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Asian American
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a snapshot of new york's chinatown

Chinatown: Then & Now

A Snapshot of New York's Chinatown

Introduction

The mention of “Chinatown” evokes many images. But for decades, Chinatown has meant home for immigrant families. Chinatown residents rely on networks of friends and relatives in the community and on affordable food and goods in nearby stores. Workers depend on jobs they find in the neighborhood and from employment agencies centered in these communities. Yet as land use struggles change downtown areas across the United States, Chinatowns are becoming increasingly destabilized as their future as sustainable low-income immigrant communities is threatened.

The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) embarked on a three-city study of Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia to determine the current state of Chinatowns. Whereas Chinatowns used to be disfavored places to live and dumping grounds for undesirable uses, luxury and institutional developers began targeting these previously shunned areas in the 1980s and 1990s for more luxury uses including high-end condominiums and stadiums. For decades, residents, workers, small business owners, and community organizations have fought against development that threatens to weaken immigrant networks and resources in these neighborhoods. In collaboration with these community partners, academic institutions, and hundreds of volunteers, AALDEF spent a year recording block by block and lot by lot the existing land uses in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia's Chinatown and surrounding immigrant areas. The data was mapped by the University of Pennsylvania's City Planning and Urban Studies Department.

This preview provides a snapshot of the land uses in New York's Chinatown in 2011 and highlights the forthcoming three-city report using Census and land use data to describe the startling transformation of Chinatowns along the East Coast in the past three decades. Without the fights against unfettered development led by members from groups like the Chinese Progressive Association in Boston, Chinese Staff & Workers' Association in New York, and Asian Americans United in Philadelphia, these Chinatowns would likely contain even more high-end and institutional expansion. City governments removed and replaced working-class immigrant residential and commercial land uses in each of these Chinatowns. This land use study documents what currently exists to support the organizing and planning efforts to retain resources and networks in these Chinatowns for current and future generations of immigrants.

Background

Located in areas previously neglected by city governments, Chinatowns have served as the gateway for thousands of immigrants from Asia every year. But as this downtown land becomes increasingly valuable, gentrification in the form of high-priced real estate transactions, institutional expansion, and commercial development threatens to destroy the places where Asian immigrants have traditionally lived and worked. In the past, these neighborhoods have disproportionately borne the burden of land use and zoning decisions that tear apart the community and dump undesirable projects like highways and convention centers next to people's homes. More recently, the neighborhoods' historical and cultural significance has been disregarded in favor of luxury buildings and upscale businesses that alter the communities' unique economic and social character. As a result, low-income residents and small businesses face the prospect of direct or secondary displacement.

Most recently in New York's Chinatown, zoning and commercial development have emerged as the dominant struggles between residents, workers, small business owners—who want to maintain Chinatown's varied network for low-income immigrants—and city agencies and big developers—which covet the neighborhood's rising property values for higher-income households.

In November 2008, the New York City Council unanimously approved New York's third largest rezoning plan since 1961 despite vigorous protest by Chinatown and Lower East Side residents and workers. Although the City determined that the rezoning would not significantly harm the community, independent analysis by urban planners concluded that the rezoning would push luxury development into Chinatown and the Lower East Side and disproportionately impact these low-income and immigrant communities. In particular, opponents feared the rezoning plan would accelerate luxury development between Houston and Delancey Streets, where the City increased the zoning density by more than 100 percent.

Soon after in September 2011, the City Council also unanimously approved a new Business Improvement District (BID), a public-private entity covering a significant portion of Chinatown with the alleged goal of cleaning its streets. Again, the City approved the BID despite small business owners and property owners filing unprecedented numbers of objections. BID opponents feared that the BID fees assessed on each property would result in higher commercial rents and increase displacement and vacancies of commercial properties.

