

AAARI Conference

Rethinking NYC's Asian American Communities

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Culture and Historic Preservation for Manhattan's Chinatown

Jocelyne Chait

jocelynechait@gmail.com

The Plan for Chinatown & Surrounding Areas

Preserving Affordability and Authenticity

**Recommendations to the
Chinatown Working Group**

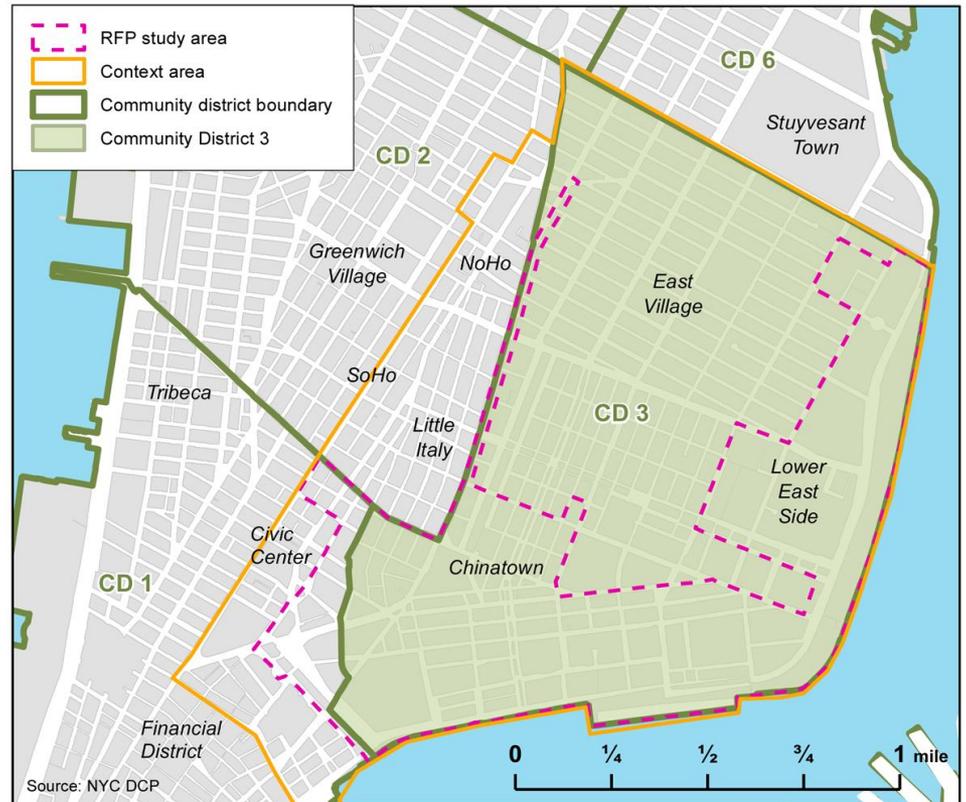
**Pratt Center for Community Development
The Collective for Community, Culture, and the Environment**

Project Background

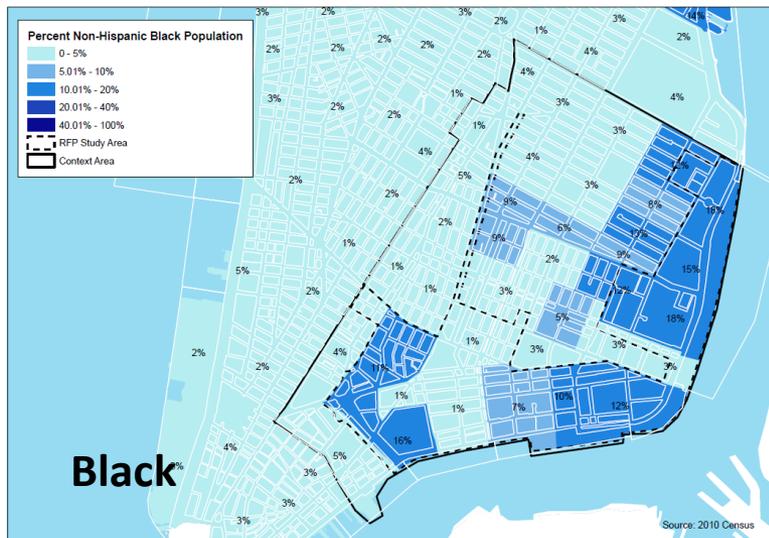
Mandate

1. Develop affordability, economic development, culture and historic preservation, and zoning recommendations and implementation strategies for Chinatown and surrounding areas, building on the work of CWG's CAPZ and Economic Development Working Teams.
2. Create a Special Chinatown District that addresses the issues in the entire RFP study area boundary – i. e. Chinatown and surrounding areas

