	The City of Seattle’s pilot Legacy Business program offers 2 hours of free legal consultation and 8 hours of free Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) consultation.
	Marketing Support	Similar to the City of Seattle’s pilot Legacy Business program having technical assistance, they also have a social media marketing toolkit.
Symbolic Protections	Written reports	Some jurisdictions like the City of Los Angeles have written reports specific to ethnic-cultural contexts like the Chinese American in Los Angeles, 1850-1980
	Registries	The City of San Francisco created a Legacy Business Program Registry that allows any business that has been operating for 30 years or more, or if it has contributed to the neighborhood’s history and/or identity of a particular neighborhood or community (City of San Francisco).

While the literature gives an overview of how ethnic businesses have experienced numerous threats, and how many cities have begun to attempt to turn the tide on the loss of these businesses, there is little literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected these community-facing businesses, and even less on how these community-facing businesses have been affected in ethnic communities like Chinatown. Even without the looming shadow of COVID-19, there are knowledge gaps on the processes of preservation for legacy, ethnic businesses. This study attempts to contribute to the literature by contextualizing the presence of these legacy and heritage-oriented small business programs under the umbrella of the COVID-19 pandemic by considering how these programs may have influenced the continued survival of the businesses they are supposed to serve.

Methodology

The methodology for study involves the case studies of three specific cities: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver. Due to the relative youth of legacy business programs (San Francisco, the most predominant one, has only been operating since 2015), there has not been as much opportunity for exploration into the implementation of these programs, let alone the effectiveness. With Zhuang (2015) noting that exploratory case studies can be useful in achieving generalized understanding, the paper also employs case studies to go in greater depth on the individual contexts of these cities while also drawing out generalizations that may be applicable elsewhere. In this specific case, there has been little exploration done on legacy business programs because these programs are relatively new and sufficient quantitative information isn't particularly available.

Figure 1. Affiliations of the Interviewees

- Former and Current City of Vancouver Staff
- LA Conservancy
- Youth Collaborative for Chinatown
- Yarrow Intergenerational Society
- Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC)
- Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED)
- City of Los Angeles
- City of San Francisco

To explore each of these cities, background research was conducted on programs provided by cities during and prior to the pandemic that may have assisted ethnic entrepreneurs in Chinatown. Thirteen interviews were conducted across the three cities, falling broadly into two categories: city staff, and non-city staff who were community organizers, members of the community, or employees of community organizations with knowledge of either historic preservation or Chinatowns. Figure 1 highlights the affiliations of the interviewees.

After they were identified, interviewees were asked about their impression of the state of ethnic entrepreneurship prior to and after the pandemic's start, how they perceived the city's legacy business program or other city aid programs, their definition for a legacy business, their assessment of how businesses and the community as a whole were faring and potential challenges they may be facing, the nature of historic preservation in their specific areas, and what types of supports would be offered or preferred. Responses were collected and coded to identify common themes.

In addition to interviews, each case study (of San Francisco, Vancouver, and Los Angeles) includes analysis of existing programs, past reports, council briefs, and other official documents related to legacy businesses and cultural preservation.

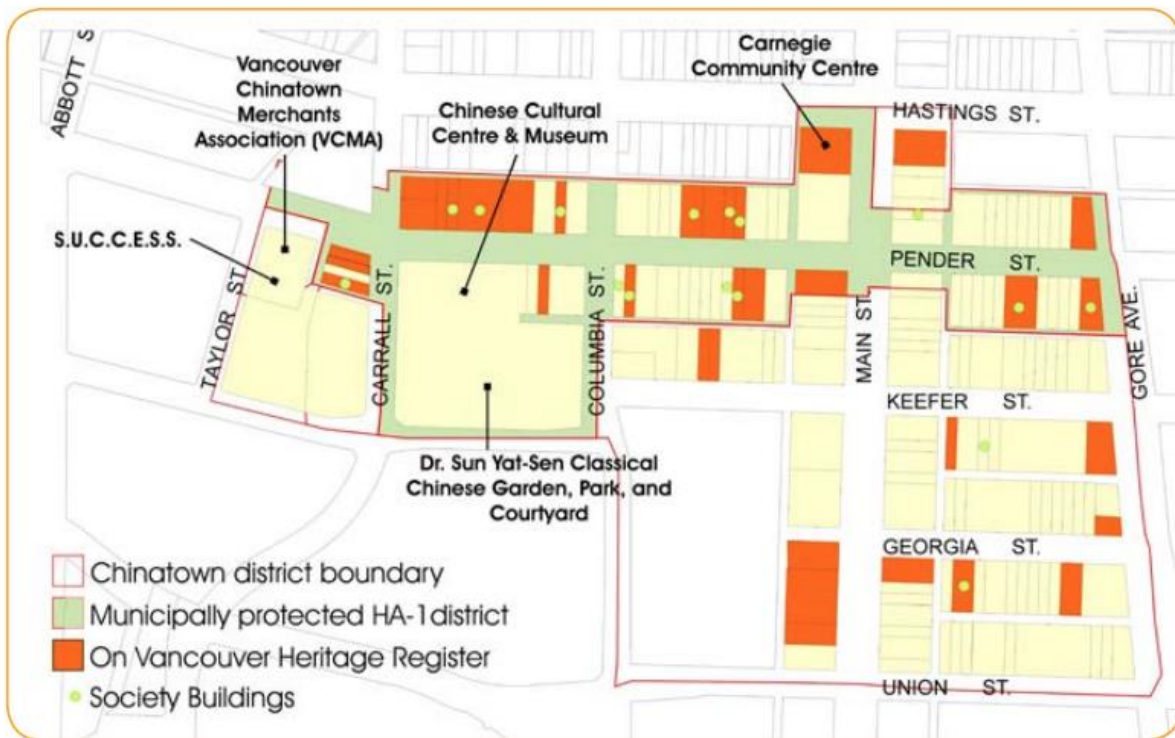
Brief History of three neighborhoods

Chinatowns are one of the sole surviving ethnic enclaves that continue to persevere and survive in urban, downtown cores across North America. Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles retain

