

Placemaking or Placekeeping? The Dual Role of the Arts in the Gentrification of Manhattan's Chinatown

Gabrielle Wong, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Eugene McCann's course, GEOG 362W, Gentrification & Urban Change. The assignment asked students to research and critically analyze an example of gentrification and urban change. The paper uses APA citation style.

Artists have a reputation as harbingers of gentrification. However, the arts are not monolithic, and many artist-activists use cultural production as a method of creative resistance to gentrification in their neighbourhoods. This paper investigates the dual role of the arts in the gentrification of Manhattan's Chinatown. The arts facilitate the neighbourhood's gentrification through high-end art galleries that physically displace lower-income residents by driving up rents and pricing them out of Chinatown. Galleries also culturally displace residents by creating feelings of alienation and non-belonging. Businesses and planners have exacerbated these impacts through 'creative placemaking' principles that co-opt the arts to support profit-making. On the other hand, the arts are a powerful tool of resistance. Through an analysis of the work of the Chinatown Arts Brigade, a longstanding arts-activist group in Manhattan's Chinatown, I demonstrate the potential of the arts to empower tenant voices, contest 'creative placemaking', and hold other artists accountable for their role in gentrification. I conclude with a discussion of the ambivalence of the arts, demonstrating that the binary between 'gentrifier' and 'non-gentrifier' is, in fact, quite blurry.

In 1980, Jack Tchen and Charlie Lai established the Chinatown History Project after meeting at the Basement Workshop, which was an artists' collective advocating against gentrification, police brutality, and anti-Asian racism (Wang, 2021). Forty years later, the project, now the Museum of Chinese in America

(MOCA), is facing accusations from activists that it facilitates the gentrification it once stood against (Freytas-Tamura, 2021; Sze, 2010). What caused the shift in grassroots sentiment towards MOCA? More broadly, what is the relationship between the arts and gentrification in Manhattan's Chinatown?

This paper is about the complex roles of art in the gentrification of Manhattan's Chinatown. Gentrification refers to changes in the population "such that the new users are of a higher socioeconomic status" than previous residents, which occurs alongside reinvestment in the built environment (Lees et al., 2013, pp.159–160). I will analyze how artists facilitate gentrification, especially through 'creative placemaking' practices that promote economic development through the arts (Loh et al., 2022). I will then consider how Chinese American art-activists resist gentrification. Through this discussion, I will illustrate the ambivalent relationship between the arts and gentrification in Manhattan's Chinatown. Sometimes the arts facilitate gentrification, sometimes they resist gentrification, and in certain cases, they do both simultaneously.

The Arts and Gentrification

Artists are often characterized as early gentrifiers who move into older neighbourhoods seeking affordable live-work studios (Rich, 2019). As Sharon Zukin's research into New York City loft-living concludes, these 'pioneers' pave the way for non-creative cultural consumers "who develop a taste for an authentic, bohemian lifestyle" (Zukin & Braslow, 2011, p.131). Wealthy consumers who can pay more for space drive up rents and eventually displace old residents physically and culturally. Cultural displacement refers to the feelings of alienation that come alongside the loss of particular foods, activities, or cultural practices; it can occur even if residents physically remain in the neighbourhood (Kern, 2022).

In later stages of gentrification, developers and the state use artists' cultural capital to establish new identities for neighbourhoods as distinctly creative and authentic (Lees et al., 2013). Pritchard (2020) calls these practices 'artwashing', the use of artistic work to promote capital accumulation (p.179). For example, commissioned street art could constitute artwashing if it is intended to attract creative middle-class gentrifiers. Artwashing accelerates displacement by building a landscape that caters to gentrifiers while simultaneously masking gentrifying processes.

Gentrification through art is further obscured by the language of 'revitalization' or 'arts-based redevelopment'. The term 'creative placemaking' is

particularly popular and describes public investments, zoning, and governance that specifically use arts and culture to “revitalize and activate urban spaces” (Loh et al., 2022, p.1). In research from Los Angeles’ Chinatown, Hom (2022) argues placemaking involves “territorializing, regulating, and symbolizing spaces to assert this sense of community and ethnic identity” (pp.201–202). Plans for Chinatown using creative placemaking principles will often include commitments to preserve local culture. Unfortunately, particularly when these strategies target the tangible heritage of building façades while ignoring intangible heritage (local knowledge and lifeways), they prioritize outsiders and business interests instead of building the current community’s capacity (Hom, 2022).