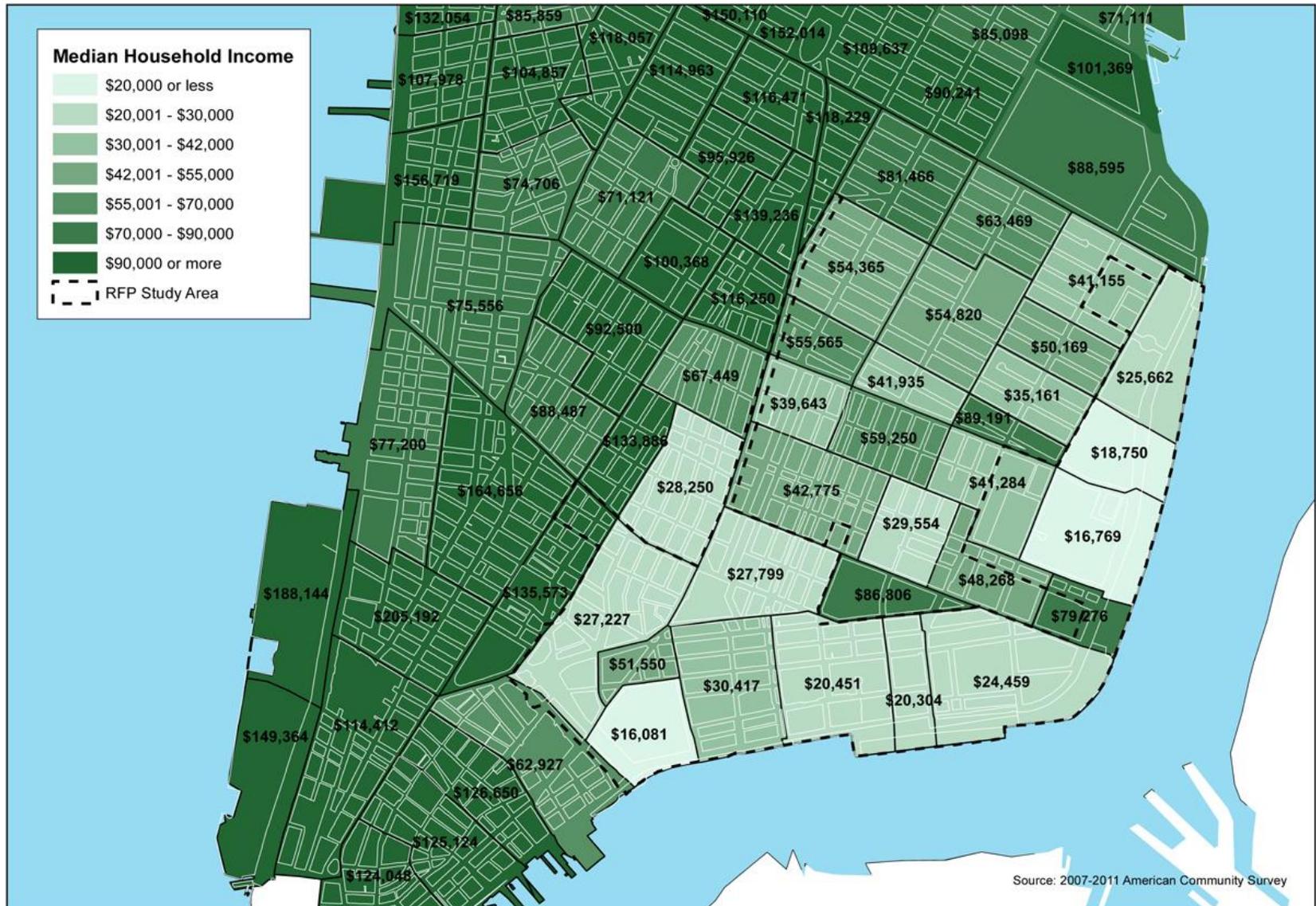
Study Area / Context Area



Population



Median Household Income, 2007-2011



Key Considerations

Assets

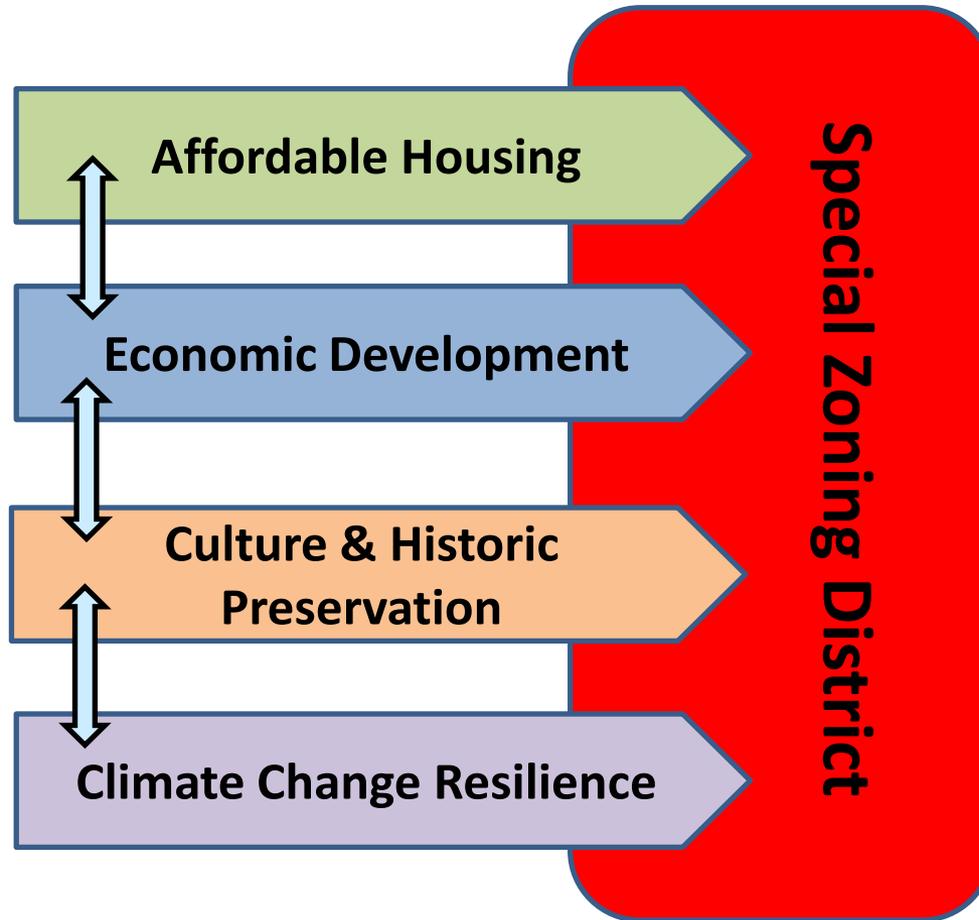
- Living immigrant neighborhood
- Affordable housing, community networks, cultural identity, neighborhood jobs
- Regional Asian American hub
- Cultural & economic value – national and international tourist destination

Threats

- Encroaching development – out of scale and character
- Gentrification - residential and commercial displacement



Integrated Recommendations and Implementation Strategies



Case Studies and Zoning Tools

Chinatowns in Other Cities

San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Toronto, Oakland, Honolulu.