some of the largest and significant Chinatowns across the West Coast of Canada and the United States. The shared histories of these Chinatowns is distinct, with strong connections to the history of urban segregation, discrimination, racism and regulatory disenfranchisement seen throughout planning history (Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019; Xie and Batunova 2019; Zuk and Chapple 2015). All three Chinatowns have histories of trade labor that encourage Asian men to seek work within gold mines, but facing white hostility, were ultimately the labor behind major railroads in the region. These Chinatowns are all peripheral to the downtowns of their cities and were targets for slum clearance and urban renewal at some point in their histories.

At the height of anti-Chinese antipathy in America, visitors to Chinatowns "delineated the utter foreignness, exoticism, and evil of the place." Notably, they marveled at the "visual and olfactory sensations "the neighborhood offered. The sights, sounds, and smells of Chinatown no longer inspire racial animus, but descriptions of Chinatown still emphasize it as "a sensory experience." Moreover, outsiders continue to market the neighborhood by gesturing at its vestigial traces of danger, along with assurances of safety. Tour guides in 1914 San Francisco, for example, called it's Chinatown "the most fascinating city of America," and made sure to tell patrons that "nowhere is the White visitor more secure in property or person." Generations later, "[r]eal estate brokers appeal to the exoticism of Chinatown's culture [and] reference the safety and style of neighboring SoHo and Tribeca." The relationship between gentrification and racial capitalism has thus been fueled, in part, by the media and real estate industries, which advance the idea of Chinatown "as an exotic yet chic neighborhood on the cusp of a major transformation." - (Naram 2017)

Figure 2. City of Vancouver’s Chinatown Neighborhood Plan, 2012



Vancouver Chinatown is located just east of the downtown and financial districts, and adjacent to other historic and existing enclaves (Black, Japanese, Eastern European, and First Nations). Established at the same time as the City of Vancouver in the late 19th century, Chinatown was the only neighborhood where Chinese migrants could be housed without hostility. Patterns of immigration and historic urban segregation clustered ethnic enclaves, low-income, and marginalized groups together in the area. Therefore, Chinese are the largest visible minority in the neighborhood followed by Black and Indigenous folks. Urban “decline” and calls for the protection of cultural heritage in Vancouver’s Chinatown can be traced back as early as the 1960s, when “slum clearance” and “urban renewal” was enacted by the city on Chinatown and Strathcona neighborhoods (David Lam Centre 2017; Madokoro 2011). The business and retail landscape in Chinatown in the past mainly served its residents, providing food, groceries, and personal services. This retail landscape has changed dramatically, with pricier restaurants, chain businesses, and other non-Chinese businesses taking root (Lee 2018; W. Li 2019; Regan 2017).