However, artists are not a monolithic group. Art-activism is a powerful way for those affected by gentrification to create spaces of “collective resistance and survival” (Ramírez, 2017, p.201). Anti-gentrification movements use art to document displacement, challenge narratives about redevelopment, and craft alternatives to gentrification (Serafini, 2022). Art provokes visceral experiences that make political problems visible to a general audience. While there is little research evaluating the extent to which art-activism achieves these goals, many scholars contest the narrative that artists are uniformly gentrifiers by recognizing the potential of arts-based resistance (Desai, 2018; Duncombe, 2016; Killick, 2019; Ramírez, 2017).

‘Placekeeping’ has emerged as a variant to creative placemaking with a more explicit focus on long-term management for future generations (Mahieus & McCann, 2023). Urban planner and activist Robert Bedoya conceptualizes placekeeping as a preservation effort that recognizes those already in a neighbourhood have a ‘right to the city’ (Loh et al., 2022). While creative placemaking constructs community identities to bolster economic development, placekeeping strategies use art to protect current residents’ intangible cultural heritage. Overall, literature on the role of the arts in gentrification is split, with some work casting artists as facilitators of gentrification and others analyzing the links between art and resistance. The following sections apply this broader academic literature to Manhattan’s Chinatown.

Gentrification Through Galleries & Creative Placemaking

In Manhattan's Chinatown (Figure 1), the decline of the garment industry, aging housing stock, and post-9/11 redevelopment funding have culminated in a landscape that is a canvas for gentrification (Katz, 2022; Yu, 2017). Nearly 30% of Chinatown's businesses are now considered 'high-end' boutiques, restaurants, or galleries (Wong, 2021). Simultaneously, rents have risen by 13% between 2012 and 2022 (Chinatown Working Group, 2022). Although these statistics highlight Chinatown's rapidly changing environment, they do not capture the complexity of displacement and resistance to gentrification found in the community.

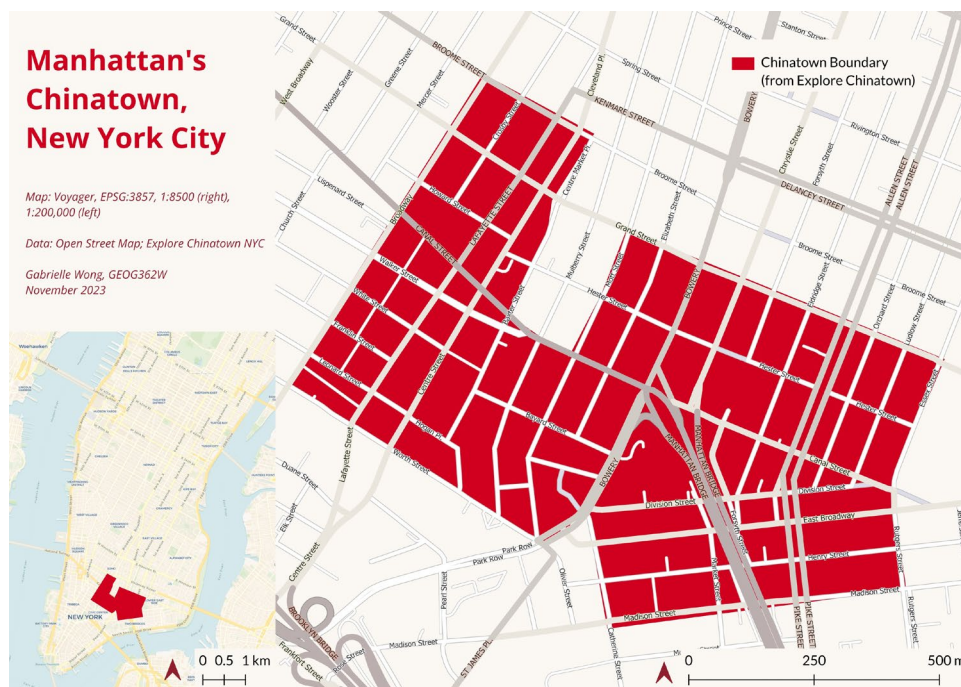


Figure 1: The boundaries of Manhattan's Chinatown. Because Chinatown is not a formal community district, its boundaries are subjective. This map displays the interpretation of Explore Chinatown, a local development group. Data from Open Street Map (2023).