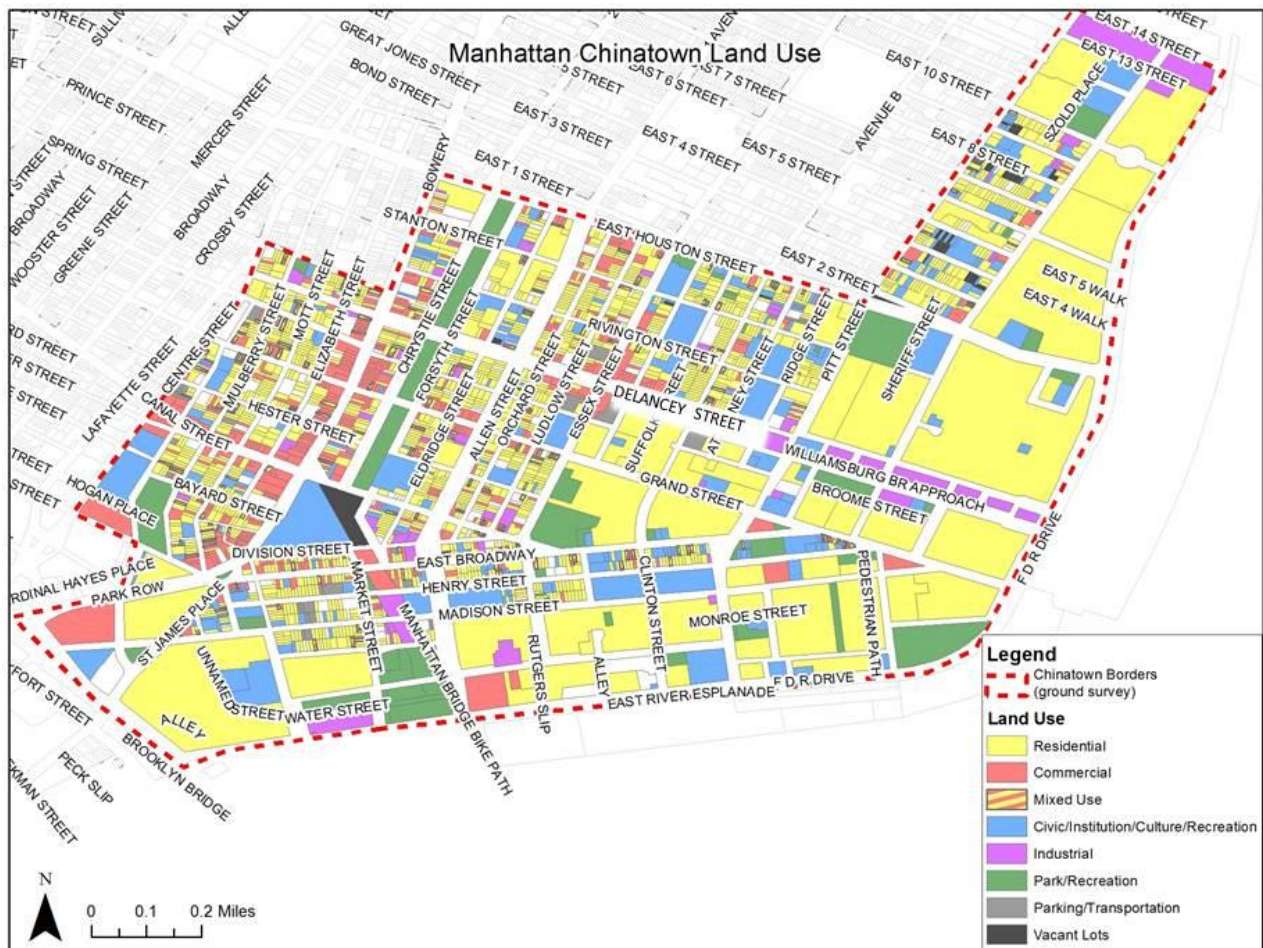
This backdrop provides insight into the land uses recorded through this three-city land survey. Much of what now exists in Chinatown is critical to the survival of this immigrant community. And residents, workers, small business owners, and even some property owners are fighting to retain the fabric of this community for current and future immigrant family households.

What's in New York's Chinatown Now?

The boundaries of New York's Chinatown and its surrounding immigrant areas, in particular the Lower East Side, have been defined by residents and workers to include areas historically considered Chinatown, but also areas where immigrants of similar socioeconomic status live and work. The study area stretches from the East River on the south and goes up along the eastern border of Manhattan to portions of 14th Street that include public housing and Houston Street on the north to Bowery and Centre Street on the west. These are also areas where urban planners predicted that increased development and displacement would take place, due to the 2008 rezoning plan.

In total, 3,652 buildings were surveyed. Of those total parcels, 51% have commercial use on the bottom floor with residential use on the upper floors, 15% are purely residential, 2% of the parcels are park/recreation space (though the percentage of the area allocated to parks is 8.5%), 2% contain industrial uses, and 6% are vacant. These percentages differ from certain categories in the New York City Planning Commission's land use map. The average height of the buildings is 5.25 stories.