Figure 3. City of San Francisco's Chinatown

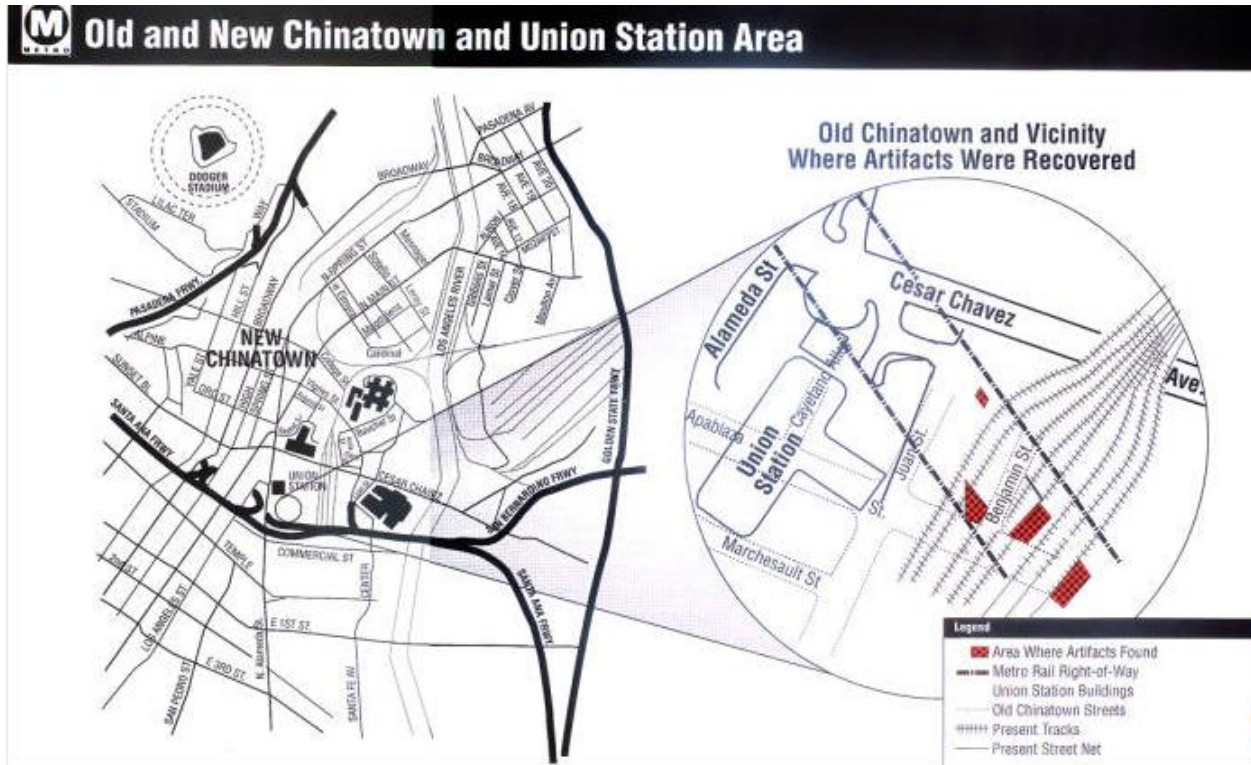


Image shows boundaries as described in Montojo, 2015. Montojo identifies that the boundaries for Chinatown have expanded beyond the city's "official" boundaries, and these boundaries show Chinatown's influence in the surrounding neighborhoods.

San Francisco is home to North America's oldest Chinatown, located just north of downtown and west of the financial district. Similarly, racial discrimination drove many Chinese immigrants to San Francisco's Chinatown. In the late 1800s, anti-Chinese sentiment manifested in exclusionary labor practices, racialized zoning ordinances, mob violence, and arson which further drove Chinese migrants to seek housing and contain businesses to Chinatown (Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019; Zuk and Chapple 2015). The 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, and fires that broke out destroyed Chinatown – the subsequent rebuilding utilized urban design and architecture to "iconize", demarcate, and protect Chinatown from displacement (Li 2019; Zuk and Chapple 2015). The retail landscape also reflects this desire to be seen as a gateway to Chinese culture, with souvenir shops and tourism-oriented businesses present today. In recent years, San Francisco's Chinatown has retained many community and cultural businesses, with grocery stores, restaurants, large banquet

halls, temples, and other Chinese-owned businesses. The neighborhood is considered the densest in the City of San Francisco, with a population of 14,820. The demographic make-up is 81% Asian, and a median income of \$21,219 (ACS 2012-2016 5-Year Estimates; San Francisco Planning Department 2018).

Figure 4. Map of Old and New Chinatown and Union Station Area, Los Angeles, CA (Metro Rail 1991)



Today’s Chinatown in Los Angeles is located just north of Downtown, and is 38.9% Asian American, followed by 28.9% Latinx, 15.6% White and 13.1% Black (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Originally, Chinatown was located within the boundaries of modern-day downtown in what was known as “Calle de los Negros”. Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1800s experienced the same racial discrimination as their San Franciscan counterparts as anti-Chinese sentiment grew, leading to the Chinese Massacre of 1871 when 19 Chinese immigrants were lynched and businesses were looted. In the early 1900s, arson attempts combined with “slum clearance” and “urban renewal” policies led to the decline of Old Chinatown, which was demolished for the construction of Union Station (Hom 2020a; Lin 2006). New Chinatown was built north of the old, with “preservation movement” aesthetics incorporated in its physical design. Chinese merchants and families banded together to provide community serving amenities including retail shops and restaurants, as well as theatre, temple, and gardens. Concerns over the gentrification of Chinatown began in the 90s, with rapid increase in market-rate units in the area and chain retail replacing independent businesses. In 2000, a Business Improvement District was established, “considered a force of gentrification from within the neighborhood as the marketing and events primarily cater to young professionals and support the new upscale retail.” (Hom 2020a) The current retail landscape in Los Angeles is a mix of restaurants, souvenir shops, bakeries, and others, with the

three most common types of businesses per 2-digit NAICS code distribution in the zip code (90012) as Real Estate and Retail Leasing (which includes mom and pop landlords), Retail Trade (which includes jewelry stores, home furnishing stores, family clothing stores, and various fish and seafood and grocery markets) and Wholesale Trade (City of Los Angeles 2020).

Table 2. Summary of demographics

	Vancouver	San Francisco	Los Angeles
Population	1800	14,820	33,800
% Asian	30%	63%	36.96%
Median income vs Metropolitan income	23,000 vs 73,000	21,219 vs 112,000	45,003 vs 69,138

(ACS 5-year estimates 2012-2017; City of Vancouver 2020; San Francisco Planning Department 2018)

Findings about recent challenges before COVID-19

When examining the potential impact of ethnic retail preservation on COVID-19 recovery and historic preservation, these three cities have shared histories and unique urban challenges. All three Chinatowns have faced varying degrees of discriminatory zoning, attempts of slum clearance, urban renewal, met with organizing efforts from the community. The success of historic planning policies have lasting impacts which inform the survivability of Chinatowns prior to and after the pandemic. In this section, we'll discuss some of the unifying and differing forces experienced in each city.