- Most Chinatowns in these cities are either experiencing disinvestment and deterioration, or trying to protect against gentrification pressures from encroaching market-rate commercial, residential and institutional development.
 - All of the cities seek to preserve the unique history, culture, aesthetics and streetscape of their Chinatowns as well as preserve and promote ethnic retail and other businesses.
 - Most support the identification and protection (often landmarking) of historic buildings. Some have detailed signage and urban design regulations and many, but not all, include height and use limitations to what they define as compatible with the existing context.
 - Nearly all Chinatown areas are mixed use, containing both housing and small, culturally-specialized businesses and services – often with residents living above commercial spaces.
- Most Chinatown Special Districts are divided into Sub-Districts with somewhat different land use regulations for each.
 - Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Honolulu have the strictest zoning regulations. These regulations seek to preserve their Chinatowns and mitigate development impacts.
 - Cities with the greatest success in preserving and promoting their Chinatowns are those with active community development corporations and tenant advocacy organizations, whose multi-faceted work includes community organizing, planning and development, as well as direct services.
 - **In summary, cities whose governmental regulations and community organizations focus on preserving, promoting and protecting the vitality of the existing residents and business community continue to have the most vibrant and authentic Chinatowns.**

Culture & Historic Preservation

Built Environment

Chinatown and surrounding areas comprise some of the oldest neighborhoods in New York City and include a range of historic buildings, streets and developments that provide an important window on different periods in the city's history.

Historic Tenements

- One of the largest remaining concentrations of new and old law tenement buildings in New York City lies within the historic Chinatown core, Lower East Side and Little Italy.
- Decorative ironwork fire escapes. Chinese elements, e.g. lanterns, pagoda-like facades, and red awnings have been added more recently in some cases.

Public Housing (NYCHA)

- These “Tower in the Park” planned unit developments on the southern and eastern portions of the RFP Study Area, were built in the 1930s, 40s and 50s.
- Their design was influenced by European architect, Le Corbusier. Distinctive for breaking the street grid, building heights, large open spaces, and iconic orange brick facades.

Historic streets

- In the Five Points area, Doyers Street, with its “Bloody Angle” is widely considered to be the defining street of historic and contemporary Chinatown.



Culture & Historic Preservation

Public Open Space

Public open space plays an important role, not only in terms of providing opportunities for active recreation but also for civic engagement, cultural expression and quiet contemplation.

Small parks

Sara D. Roosevelt Park, Columbus Park.

- Very well utilized by local residents of all ages.
- Support diverse uses: dancing, exercise, tai chi, card and chess playing, music, singing, reading, sports and socializing.
- But inadequate for the size and density of existing population

Public plazas

Chatham Square (local residents, tourists)

Confucius Plaza (local residents, workers)

Potential additional public open space at Confucius Plaza

East River Waterfront

- Physically separated from the neighborhood by the FDR Drive overpass and South Street.
- Isolated from economic activity in the RFP Study Area.
- Some use, primarily by elderly residents for sitting, fishing, or strolling.



Culture & Historic Preservation

Sense of Place

Vibrant street life and streetscapes

- Street vendors and stores that spill out onto the sidewalk .
- Dynamic street wall created by open storefronts, restaurant entrances and colorful window displays.



Signage

- Brightly colored signage in Chinese characters on buildings and awnings.
- Most of the signage that gives Chinatown such unique character does not comply with current zoning



Culture & Historic Preservation

Previously Identified Historic & Culturally Significant Resources

- **Local NYC Landmarks**

Individual structures or historic districts designated and regulated by the NYC LPC. Currently no local Historic Districts in the RFP Study Area, although some exist nearby.

- **National Register of Historic Places**

The boundaries of four National Register Historic Districts intersect with the RFP Study Area: The Chinatown & Little Italy Historic District; The Bowery Historic District; The Two Bridges Historic District; The Lower East Side Historic District.

- **Place Matters Census of Places that Matter**

Properties nominated by the public, that evoke associations with history, memory and tradition. Recognition only. No formal protections.