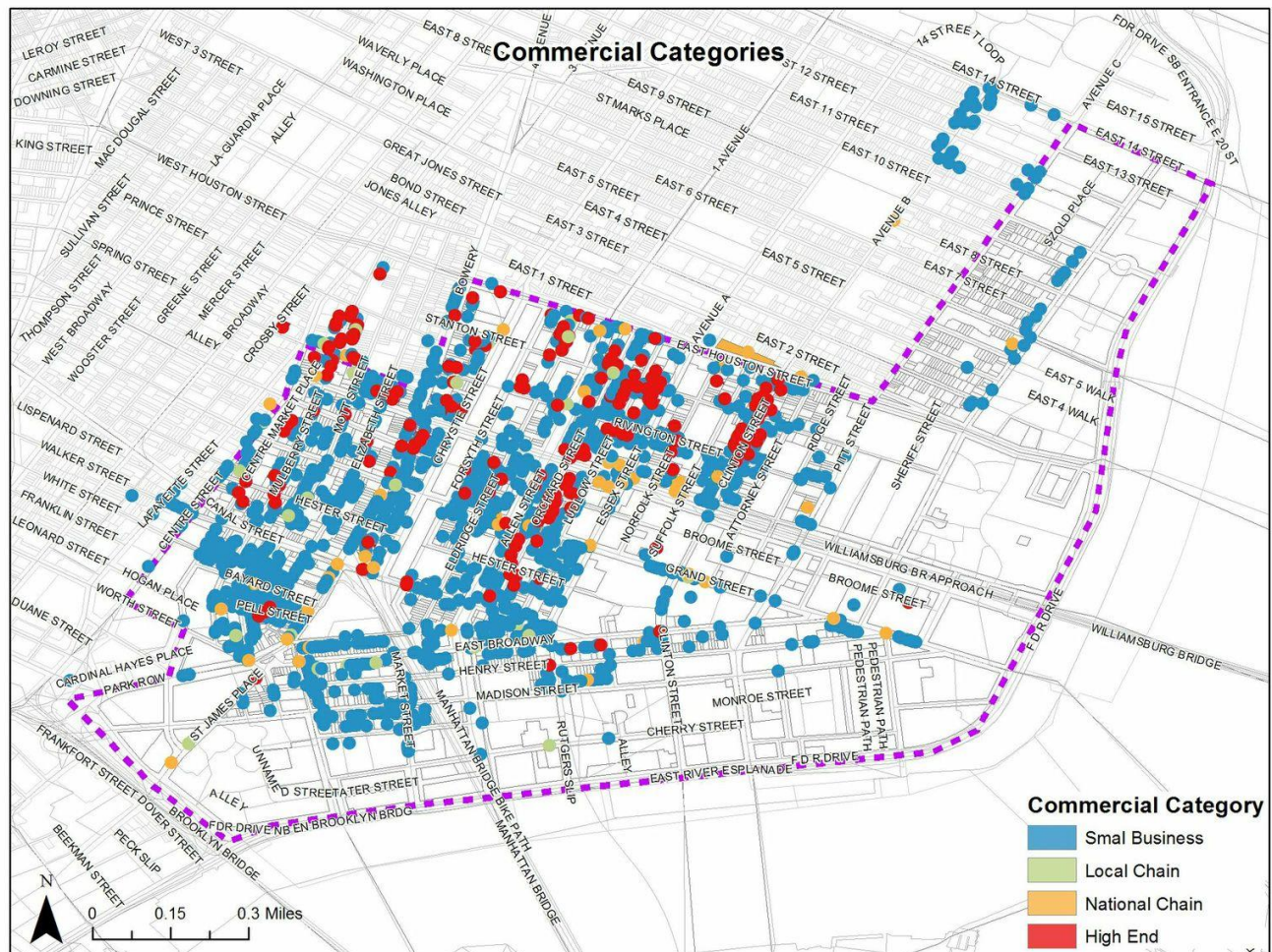
Chinatown & Lower East Side Study Area: Land Use According to City Planning Commission 2010



Commercial Uses & Small Businesses

Chinatown has 2,274 ground floor businesses or institutions. At 94%, the overwhelming majority of commercial use in New York’s Chinatown is small businesses. The majority of small businesses is geared towards residents’ everyday use and purchase of affordable goods and services. Businesses geared toward tourists are minimal. Only 4% are national chains and 1% are local chains.

Approximately 12% of all businesses were classified as “high-end,” including 79 clothing/shoes stores and 62 restaurants. The most significant portion of these high-end stores are clustered in the area between Houston and Delancey Street where students and young professionals have displaced immigrants in the past decade. High-end stores also dot the landscape along Allen and Orchard Streets heading towards the historic core of Chinatown.