Housing Gentrification and Retail Change

Vancouver, SF, and LA are cities known for the lack of affordability of their housing markets. All three cities have seen rapid population increases due to job growth coupled with low densification rates. This rise in demand for housing places pressures in areas of the city that have the lowest land and rental values. As Chinatowns in these cities are adjacent to downtown cores, the affordability in housing ensures that they are in prime locations for gentrification and displacement as landlords are incentivized to sell to higher bidders. As housing prices, job growth, and urban attraction draws wealthier demographics into the city, retail change has been a significant challenge in all three Chinatowns as well. While traditional Chinese businesses emphasize affordability for their patrons, new retail arriving in the neighborhoods often charge higher price points than their traditional counterparts. Even if these stores specialize in Chinese cuisine or fusion, the marketing and intention of the business caters to a wealthier demographic. Examples include Bao Bei, a high-end “modern Chinese” restaurant serving \$20 main courses in Vancouver; Eight Tables in San Francisco, with a \$225 tasting menu; and Majordomo, a restaurant from celebrity chef David Chang set in an “industrial-chic space.” In combination, changing urban demographics and real estate forces have contributed to rapid changes in both the retail and housing landscape.

Vancouver

In Vancouver, Japanese incarceration during World War II combined with the slum clearance and urban renewal of Chinatown's supporting neighborhoods in the 1960s propelled the decline of a robust Asian population to support the businesses of Chinatown. The predominantly Chinese and low-income neighborhood of Strathcona was targeted for renewal, and many of the homes were seized through eminent domain for values much lower than median housing prices in the area (Anderson 1988; Bruce 2005; Madokoro 2011). In short, the ability for the Chinese community to live within the City of Vancouver was once again being limited and redrawn to serve discriminatory purposes. As the housing boom in Vancouver continued, the Strathcona neighborhood, once a Chinese enclave with predominantly low-income households, has changed rapidly with less than a quarter of the population living in low-income housing (Anderson 1988; Bruce 2005; Madokoro 2011). Further, the housing within Chinatown's boundaries, predominantly SROs – a critical portion for sheltering the extremely low-income – have fallen into disrepair and need substantial funding to replace (City of Vancouver 2017; Denis 2020). These dueling forces have placed pressure on seniors, the majority of which are low-income – 73% according to the Government of British Columbia 2015 – who live in the area. Since the 1970's, many residents of Chinese descent have moved to find more affordable housing options in the other ethnoburbs in the Metro Vancouver region.

In Vancouver, interviewees noted that a city-level or regional government resource for small business support is missing. Specific to Chinatown, long standing businesses have faced rapid demographic changes in the neighborhood, competing with more new, modern businesses for foot traffic. In a 2018 report, the hua foundation found that patrons of traditional Chinatown businesses tended to patronize only traditional businesses and patrons of newer businesses only patronized newer businesses (Lee 2018). Respondents also noted that many business owners in the area struggle to adapt to major changes, such as adopting digital food platforms during COVID-19. Other factors have also contributed to pressures on retail exit, such as the retirement of aging business owners, businesses without succession plans, or onerous bureaucratic processes to access support and resources. Notably, a recurrent comment from community members is the inability of government resources to service streets and the public realm in the neighborhood to maintain cleanliness and safety. Some have also noted that there is a lack of public space for communal gathering central to the retail.

San Francisco

San Francisco's Chinatown is the city's densest neighborhood, created out of necessity from historic segregation and discriminatory planning policies. However, this community also has a long history of community organizing and advocacy, bolstered by strong community institutions such as Chinatown Community Development Center, that have mitigated some of the housing impacts created by the tech booms in the region. This advocacy has enabled the successful protection of subsidized units, and reduced conversion of housing to commercial land use (Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019). The Chinatown area is predominantly rental housing, at rates that are affordable in comparison with the rest of the city. However, this affordability creates a growing disparity between the neighborhood and potential market rate prices which enables mounting pressure to rents in the area. Some residents fear that new developments in the area, such as the

potential impact of the new subway station that is opening in 2022, will exacerbate these pressures on rent. The history of Chinatown's segregation, community building, and organizing activity has enabled strong social connections within the Chinese diaspora. Reports and anecdotal evidence has shown that land ownership remains within community hands, even when it is transferred and sold as they are sold to other community members.

For the small businesses in San Francisco's Chinatown, they faced numerous challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic: many businesses did not have the capacity or knowledge to bring their businesses online, and moreover, faced much competition with online retailers who were able to provide the same wares. However, for community-serving businesses, the expensive commercial rents were never far from the minds of the retailers renting space in the community, particularly with its proximity to the transportation stations near the community.

Los Angeles

Multiple histories of displacement in Los Angeles' Chinatown have been highlighted above, but one of the most significant iterations of this displacement has been taking place since the 1990s. Pressures from global investment capital buying land for development and subsequent pressures the growth of the art gallery scene, and transit-oriented development have prompted much of the displacement of working-class and immigrant communities in the Chinatown (Lin 2008). There are reports of rent increasing 200% in buildings currently facing eviction (interview with Janis, 2021).

Not only are residents being displaced, but so too are the retailers important to the social fabric of the community: the construction of the Gold Line Chinatown station in 2003 is correlated with the decline in the community's small business growth – a point of concern because of how many of these retail businesses are community-facing and community-serving. Organizations like the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID), which have the purported task of “improving business” in Chinatown, may contribute to gentrification by increasing marketing to young professionals and those outside of the community, prompting influxes of market-rate housing developments and retailers which may displace the working class community currently in the neighborhood (Hom 2020b).