- **Potential Landmarks identified by the CAPZ Team**

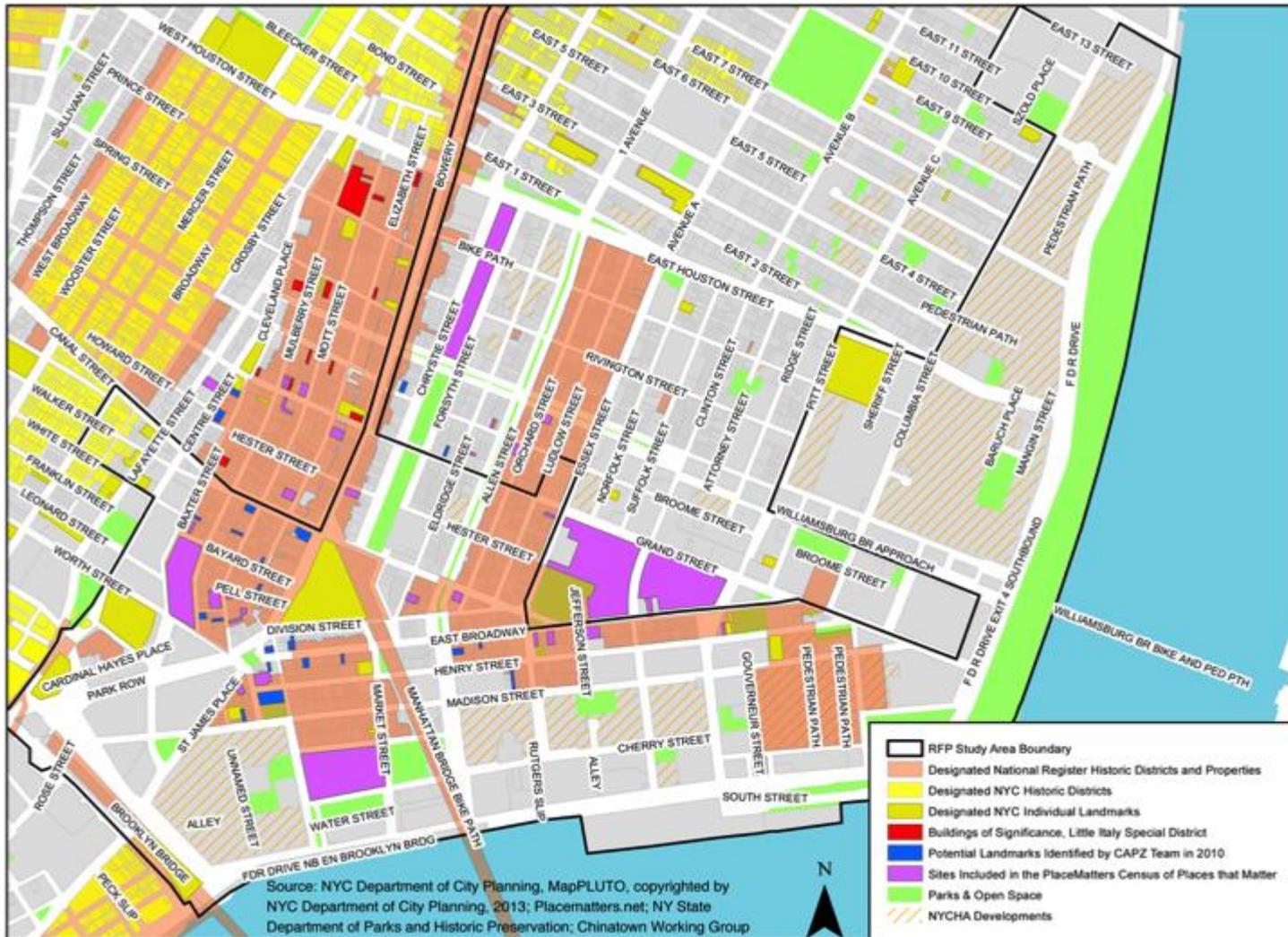
Survey by CWG CAPZ team in 2010 identified potential landmarks for possible designation.

- **Buildings of Significance, Little Italy Special District**

Special Little Italy District, just west of the Study Area, established in 1977 by CPC. Includes 18 buildings of special significance that may not be demolished or have external alterations without review and approval by the CPC.