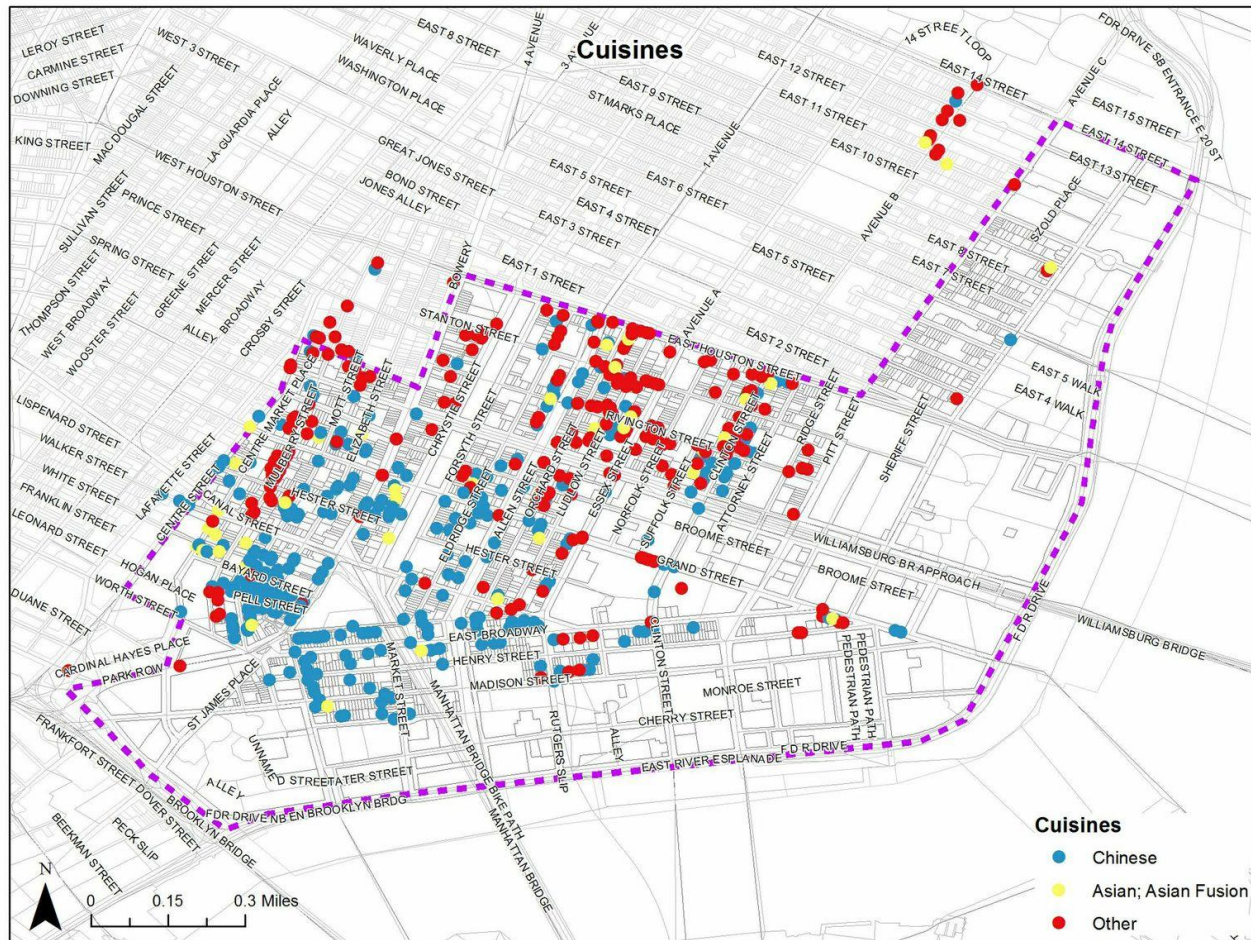


Restaurants

The predominant commercial use in the neighborhood is restaurant/food at 26%.

The types of restaurants and food available in Chinatown are often good indicators of the amount of gentrification occurring in the neighborhood. In New York, Chinese restaurants mainly inhabit Chinatown's historic core. "Other" restaurants are mainly between the Houston and Delancey Street area and Little Italy, but also have popped up along some of the edges of historic Chinatown where many Chinese residents live and work, including on East Broadway, Essex Street, and the Bowery.

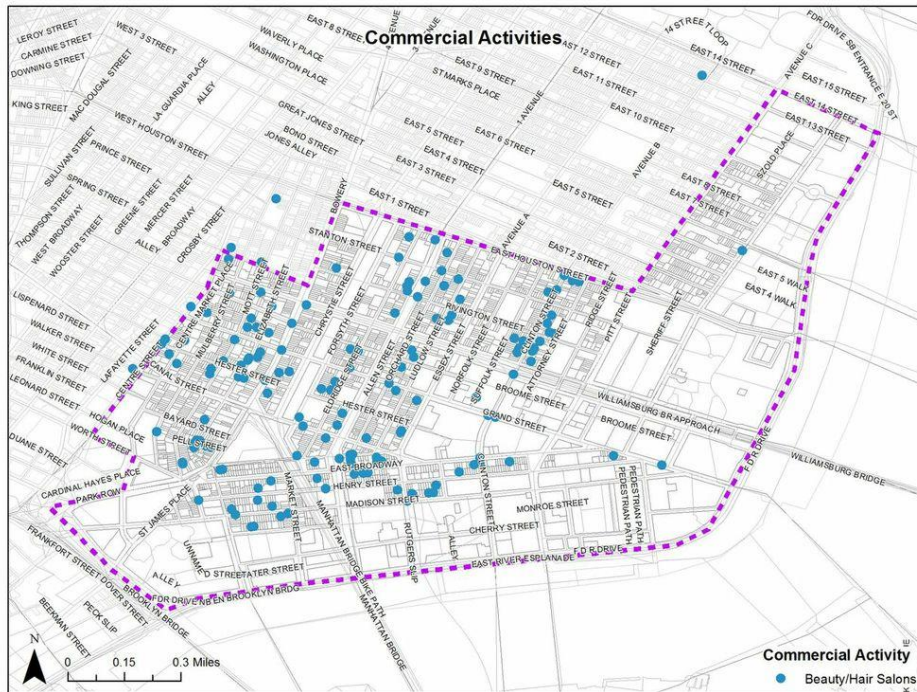
In addition, in the past few years, "other" restaurants such as a French bistro have opened on streets like Baxter in the heart of Chinatown. Starbucks opened on Canal Street in the 2000s. Another building along Canal Street, where stalls of counterfeit goods were located just across the street from a tourism booth for Chinatown, is now boasting a large coffee shop. Before debuting the new coffee shop signs, the building's ground floor storefront was covered with wooden boards, on which a local resident had scrawled the Chinese word for "gentrification."