Historic and Retail Preservation Measures

Vancouver

Prior to the pandemic, Vancouver's Chinatown faced a number of hardships with many long-standing businesses closing shop due to rising rents, reaching retirement age, or declining business. In 2017, a Legacy Business study was conducted to develop a strategy to preserve legacy businesses that have a connection to the “community's history, contribute to neighborhood character, and play an integral role in the community's way of life” (City of Vancouver, 2017). No program was enacted, and small business support was limited to funding from Chinatown and Strathcona Business Improvement Associations, and local funders such as Vancity Credit Union and Vancouver Chinatown Foundation. Vancouver's Chinatown is designated a National Historic Site, and the City of Vancouver is actively seeking UNESCO Heritage Site status for the

neighborhood. At the city level, parts of the neighborhood are zoned HA-1 and HA-1A, Historic Areas that regulate and preserve the land uses, urban form, and design of buildings (especially older properties).

In January 2021, the Downtown East Side Special Enterprise Pilot Program was released tailored to supporting community-focused enterprises. The funds would support businesses with technical assistance for marketing and real estate transactions, in addition to providing funds for capital building improvements. It is important to note that the City of Vancouver is the only amongst the three cities that are unable to support businesses directly with financial reimbursement due to the city's charter.

San Francisco

Following a 2014 report from the City of San Francisco's Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office, a two-phased Legacy Business program was proposed. Phase 1 created the Legacy Business Registry: eligible businesses would be 30 years or older, would be nominated by the Board of Supervisors of Mayor, and prove at a Small Business Commission hearing that they have made a significant impact on the neighborhood's culture or history. Phase 2 created the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund, where lease extensions would be facilitated between Legacy business tenants and property owners (this passed under Proposition J in 2015).

Los Angeles

There is currently no legacy business program in Los Angeles, though a motion was filed by City Councilmember Curren D. Price Jr. in 2019 to instruct the Economic and Workforce Development Department to report to the Economic Development Committee with an analysis of the San Francisco Legacy Business Program and other programs along with recommendations to implement a similar program in Los Angeles. There is a local organization (LA Conservancy) which runs a legacy business program focused on spotlighting legacy businesses through a map and written content (L.A. Conservancy 2021). In addition, there is a series of Ethnic-Cultural Contexts produced by SurveyLA in October 2018 and funded by the Historic Preservation Fund that outline the history of five ethnic communities in Los Angeles: Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and Thai Americans (Los Angeles City Planning 2019).

Table 3: Summary of Historic and Retail Preservation Programs from City Governments*

	Vancouver	San Francisco	Los Angeles
Financial Assistance	No direct financial assistance provided	Yes - there has been a rent stabilization grant and a business assistance grant.	No
Protections and Covenants	Zoned Historic Areas (facade and land use protections), some funding for renovating these buildings	While there is a program that specifically designates “cultural heritage districts”, there are no associated regulatory controls.	No
Promotion Activities	New Enterprise program (2021)	Anticipated to begin soon, this component of the program is not yet up and running, though a website is currently being constructed.	No
Technical Assistance	New Enterprise program (2021)	Yes, there is some technical assistance offered by the SF Department of Small Business, including assistance with permits and licenses.	No

As of December 2021

Findings about Available Resources During the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic and various shut-down orders, the Chinatowns in each of the individual cities had varying levels of access to resources. Small businesses in San Francisco and LA Chinatown had the ability to apply for the United States Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL). Vancouver (in Canada) had access to various Government of Canada programs like the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA), and the BC Small and Medium Sized Business Recovery Grant.

However, when distilled down to the local level, it was clear that there were the differences in what was offered as resources in each city at a local level.

In San Francisco, community organizations like Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC) have supported the creation of various programs that support both the restaurants and businesses within the neighborhood but also the residents within the SROs. Feed and Fuel Chinatown is a program that provides 122,000 meals to Chinatown SRO residents, sourced through 34 Chinatown based restaurants, with current fundraising efforts going to support a second version of this program (Chinatown Community Development Center, n.d.). In addition, San Francisco's Shared Spaces program allowed Grant Street (a part of San Francisco Chinatown) to completely close to cars and allow restaurants (which often had limited spaces) to expand their dining spaces onto the streets (Batey 2020). The City of San Francisco also provided a variety of COVID-19 relief programs such as SF Resiliency Fund, SF HELP, Neighborhood Mini-Grants, African American Small Business Revolving Loan Fund in addition to the State of California's Small Business COVID-19 Relief Grant Program. Respondents also noted that it was difficult for shop owners to access many of these funds in the case, and when they did, may not have understood the requirement. There have been accounts of some owners using funds provided for business rent and may be in a position where they are required to pay it back. Other accounts noted that these grants are not guaranteed, and competition made it difficult to receive financial aid even after applying to multiple funds.

In Vancouver, there was a broad consensus that there was not enough direct assistance available for local residents and retail organizations. The federal and provincial funds available were dependent on applications and contributions from landlords in order to access funds. Further, some interviewees noted that there were language barriers, and lack of capacity from small business owners to complete the necessary documentation for the funds. At the community scale, grassroots organizations formed the Chinatown Cares program to deliver groceries and hot meals to isolated seniors in the neighborhood (Cheng 2020; hua foundation 2020).

In Los Angeles, there was little support from the city. Organizations on the ground like Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) were doing outreach and supporting small businesses while they were being evicted, and also created a coupon book for the small businesses that raised over \$10,000 for the businesses participating.