Culture & Historic Preservation

Previously Identified Historic & Culturally Significant Resources



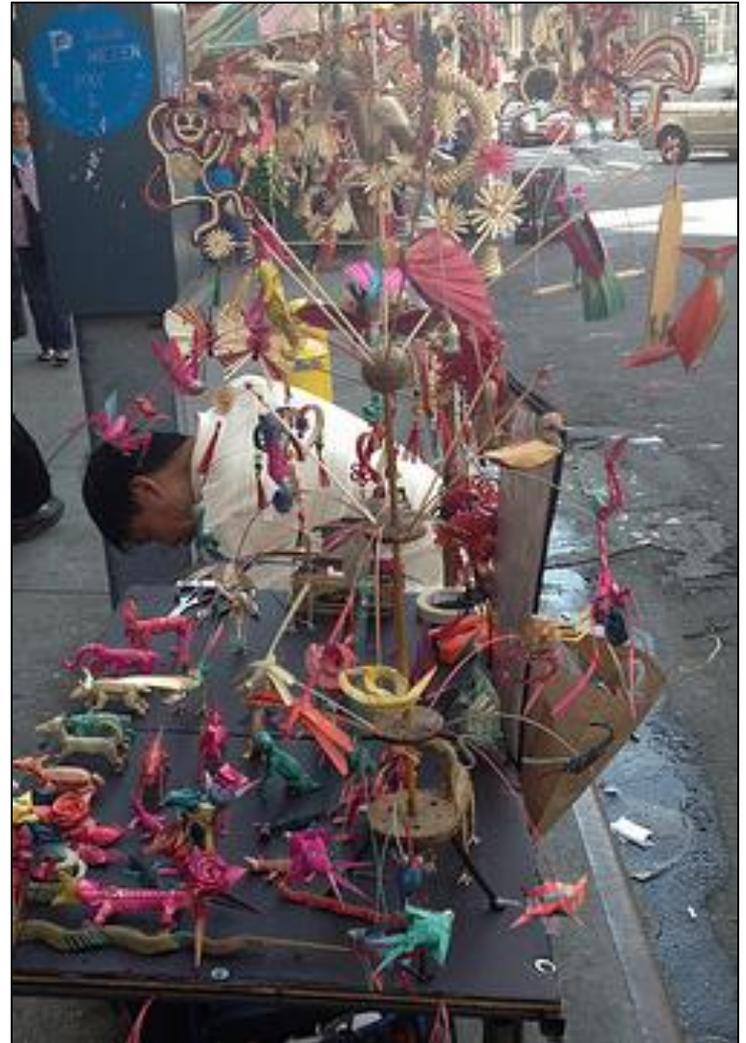
Culture & Historic Preservation

Arts and Culture

- **Rich arts and cultural history and activities**
 - Successive generations of Chinese residents, workers and businesses.
 - Family, civic and cultural institutions
 - Culturally-oriented businesses
 - Arts and cultural programming and events
- **Valuable creative and cultural assets**

Including local artists and performers, and people with unique skills and knowledge. Need to recognize and celebrate these cultural treasures and promote them locally and to a broader citywide and regional audience.
- **Need for affordable and adequate facilities**

There is no sufficient programming space to meet the needs of the vast majority of arts, cultural and civic organizations.



Culture & Historic Preservation

Arts and Culture

- **Need for a visual and performing arts center**

Substantial effort has already been made by CREATE in Chinatown (toward developing a performing and visual arts center in the area. Needs ongoing support, organizational development and funding.

- **Need for more effective use of 70 Mulberry Street (former P.S. 23)**

CREATE has made recommendations for maximizing this important city-owned resource. Need for a permanent solution to lease arrangement and maintenance of the building.

- **Need for a movie theater**

Chinatown has not had a movie theater for many years. Chinese and Asian movie industry is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon, and Chinatown could benefit from having a movie theater to showcase Chinese and American films.