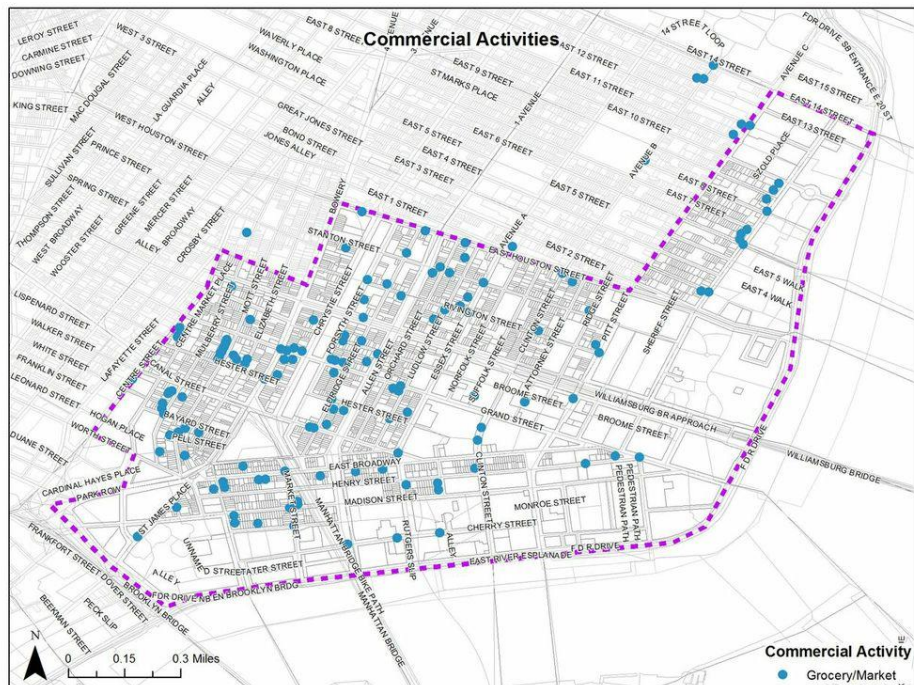
Beauty & Hair, Groceries, Clothing & Shoes, and Other Small Businesses

Beauty/hair salons and grocery stores/markets—both of which comprise 9% each of all businesses—are the next most predominant uses and spread throughout Chinatown, making them easily accessible to residents and workers with goods and services at inexpensive prices.

Beauty & Hair Salons

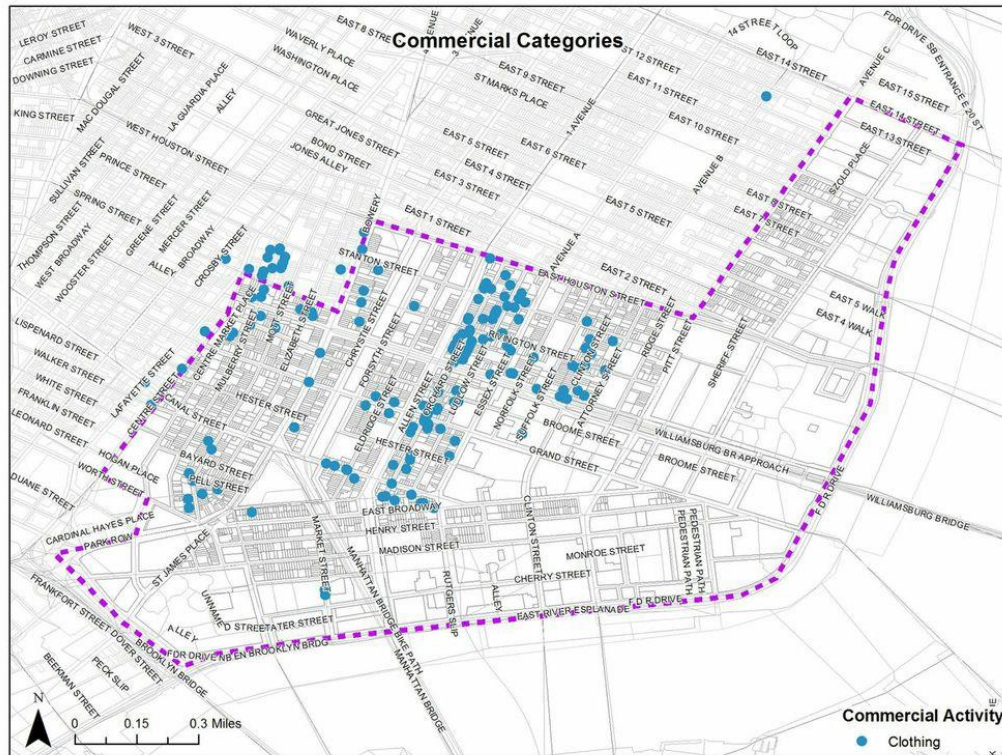


Grocery Stores & Markets



Clothing and shoe stores also comprise 9% of the stores in the study area, but are clustered mainly on the same streets where high-end stores have been identified, suggesting that low-income immigrants in Chinatown may not frequent this type of store.