While there were community organizing efforts and available funds across all three cities, interviewees noted that above all else, direct assistance was needed to pay for commercial rent. None of the respondents we spoke with noted any adequate programs or resources that significantly mitigated retail pressures. Overall, program requirements and restrictions from financial assistance during the pandemic were unclear or onerous processes that didn't fully meet the needs of the community.

Overall Findings and Key Takeaways

From the interviews, historic analysis, and policy analysis conducted, it is clear that there are both distinct and similar themes regarding the preservation of ethnic retail in Chinatowns across all three cities. Further, under city measures provided for small business support and historic preservation, these findings apply to both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historic Preservation and Small Business Support programs did not provide enough assistance for Chinatowns even before the pandemic

Interviewees were clear that Chinatowns had been facing struggles long before COVID-19. Across all three cities, Chinatowns were facing rapidly changing demographics, rising commercial rents, and pressures from skyrocketing real estate prices.

Some issues identified are the decline in business patronage due to a combination of changing demographics, marketing, and “an inability to keep up with changes”. In Vancouver, some also attributed falling patronage due to lack of management in the public realm (i.e. street cleaning, garbage pickup), the opioid epidemic, and “feeling unsafe in the area”. Retirement and succession have also been issues across all Chinatowns, as aging owners reach retirement age and do not have the capacity, interest, or option to pass the business on. Aging building stock is also an issue, where business owners or landlords may not have the capital to improve stock, furthering storefront vacancy and affecting the ability to keep building ownership with the Chinese community. Relatedly, slow and onerous permitting processes were cited as a possible barrier to capital and public realm improvements to revitalize the neighborhood’s atmosphere. Large infrastructure projects affected business decisions as well: in San Francisco, the planned construction of a new transit line is seen as a threat to the commercial and housing rental prices in the neighborhood.

Juxtaposing the needs, gaps, and stressors most commonly expressed by interviewees with the available government programs showcases gaps in ethnic retail preservation. Programs made available through historic and cultural preservation programs, small business support programs, and pandemic relief programs did not fulfill the needs of the community and fill in these gaps. Interviewees across all three cities noted that traditional preservation programs, such as the protection of building facades did not protect the longevity and survivability of businesses and affordable housing units. Direct commercial rent control and support was emphasized as critical for business survivability.

As part of the interviews, participants were asked on their effectiveness and whether they believed these programs were impactful in supporting Chinatown businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the board, interviewees expressed that COVID-19 exacerbated the existing stressors on Chinatowns and that there was not enough direct financial assistance to mitigate business impacts. The interviewees did not believe that existing programs prior to COVID-19 reduced impacts. In Vancouver, the benefits made available during the pandemic were difficult for business owners to access due to capacity, cultural expectations, or onerous reporting. For example, one business closed down because commercial rent relief required participation from the building’s landlord, and they did not enter the program. In another instance, business owners did not apply to relief programs because they felt that the requirements for documentation entitled the government to too much personal information. Lastly, one interviewee noted that some business owners simply don’t have the accounting or assistance needed to fill out the relief funding forms as they only have time to keep their business accounting afloat.

In San Francisco, Chinatown shop owners were eligible for the federal Paycheck Protection Program, but as with all businesses, it was not guaranteed. For those who did, they may not have

understood what was allowable through the program. For example, there was one account of an owner using funds for commercial rent and they may now be in a position where they are required to pay the funds back. Direct assistance was provided to Chinatown's businesses through SF's Resiliency Fund where grants were provided up to \$10,000. While there was the existing Legacy Business Registry and Legacy Business Preservation Fund, they did not add any new supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Los Angeles, there were certain programs made available to the businesses to support them on CARES Act applications (which included applications to the PPP). There were also small business loan programs available to Los Angeles businesses, including the LA County Small Business Stabilization Loan Program, and grant programs, including the LA Regional COVID Fund (which provides both loans and grants). However, while these programs were available, many of them did not offer in-language support, which made it difficult for many businesses in Los Angeles' Chinatown to apply.

Direct Assistance for commercial rent was biggest gap before – but especially during – the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviewees noted that direct assistance - specifically funds that were available to pay for commercial rent - was the biggest gap in programs provided. Although some programs in these cities provided some direct financial aid that could be paid towards rent, it remains an issue even now. Commercial rent was also cited as an ongoing issue, even prior to the pandemic. Some businesses, like those in Los Angeles' Chinatown, can pay upwards of \$25,000 a month, and there is more incentive for landlords to keep rents high due to Chinatown's proximity to urban cores. Across the three Chinatowns, some businesses received a level of empathy from landlords during the COVID-19 pandemic, with rent deferral or reduced rents given. In Los Angeles, some business owners organized to ask landlords to lower rent over the course of the pandemic. However, despite these efforts, it was noted that commercial rent and a lack of commercial rent control leaves much of the affordability and survivability of businesses to the hands of benevolent landlords. In San Francisco, one interviewee noted that state laws hinder the ability to enact policies that control commercial rent. The same interviewee noted that high ownership rates of buildings that stayed within the Chinese community was very important for the neighborhood, as the owners were invested in the survivability of their commercial tenants and were more willing to ease on rent and other measures.

Preserving ethnic retail is the act of preserving community services, as opposed to cultural or economic value

Through our interviews with members from all three cities, part of the difficulty in establishing a program that preserves ethnic retail (such as a legacy business program), was the unclear definitions for businesses that should be protected or supported. These definitions varied, particularly between those in the community and city staff.