Art galleries in Manhattan's Chinatown are physically and culturally displacing residents. In 2016, artist-activist Liz Moy mapped over 125 galleries in the neighbourhood, which are replacing beauty shops, fish markets, and local music venues (Figure 2; Lesser 2016; Moy, 2016). The replacement of local-serving retail with high-end galleries is a clear sign of gentrification. New galleries are willing to pay up to \$25,000 monthly in rent, incentivizing landlords to "keep storefronts unoccupied...and wait to rent it to the next gallery" (Yu, 2017). They give landlords an opportunity to increase their land's potential value, displacing

less profitable uses like rental housing. Because 94% of Chinatown's families rent, they are particularly vulnerable to these upwards pressures on rent (Wong, 2019).

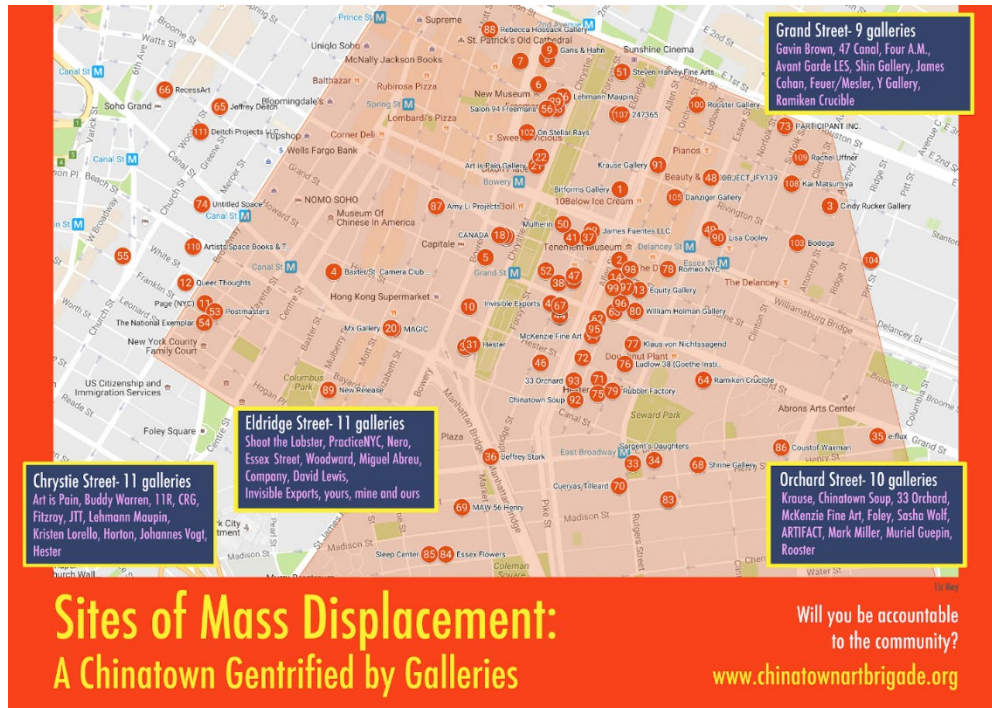


Figure 2: Liz Moy's Map of art galleries in Chinatown. The map highlights the significant growth in high-end galleries in the area and speaks directly to artists, asking if they will be "accountable to the community" they are encroaching in. Map from Moy (2016).

The contemporary art scene also displaces residents culturally. In 2017, the James Cohan gallery invited Israeli-American artist Omer Fast to transform the gallery into a dirty waiting room, complete with cheap phone cases, broken machines, and a shabby exterior (Figure 3; Sayej, 2017). Fast claimed the exhibit was an "eclectic aesthetic" that recreated "what the space looked like before the gallery" (Fast, 2017). However, he did not engage with any local groups or research the building's true history as a fish market (not a cheap phone case shop) before displaying his work. Local artists condemned the exhibition, arguing its orientalism replicated racist narratives of uncleanness that lead non-residents to argue Chinatown requires revitalization (Sayej, 2017; Wu, 2017). An artist's positionality and their [lack of] accountability to the communities they create in can affect their work's impact. Here, a non-Chinese artist's work is contributing to gentrification by replicating racist tropes, erasing the community's true history,

and promoting narratives that imply redevelopment can ‘save’ Chinatown from its own people.