Clothing & Shoes



Businesses in Chinatown are incredibly diversified, demonstrates the neighborhood’s strong residential nature as locals rely on Chinatown for their day-to-day needs. The predominant businesses that provide affordable goods and services are dotted throughout the neighborhood. For example, appliance and electronics stores (5%) and convenience and variety stores (4%) are the next most predominant commercial uses in Chinatown while offices of dentists, doctors, herbal pharmacists, lawyers, and accountants (3%) are scattered throughout the neighborhood. These types of small businesses are supported largely by residents, but also attract Chinese and Asian immigrants who live outside of the neighborhood and rely on linguistically and culturally accessible services.

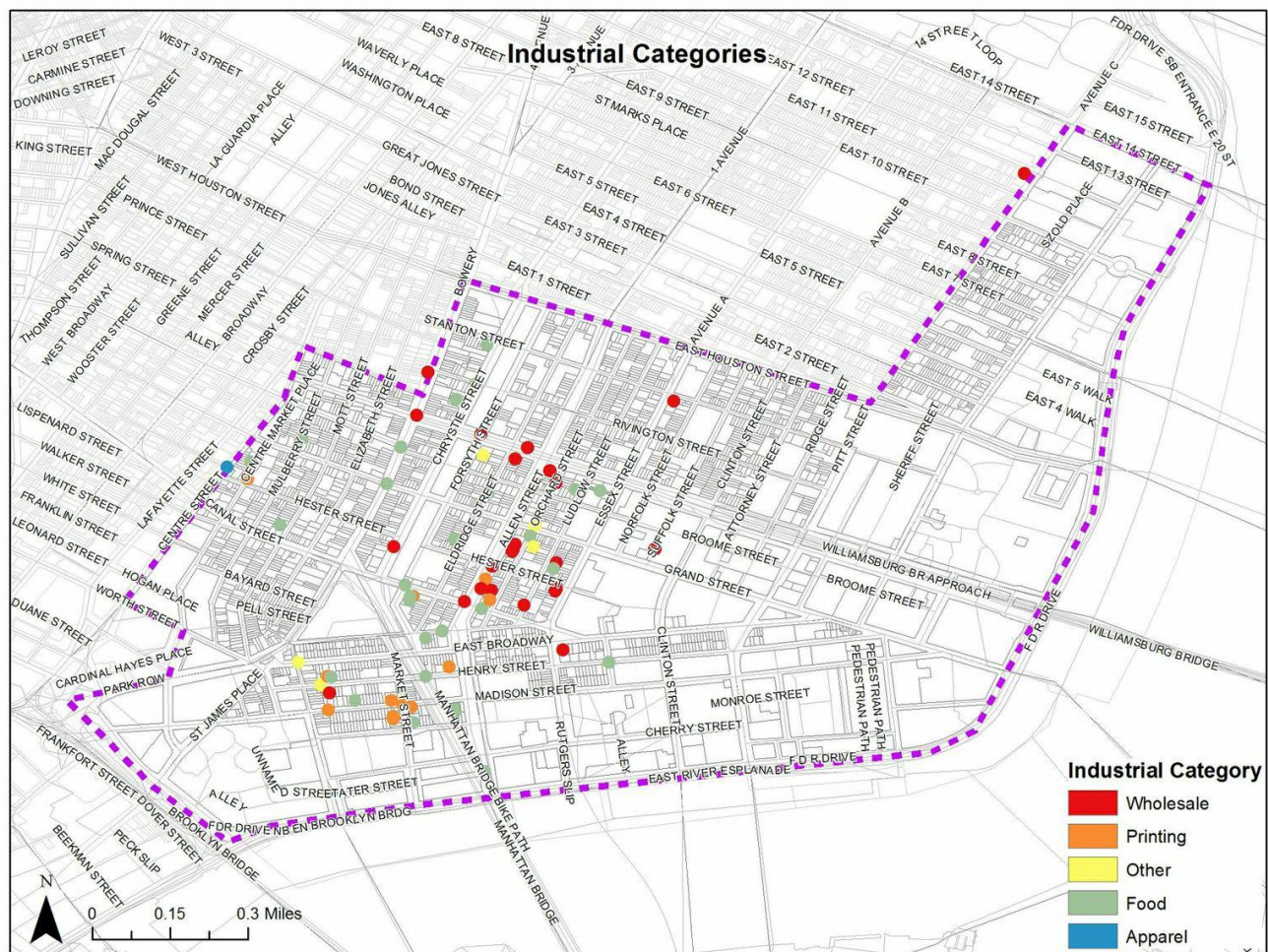
Other types of small businesses like jewelry stores and gift shops—which comprise about 3% each of all businesses in Chinatown—are geared more towards tourists. The clusters of these types of stores versus the scattered nature of businesses geared towards residents, such as grocery stores, make them more of a destination stop rather than representative of businesses selling every-day goods. For example, gift shops are clustered just a couple blocks north and south of Canal Street along streets like Baxter, Mulberry, and Mott while jewelry stores are located mainly along Canal, Elizabeth, and the Bowery. Although present in the neighborhood, businesses geared towards tourists are not as prevalent as businesses selling day-to-day goods to residents and workers.