In San Francisco (which was the only city with a formalized legacy business program out of the three cities), the program defines a legacy business as one that is older than 30 years, and "contributes to the history and/or identity of a specific neighborhood." Similarly, when speaking with city staff from LA working in historic preservation, the same qualities of longevity, permanence and characteristics of whether they contributed to community or cultural identity

arose. In contrast, Vancouver’s legacy business study emphasized a fluidity to the definition – allowing the community to define what the parameters were for retail businesses that should be supported. Further, Vancouver’s 2021 Special Enterprise Pilot Program draws a distinction between “legacy business” (something transmitted by, or received, from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past) and use the term “heritage business” (based on values and their attributes, and often more complex and nuanced than legacy) to address the living heritage, culture and identity of Chinatown” (City of Vancouver 2021). These distinctions in definitions are important, as the adoption of legacy business programs often require strict guidelines (i.e. number of years, etc.) in order for retail entities to qualify for support.

Community members from all three Chinatowns saw legacy businesses as community assets and institutions, providing a sense of place and identity, and essential goods and services for the neighborhoods, in addition to being a driver for the local economy. Some community members defined the legacy business as one that was specifically attached to the community and that their patrons were long-term residents of an area. Others asserted that legacy businesses in Chinatowns were those that provided community service – working hard to ensure that culturally appropriate goods and services were provided for community members at an affordable price point. Another interviewee emphasized that legacy businesses are those that go beyond simple economic units of the economy, noting that while beloved businesses in Chinatown may not be adapting to new food trends, there is still value in their service to the community.

Given these sentiments, it seems that there is still a gap in existing programs to address that is truly valued by community members - the survivability of businesses that provide for the populations that live there. The technical supports currently provided (a legacy business registry, employee subsidy, and technical support for marketing and rent negotiation) do not seem to be mitigating the drivers of business closure like the lack of commercial rent control, onerous and culturally inappropriate processes for grant funding, lengthy zoning and permit processes.

Preserving ethnic retail also requires the preservation of housing and affordability

As cities continue to look to address retail gentrification and the protection of legacy businesses, the findings from this research show that the desire to retain cultural, historic, and community defining retail may be separate from the idea of legacy. Many of our interviewees noted that enterprises that should be part of support programs are those that provide a community service by meeting community necessities like social services, food kitchens, shelter, and more. Specific to Chinatowns and adjacent enclaves, interviewees noted that this meant low prices and culturally appropriate goods and services. This is supported by business owners who have acknowledged their intentionally cheaper pricing to meet the needs of patrons. Other information that supports this is related to the context given by our interviewees, where some noted that business owners don’t invest in modernizing changes to adapt to the trends of today such as newer aesthetic appeal that would drive a corresponding increase in prices.

The idea of protecting legacy businesses extends beyond the idea of protecting old enterprises. As demographics, housing prices, and retail enterprises in our neighborhoods rapidly change, these communities have noticed that beloved businesses find it harder to adapt. A challenge identified by some interviewees is that ethnic entrepreneurs in Chinatown are unable to adapt to changes in

demand and are not meeting economic competition. These entrepreneurs do not engage in utilizing digital delivery services, marketing through mapping and other business review applications, or keeping up with food trends such as emphasizing food aesthetics. Existing businesses form the backdrop against which new businesses enter the community: some see these new businesses in Chinatown as revitalizing “blighted” neighborhoods, while critics of these new modern businesses say that they don’t serve the neighborhood, instead importing wealthier demographics from other areas of the city.

Given that Chinatowns are home to the low- and very-low-income, immigrants, non-native English speakers, and pan-Asian folks who need affordable housing, affordable and culturally appropriate goods and services – ethnic retail fills a gap beyond mere units of the economy. Small businesses in these neighborhoods often charge relatively little and do not prioritize investment into the aesthetic appearances that are trending in today’s retail landscape. The preservation of these ethnic retail units and, by hopeful extension, the culture of the neighborhood, is also a narrative about the value of affordability within the urban core. The survivability of Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves must be about the preservation of affordable commercial rent, affordable housing, and prices for goods and services for those who live there.

This idea is supported by the differences between San Francisco’s Chinatown and those of Vancouver and Los Angeles. Even prior to the pandemic, interviewee concerns around the survivability of San Francisco’s Chinatown seems less severe in comparison to the other two cities. While there were obvious worries regarding the city’s affordable housing prices and the new Chinatown station to be built, community members noted that Chinatown was doing well. Interviews and other studies credit the positive landscape of SF’s Chinatown to its history of organizing and political activism that have retained many of the residential buildings within the Chinese community and have intentionally kept rents affordable. In short, the ownership of buildings by community members have allowed the survivability of affordable housing units and relatively more affordable commercial rent. Organizers were also more successful in halting urban renewal and discriminatory housing practices in decades past, allowing a significant population to continue to inhabit Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods. In stark contrast, Vancouver and Los Angeles both suffered significant decline in Chinese populations as a result of slum clearance, eminent domain, and planned disinvestment in neighborhoods as outlined in the history. To this day, descriptors by media outlets as well as current and former Chinese patrons in both neighborhoods are reminiscent of those from over a century ago. In Vancouver, many see Chinatown as dangerous, dirty, and unkept; this is attributed to storefront vacancy, declining business, lack of street cleaning and community public spaces. In Los Angeles, this is attributed to rising rents, gentrifying businesses, and even the work of ill-meaning landlords who have disinvested in their buildings in hopes of evicting tenants and redeveloping the buildings. This dynamic can make it difficult to determine truth from perception, but it is nonetheless clear that these two Chinatowns were losing businesses and residents long before the pandemic.

