

Chinatown Future Histories: Public Spaces and Equitable Development in Philadelphia Chinatown

Executive Summary

James A. Crowder Jr. and Sarah Yeung

PolicyLink

SOJOURNER
CONSULTING

PHILADELPHIA CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



Parks and other public spaces are critical elements of a civil society. They can be neighborhood anchors and connective forums. They hold particular potential for low-income communities, serving as a respite in ways that can offset the challenges and stresses of segregation and urban poverty. In recent years, public space advocates and park conservationists have become increasingly vocal about the need for “park equity,” or the idea that all residents should have reasonably equal access to quality park space.

Much of the emphasis on park equity focuses on access, funding, and the degree to which residents perceive public space to be welcoming and inclusive. While these are important elements, planning and development processes and governance structures are often left unexamined. Without a critical analysis of power dynamics in the decision-making process, conversations about

parks perpetuate and sometimes accelerate historic structural inequities in low-income communities of color. These dynamics can be observed in the case study of Philadelphia Chinatown and the Rail Park, an ambitious adaptive reuse project which recently completed an \$11 million first phase of construction in this gentrifying immigrant community with a proud history of activism.

The Chinatown Future Histories project set out to engage community members with the goals of creating a locally driven vision for equitable development, and mobilizing a new generation of community advocates. Using Philadelphia Chinatown as a case study, this report offers guidance for the broader field of community development practitioners, local governments, and planners working in gentrifying neighborhoods on this critical question: **How can public spaces contribute to equitable development?**

Chinatown and the Rail Park: An Equity Analysis

Analyses of gentrification and displacement in US cities often omit the lived experience of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Several practices hide the complex economic diversity among AAPIs, including the widespread stereotype of AAPIs as that of a “model minority,” the way that income, wealth, and poverty data are calculated and shared, and the failure to disaggregate data. In Chinatown, low-income and limited English proficiency (LEP) renters are particularly vulnerable to displacement and poor housing conditions.

In the urban renewal of the 1960s to 1980s, planners and policy-makers considered many neighborhoods of color, including AAPI communities, to represent economic and social blight. Over the years, Philadelphia Chinatown was threatened with multiple redevelopment proposals. In 1966, the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) was born out of community activism against a proposed highway. The legacies of this activism and urban renewal still resonate in the community today. Philadelphia Chinatown continues to sustain a significant Asian community, and serves as a cultural, economic, political, and social anchor for Asian Americans in the region.

In the context of this community, the Rail Park’s development illustrates how the identity of park decision makers often directly impacts who benefits, while negative outcomes tend to fall upon the most vulnerable populations. The Friends of the Rail Park (FORP), a nonprofit organization, began its efforts in 2013 to redevelop an abandoned viaduct structure as part of a vision for a three-mile-long series of public spaces across the city. Working with the Center City District (CCD), a Business Improvement District which represents Philadelphia’s downtown core, these two organizations with no representation from the community’s low-income populations of color have made the bulk of the decisions around the park’s first phase, which is a public space of the City of Philadelphia and managed by Parks and Recreation.

While the economic impact of the Rail Park is often presented in broad, positive terms, the costs, including increased property taxes and housing maintenance costs, will be disproportionately borne by the most vulnerable residents of the community—low-income, people of color with the least influence over park decisions. This dynamic was illustrated during an effort to create a local BID in 2019. While it was supported by FORP and CCD and overseen by the city’s Department of Commerce, concerns from many residents and business owners around limited community engagement and representation in decision-

making and lack of a codified anti-displacement strategy eventually contributed to the failure of the BID.

Given that the redevelopment of public parks is often part of a broader urban revitalization strategy, highlighting the need for park equity has the potential to advance a robust dialogue on the disparate impacts of neighborhood change. However, increased clarity around who will decide, benefit from, and bear the cost of that change is needed. The answers to these questions are particularly important given that the groups advocating for business districts, park equity, green space development, and community development often have fragmented missions that constrain their ability to work collaboratively.

Value Capture Strategies and a Vision for Equitable Development

A growing body of research has documented the connection between certain types of parks and the displacement of low-income populations, disproportionately made up of people of color. Noteworthy examples of what researchers have termed as “environmental gentrification” or “green gentrification” include adaptive reuse projects such as the Bloomingdale Trail at The 606 in Chicago and the Atlanta Beltline.

Land value capture strategies offer an array of public finance instruments that allow communities to recover and reinvest a percentage of the land value increases resulting from public investment and other government action. PCDC commissioned an economic analysis of the neighborhoods surrounding the Rail Park which confirmed significant potential for implementation of a land value capture strategy. Strategic Economics, supported locally by Urban Partners, reviewed apartment building sales within a half mile of the Rail Park since 2013, the year that FORP was formed. Trends in apartment building sales suggest that up to 16 percent of value in apartment buildings within the study area is attributable to the impact of the Rail Park.