Industrial Uses

Like the commercial uses in the neighborhood, a closer look at the industrial uses reflects the predominance of the food industry in Chinatown. The majority of industrial uses are connected to food and restaurants. Approximately 33% are wholesalers, including for restaurant supplies and food, while another 33% make or distribute food, including beer, dumplings, ravioli, wonton skins, and sushi supplies. The smaller spaces that produce food are particularly geared towards stocking local restaurants with perishable food supplies. Wholesalers provide to restaurants in the local vicinity, but also attract restaurant owners from all over the country who need supplies.

Even the printing industry, which comprises 15% of industrial uses, is focused on the food industry and prints such things as restaurant menus and materials for wedding banquets used in local restaurants or outside of New York.

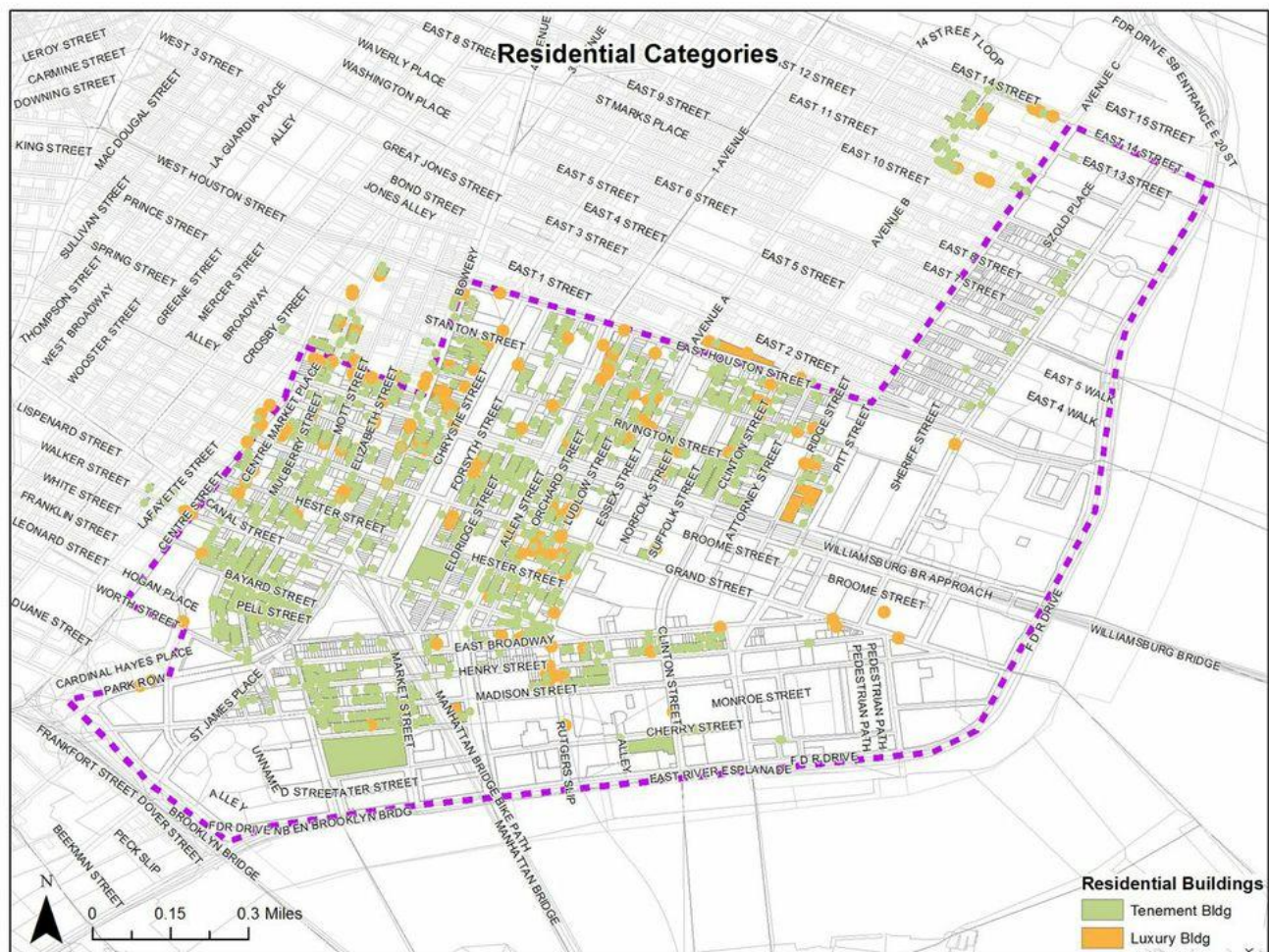
The decline of the garment industry is obvious as less than 1% of recorded uses are apparel.