Discussion

This study explored how ethnic retail has been changing in the Chinatowns of Vancouver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and how a legacy business program and other support systems have impacted these businesses before and during COVID-19. Legacy business programs in practice

and the preservation of ethnic retail in general fall between historic preservation and small business development, and there is yet to be intensive studies on the impact and effectiveness of legacy business programs on this subset of retail. Existing studies have focused on the value of ethnic businesses within their communities, existing challenges to operating a business within urban cores, and physical historic preservation policies. As a first step, our current study has examined the impact of these programs to understand how business preservation programs have fared amidst the pandemic across three cities. Findings reveal how residents value ethnic businesses within their communities, the effectiveness of city programs to meet needs of ethnic businesses during and before the pandemic, and how the perception of disappearing retail from varying Chinatowns influence policy decisions. This data seeks to fill a gap in research about how ethnic retail should be preserved through historic preservation and small business support in planning and policy.

The three case studies revealed and affirmed that ethnic enterprises are beloved for their community functions far greater than merely for their goods and services within Chinatowns. For many, these community functions are as familial gathering spaces, representatives of rich historical contributions, or are spaces where residents can find affordable and culturally appropriate meals and supplies. These ideals extend beyond the definitions of legacy businesses as understood through existing preservation programs and studies which identify an amount of time within the neighborhood. The emphasis on community contribution draws attention to how we can protect these businesses, not as economic assets, but rather as a part of a fabric of the neighborhood as affordable retail and community spaces integrated into Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves alike.

Preservation programs have focused on providing physical building protections through zoning, relief grants, marketing support, and succession planning support. However, the largest perceived gap in need prior to and during the pandemic was direct rental relief, commercial rent control, and creating more culturally appropriate processes for bureaucratic programs.

Further, our comparison between these three case studies have shown that affordability and survivability of ethnic retail in Chinatowns is also dependent on how the community has been able to survive past discriminatory planning practices that have tried to rid these neighborhoods of public realm improvements and housing ownership. The importance of community-based ownership of buildings has provided protection to Chinatown from those who may seek to raise rents for housing and commercial businesses beyond what is survivable from Chinese tenants.

This research contributes to an ongoing and evolving discussion on how to preserve intangible cultural assets, identified as ethnic retail in our three case studies. Across all three cities, it appears that programs need to preserve the community service of affordable, and culturally appropriate goods and services; protect or provide direct assistance in the form of rent control or rent relief; and lastly programs should protect affordable housing stock and promote community ownership of residential and commercial buildings in these communities.

We acknowledge, however, that there is a gap between San Francisco and Vancouver and Los Angeles. San Francisco's Chinatown is struggling, but still retains a large neighborhood of Chinese residents and owners. The solution for a neighborhood that still retains many assets and strengths is to focus on preservation and protection. This would include avenues to retain community ownership and reduce commercial rent burden to weather the pandemic and other shocks. This

includes avenues to preserve affordability and enable continued ownership from the Chinese residents and business owners that remain – potentially through alternative ownership methods like the community land trusts and community co-ownership.

For Chinatowns and enclaves in greater decline and that have lost significant community populations, municipalities may wish to create pathways for community ownership, but also look to re-envisioning the community on the basis of affordability. Often, planners look to declining neighborhoods as projects for revitalization, attempting to create “mixed-income” neighborhoods by developing housing stock that may import wealthier demographics from outside the community. These initiatives may not be well received well by existing community members, further exacerbating sentiments in ethnic enclaves as these policies tend to ignore that the decline of their neighborhoods also stem from past planning decisions. Potential solutions may be to aim to create mixed-income neighborhoods through social support services and pathways for existing residents to reach higher income levels. This is a topic for further research.

Due to the timing of this research, quantifying the impacts of COVID-19 on ethnic businesses in Chinatowns may have to wait for after the decline of the pandemic. The data collected since may better identify the factors for closure both during and prior to the pandemic, and to evaluate the impact of legacy business and other preservation programs in these neighborhoods. In addition, while some research has been formulated on the importance of small businesses to the social infrastructure of ethnic enclaves, there should be more qualitative research conducted on 1) the institutional completeness provided by ethnic retail; and 2) how historic and legacy businesses programs can better protect the completeness provided by ethnic retail.

Conclusion

Historic preservation and economic development programs from cities are currently developing programs and policies to preserve ethnic retail and retain cultural neighborhoods. Thus far, these programs have focused on preserving legacy, and have not met the needs of their constituents. Chinatowns have been on the decline even prior to the pandemic, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated the factors that have forced closures. Through our research, we have found that programs that preserve ethnic retail should understand that these policies should focus on the preservation of community services within the neighborhood, as opposed to the preservation of physical buildings or economic contributions. We have also found that the preservation of ethnic retail may require commercial rent control and direct assistance for rental relief during COVID-19 and beyond. Lastly, retaining cultural neighborhoods such as Chinatowns, likely requires the prioritization of housing affordability and pathways towards community ownership in order to sustain the cultural institutions, spaces, and assets created for years to come.

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