The impact is more than physical. In a dialogue held by the Chinatown Art Brigade, a grassroots activist group, an elderly resident spoke about the ‘out of placeness’ he felt in his gallery-filled neighbourhood. Describing the spaciousness of the galleries in contrast to the cramped rooms of the SROs that provide(d) affordable housing for seniors, he “wondered if [he] could call Chinatown home after that” (Wong, 2019, p.186). Feelings of non-belonging are created by class differences between elite galleries and local shops losing space and by racial differences between new and old consumers. In other words, residents are leaving the neighbourhood because of art galleries, and these art galleries mean the neighbourhood leaves them behind too.



Figure 3: Omer Fast's Exhibition. The Chinese characters on the exterior loosely translate to 'Fashion Art Gallery'. The interior is intentionally dirty and 'cheap' looking, with visible garbage, counterfeit phone cases, and shabby décor. Images from Fast (2017).

Businesses and planners also harness arts and culture to gentrify. Cultural planning proposals often brand neighbourhoods as authentic and uniquely ‘ethnic’ to attract investments (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). The 2021 Chinatown Downtown Revitalization Plan, produced by a coalition of business associations and nonprofits in Chinatown, is emblematic of these desires. The coalition’s explicit goal is to “build a new economic engine driven by arts and culture” to attract tourists (Díaz-López & Kong, 2021, p.4). It proposes creative placemaking principles to enhance public space and preserve Chinese culture through arts centres, beautification, and public art displays. The plan’s language exemplifies artwashing as defined by Pritchard (2020). Business elites, both within Chinatown and non-Chinese outsiders, are explicitly co-opting art as a profit-making strategy,

centering their attention on the ‘economic engine’ of profit rather than the needs of current residents.

Resisting Gentrification Through Art

Artists are not homogenous. Many are using art to push back against gentrification, often by centering those most at risk of displacement. This section focuses on the work of the Chinatown Art Brigade (CAB), one of the oldest currently active art-activist groups in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Much of the CAB’s advocacy is in partnership with the Chinatown Tenants Union, an advocacy group organizing amongst tenants (Smithson, 2021). In interviews with researchers and media, the CAB’s organizers center amplifying tenant’s voices (as opposed to speaking *for* them) as a key principle of their work (Rupersburg, 2018; Wong, 2019, 2021; Yu, 2017). For example, the ‘Here to Stay’ Campaign, one of the CAB’s flagship projects, used “large-scale outdoor mobile projections” to draw attention to gentrification, displacement, and resilience (Figure 4; Yu, 2017). The visual documentation of gentrification’s injustices in public space sparked conversations between CAB members and residents playing mahjong outside, giving activists an opportunity to share information with community members about their rights and anti-gentrification organizing (Wong, 2021). Most importantly, the messages were co-created with tenants. The CAB used oral histories, storytelling circles, photography, and walks to create content. Amplifying the voices of tenants shows them they are not alone. As Betty Yu, one of the CAB’s leaders, argues, the “production process wasn’t designed to have people make things so that we could project it. It was more important...to see relationships be built” (Wong, 2019, p.171). These relationships reduce the despair residents feel about gentrification, building collectives that facilitate organised responses to changes in the neighbourhood.

‘Here to Stay’ built connections between tenants, giving them an opportunity to vocalize their fears about gentrification. The CAB has also worked with tenants to reassert their right to space in Chinatown through the ‘People’s Placekeeping Tours’, intentionally named to challenge ‘creative placemaking’ tactics (Wong, 2019). During these tours, CAB members and tenants visited places that are unknown or uncared for by tourists, such as the first unionized restaurant in Chinatown (Wong, 2021). These stops became the basis for community-centered artwork. The tours reasserted the rights of low-income Chinese residents to Chinatown, encouraging them to take space by centering their experiences of the city. Through them, the CAB educated residents about

their community's history, resisting outside narratives imposed by actors like tourist-serving media outlets and business interests.