Residential & Household Make-Up

Because many residential buildings are tenement buildings and Chinatown in New York is larger than in Boston or Philadelphia, the physical aspects of residential gentrification are not as obvious. However, changes are gradually occurring. Tenants have experienced more harassment by landlords in the past decade. The occupants of rent regulated units have shifted from immigrant family households to a younger demographic, including young professionals and students. Further, the decline of the garment industry has transformed former factories into million dollar loft apartments on streets like Hester Street in the core of Chinatown.

As seen in the map, tenement buildings, traditionally a source of affordable housing for immigrants in Chinatown and the Lower East Side still proliferate, but the demographics of their occupants have changed in the past three decades.



US Census data shows that between 1990 and 2010, the population of New York’s Chinatown decreased by 7% from 125,574 to 116,722 people. Meanwhile, the borough’s population grew by 6.6%. The Asian population in Chinatown is currently 42%, which is relatively stable from 41% in 1990. The rest of the population is currently mostly White (20%) and Hispanic/Latino (26%). However, the Hispanic/Latino population decreased from 41,609 to 30,227 whereas the white population increased from 22,229 to 23, 314, especially in the last decade. This increase is a significant indicator of gentrification as white households in Chinatown have generally been more affluent than other racial groups.¹

	Manhattan - Median Household Income			
	2000		2006-2010	
	Chinatown*	New York	Chinatown*	New York
Non Hispanic White	\$35,904	\$46,534	\$58,265	\$62,517
Non Hispanic Black	\$26,653	\$31,058	\$44,410	\$39,927
Latino	\$29,627	\$27,757	\$31,814	\$34,467
Asian Pacific Islander	\$31,368	\$41,119	\$29,524	\$53,173

* Value Missing for some of the Census Tracts

Source: US Census Bureau

However, the most significant reason behind Chinatown’s shrinking population is the decline of family households; a large indicator of gentrification in Chinatowns is the shift from multi-generational immigrant families to households comprised of young professionals. Between 1990 and 2010, the share of non-family households increased dramatically from 14% to 24% while the share of family households decreased from 82% to 73%. Even more telling in the decade between 2000 and 2010 is that the percentage of non-family households in New York City overall remained exactly the same at 37%, but increased in Chinatown from 19% to 24%. This change from family to non-family households is also reflected in Chinatown residents’ ages. The share of residents under 17 years old also declined from 21% to 15% between 1990 and 2010.

While the number of Chinatown residents over 65 years old in Boston and Philadelphia also decreased, this population in New York increased slightly in the past thirty years from 15% to 17%. The steadiness of this particular group reflects how critical New York’s rent regulation system is in maintaining immigrant neighborhoods, since many of New York Chinatown’s residents who are over 65 years old have lived in the neighborhood’s rent regulated housing for decades. Because rent regulation makes demolition and evictions more difficult than in cities without these laws, the elderly population in Chinatown has been sustained despite overall higher rents in the neighborhood. However, newer immigrants do not have the same access to this system, which has weakened over the years.

¹ Due to the interruption of the administration of the long form in the 2010 Census and its replacement by the American Community Survey (ACS), only the 5 year data allows analysis of census tract level for socio-economic variables.

Between 1990 and 2006-2010, the median monthly rent remained lower in Chinatown than in the city overall (1990: \$351 versus \$448; 2006-2010: \$851 versus \$1,022) though it rose from 78% to 83% of the city's median rent.

Luxury development occurring in and around New York's Chinatown is contributing to that increase and the rise in home ownership opportunities in the neighborhood has not benefited the immigrant Asian population in Chinatown. The map indicates that a large amount of luxury buildings are located in the area between Houston and Delancey Streets in addition to portions that creep into Soho near Broome and Ludlow Streets. This pattern coincides with the higher concentration of high end clothing and shoe stores on these streets.

Whereas homeownership increased between 1990 and 2010 from 7% to 14%, the poverty rate among Asians in Chinatown has remained relatively consistent. Further, the poverty rate of Asian residents (2006-2010) in Chinatown remains much higher at 33% as compared to the city overall at 18%. In addition, although median house value was slightly lower in Chinatown at \$145,000 than the city overall at \$189,600, by 2006-2010 the median house value was significantly higher in Chinatown at \$684,388 as opposed to \$504,500 in the city overall.²

The owner-occupied housing in Chinatown is clearly geared toward higher-income households, whereas rental units have remained somewhat more affordable. Keeping rents affordable will help determine whether the population will shift dramatically in the next ten years.

Conclusion

This preview provides just a snapshot of New York Chinatown's community fabric that immigrant workers, residents, and small business and property owners are fighting to maintain. Land use and census data can be instructive in helping communities plan for their futures.

AALDEF's forthcoming three-city comparison of Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia will provide additional analysis of the development of these immigrant neighborhoods and document these communities' long struggles against unjust neglect and displacement.

² Note that the value was missing for some of the Census tracts.