Culture & Historic Preservation Goals

- **Preserve sites of cultural significance to the contemporary community, as well as sites of historic significance.**
- **Preserve and build upon Chinatown's cultural assets and promote opportunities for artistic and cultural expression.**

Culture & Historic Preservation CWG Guiding Principles

- 1. Preserve and enhance the cultural character of Chinatown that makes it a unique and diverse community.**
- 2. Support cultural activities and preservation efforts that will attract and retain Chinatown residents, businesses, and visitors, while also addressing the quality and importance of family life.**
- 3. Create a dedicated community arts center and other appropriate spaces for cultural use that are affordable to area artists, organizations and residents.**
- 4. Recognize, protect and preserve Chinatown's historic buildings/structures and districts of architectural and/or cultural significance, its distinctive streetscapes and other characteristic elements of the community.**
- 5. Encourage imaginative new architecture and environmental design reflective of contemporary life and aesthetics, but also respectful of older architectural styles in the neighborhood.**
- 6. Ensure that the efforts of other CWG working teams align with the community's historic/cultural preservation, growth, and development goals.**
- 7. Work with and support local cultural organizations that gather, safeguard and disseminate the shared histories and stories that collectively form the basic foundations of this neighborhood and are vitally relevant to its future.**
- 8. Pursue policies and efforts aimed at long-term community preservation and development rather than the creation of a "Disneyland Chinatown."**

Proposed Chinatown and Lower East River District, Subdistricts and Recommendation Areas



Special District Findings

Although different parts of the RFP study area vary in many respects such as use, scale, community character, and context there are also a number of significant similarities that make the creation of a single Special District appropriate.

1. Unique history as NYC's longest continuous home and cultural resource for past and current immigrants
2. Diverse mix of land uses that are not permitted to co-exist under current zoning
3. Unique signage and streetscape that is reflective of community culture
4. Concentration of tenements and large scale "tower in the park" planned developments built for working class residents
5. High percentage of low income residents unable to afford market rents and vulnerable to harassment and displacement pressures
6. High percentage of renters, rent regulated units and rent burdened and overcrowded households.
7. High percentage of residents who walk to work
8. Small businesses that provide culturally specialized goods and services for the local and regional community
9. Among the only areas in Lower Manhattan not currently covered by contextual or Special District zoning or NYC Historic District designation.

Culture & Historic Preservation Special District Recommendations

- 1. Preserve and protect sites of cultural, historic or architectural significance in the RFP study area, modelled on the “buildings of significance” in the Special Little Italy District established in 1977.**
- 2. Include signage regulations that legalize existing signage, except illuminated signs above the first floor.**
- 3. Incentivize or mandate affordable arts and cultural uses within new construction.**
- 4. Use Transfer of Development Rights from existing buildings determined to be of cultural, historic or architectural significance in Subdistrict A to new developments in Subdistricts C and D.**
- 5. Include contribution to a Cultural Resources Fund in exchange for a floor area bonus, as an alternative to incorporating cultural uses in new development.**
- 5. Establish a Local Arts and Cultural Conservancy to: (a) guide the implementation of culture bonuses in new development; (b) manage a Cultural Resources Fund; and (c) support cultural events and programming as well as local arts and cultural organizations.**

Culture & Historic Preservation

Other Recommendations

1. Pursue landmarking and other interventions for identified sites of significance that fall outside the proposed Special District.
2. Pursue historic district designation for Henry Street and for the west side of Oliver Street between Madison Street and St. James Place/Kimlau Square.
3. Pursue landmarking of the historic “Five Points” street plan.
4. Support Friends of the Lower East Side’s efforts toward a historic district on Orchard Street; also Two Bridges Neighborhood Council’s and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum’s local landmarking efforts.
5. Assist owners of property listed on the National Register of Historic Places to access Historic Preservation Tax Credits.
6. Pursue creation of a Chinatown Arts Center or Campus.
7. Advance CREATE’s recommendations for more efficient use of 70 Mulberry Street.
8. Promote development of a movie theater.
9. Explore use of bank windows to showcase local art.
10. Explore use of tax abatements and other incentives to encourage landlords to rent affordable space to community organizations.
11. Leverage Chinatown’s unique cultural assets for local economic development.
12. Advocate better promotion of Chinatown and its cultural assets by the Chinatown Visitor Kiosk.
13. Provide for better access to and programming of public spaces.
14. Promote use of the Confucius Plaza “amphitheater” site for public gathering.

**To view and download the full report please visit
the Chinatown Working Group website at:**

www.chinatownworkinggroup.org