Based on actual property values of the surrounding parcels, the Rail Park is projected to cause an up to 20 percent increase in property values, or an estimated \$169.49 million, which would yield an additional \$2.37 million in property tax revenue per year.

The analysis shows high potential for land value capture as a tool for the city to advance inclusive economic growth in communities to intentionally realize inclusive economic growth in communities surrounding the Rail Park. Without such a tool, benefits from the growth will continue to disproportionately accrue among higher income households, while low-income residents struggle with increased housing cost burden and risk of displacement.

In the Chinatown Future Histories project, public space serves as a framework for community members to weave together interests and historic experiences. A full-day Equity Lab, which convened community members, policymakers, and community development practitioners became a rallying point for systemic change around public spaces and equitable development.

In Chinatown, vibrant institutions, a tradition of community activism, and informal mutual aid networks emerged and now form the cradle of a regional touchstone. As Philadelphia changes, it becomes all the more important to ensure the protection of these cultural resources.

A public space can amplify and contribute toward equitable development goals. Key recommendations which emerged in Chinatown Future Histories include:

- **Build the capacity of low-income and LEP community members to advocate for their interests and access needed resources.** Community members want to strengthen the community engagement process conducted by local government as part of the disposition of city-owned properties, and increase public resources for community assets such as public spaces and affordable housing.
- **Incorporate equity values in public land and development processes.** Of particular potential for impact are tenant rights strategies such as Tenant/Community Opportunity to Purchase, opportunities to promote equitable development in the city's land disposition process, and community land trusts as a tool for neighborhood preservation.
- **Make economic growth work for everyone.** Specific goals include creating an inclusive business improvement district (BID) and exploring a value capture strategy which could be used by the City of Philadelphia to invest a portion of growth into equitable development goals.

Across the country, public space and community development practitioners can benefit from the following takeaways:

- **Amplify and partner with communities toward equitable development goals**
- **Ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities around park governance and planning processes**
- **Convene ongoing, proactive, and multisector forums such as the Equity Lab which center community members to generate consensus around viable equitable development strategies**
- **Acknowledge displacement pressures facing AAPI communities**
- **Invest in community leadership and capacity**

For more information, download the full report at:

<https://www.policylink.org/resources-tools/chinatown-future-histories>

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the William Penn Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for their support of the Chinatown Future Histories project, and the William Penn Foundation for funding this report. Additionally, we would like to thank project team members John Chin, Isaac Kwon, Yue Wu, Jeremy Liu, Akeem Dixon, Alexis Stephens, and Karen Black. Thanks to Gerry Wang and Melissa Kim for their insight and encouragement, as well as Beth McConnell, Shawn Sheu, Tayyib Smith, and Erica Atwood. We would also like to thank the PolicyLink staff who contributed to this document including Victor Rubin, Jacob Goolkasian, and Heather Tamir. Thanks as well to Helen Luu for providing Chinese language interpretation throughout the project, and also to Jackie Wong for her interpretation services. Finally, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the members of the Chinatown Future Histories Advisory Committee, community members who led Chinatown Walks, and the communities and artists who showed up in support of Chinatown during the Equity Lab. Your activism and leadership are the fuel for the past, present, and future of our communities. This report is dedicated in memory of George P. Moy for his lifelong commitment to the Philadelphia Chinatown community.



Lifting Up What Works®

Headquarters

1438 Webster Street
Suite 303
Oakland, CA 94612
t (510) 663-2333
f (510) 663-9684

Communications

75 Broad Street
Suite 701
New York, NY 10004
t (212) 629-9570

Washington, DC

1301 K Street NW
Suite 300W-414
Washington, DC 20005

www.policylink.org

Facebook: /PolicyLink
Twitter: @policylink

Sojourner Consulting is a professional consulting firm specializing in community engagement, urban planning and policy advocacy based in Philadelphia, PA.

info@sojournerconsulting.co

Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation was founded in 1966 as a grassroots, non-profit organization with a mission to preserve, protect and promote Chinatown.

Office

301-305 N 9th St
Philadelphia, PA 19107
t (215) 922-2156
info@chinatown-pcdc.org

www.chinatown-pcdc.org

Facebook: /phillychinatown
Twitter: @pcdc_events
Instagram: @chinatownpcdc

Cover: Children playing at the playground at Holy Redeemer Church and School in the 1980s. The site was threatened by the proposed Vine Street Expressway in the 1960s, which prompted the Save Chinatown movement. In the background, Vine Street is visible behind the fence, which was replaced by a sound wall during the highway construction in the 1980s. (*Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation*)

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by **Lifting Up What Works®**.

<http://www.policylink.org>