In addition to their direct work, the CAB addresses the relationship between art and placemaking through supporting anti-gentrification policy advocacy. Yu notes that “our asset as artists is that people tend to listen to us more” (Rupersburg, 2018). The CAB has lent its voice to the Chinatown Working Group Plan, an explicitly anti-gentrification plan that demands rezoning and other city planning measures to halt displacement (Chinatown Working Group, 2014). The aforementioned Downtown Revitalization Plan explicitly frames art and culture as creative placemaking tools for economic development. In contrast, the Chinatown Working Group plan prioritizes affordable housing and services. The arts supplement these goals as placekeeping tools mentioned only in conjunction with helping residents retain a sense of place. For example, the plan explicitly rejects the ‘Disneyfication’ of Chinatown, which refers to neighbourhoods that cater to tourists and forward a sanitized, tourist-friendly ‘brand’ (Chinatown Working Group, 2014).



Figure 4: Images from the CAB's 'Here to Stay' campaign, a series of illuminated projects co-designed by artists and tenants. The image on the right reads 'Let's Act Together!' Images from Chinatown Art Brigade, 2018

Chinese artists also resist gentrification by holding other artists accountable. The CAB organized protests against the James Cohan gallery after Omer Fast's exhibition. These protests included bringing smelly foods like durian and stinky tofu to draw attention to continued Chinese presence in a multi-sensorial way (Wong, 2019). They have also organized dialogues between art galleries, organizers, and tenants. Through these dialogues, the CAB connected their work to wider histories of cultural production and political activism in

Chinatown and urged art gallery owners to be accountable to the community by aligning themselves with anti-displacement organizing (Wong, 2019).

Although unable to stem the tide of galleries rushing into Chinatown, their calls have not gone fully unheard. Margaret Lee, co-founder of the gallery 47 Canal, says she started the collective Artists Against Displacement (AAD) after attending a ‘Chinatown is Not for Sale’ panel hosted by the CAB (Vartanian, 2017). While Lee’s gallery is still there and (presumably) still having the same gentrifying effect by virtue of its high-end products, AAD’s explicitly anti-gentrification political orientation demonstrates there are many ways a potential gentrifier could reduce the negative impacts of their presence.

Returning to MOCA

Where does MOCA fit into this story? Despite its grassroots history, many activists argue that MOCA has ‘sold out’ to gentrifying forces and is now as complicit in gentrification as any developer or gallery (Wang, 2021). Their anger stems from a \$35 million “community contribution” offered by the City of New York to MOCA, one of many amenities offered to Chinatown in exchange for the construction of a jail tower to partially replace Riker’s (Freitas-Tamura, 2021). MOCA’s acceptance is perceived as implicit support of the jail, which the CAB argues will further displacement and harm the community (Yang, 2023). Others suggest that MOCA, while it has expanded beyond its grassroots activist origins, remains a cornerstone for the Chinese American community. MOCA has hosted exhibits on gentrification, including collections of oral histories from residents (Museum of Chinese in America, n.d.-a). It has also regularly hosted exhibits on racism in Chinatown, drawing attention to the link between framings of the neighbourhood as crime-ridden and its gentrification through promises to ‘clean up’ Chinatown (Museum of Chinese in America, n.d.-b). In some ways, MOCA facilitates Chinatown’s gentrification. In others, it draws attention to gentrification’s problems.

These conflicting approaches suggest MOCA holds significant ambivalence about gentrification. Sze (2010) calls this ‘gentrification consciousness’, arguing that the conflicting politics of cultural institutions like MOCA reflect their efforts to balance a desire for growth with their history of advocating for the Chinese American community. These ambivalences are formed in relation “to larger structures, policy decisions, and histories” that can constrain the options of institutions like MOCA who rely on conventional arts and culture funding (Sze, 2010, p.525). The shift from grassroots activism to mainstream

institution has been difficult for MOCA. It must appeal to outsiders, including tourists, to survive, but it also must retain its importance to locals as an archive of community history. The museum's ambivalence breaks down the binary between 'gentrifier' and 'non-gentrifier'.

Conclusion

Artists are not inherently 'pioneer gentrifiers' or anti-gentrification activists. Who the artist is, who they create for, and the politics their work serves matters. While Chinatown's business leaders use art as a 'creative placemaking' strategy to attract tourism, its residential leaders, particularly tenant organizers, use art to push back. Between the two, cultural institutions like MOCA are caught between a desire to expand and the imperative of protecting the cultural traditions they were founded on. The arts are one voice in a broader struggle over who decides what happens to Chinatown. At times 'the hip thing' displacing Chinese tenants and at others empowering those very same renters, art is intertwined with gentrification in Manhattan's Chinatown.

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