Chinese American Habitation: From Dwelling to Home

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Although Chinese Americans inhabited the common types of North American buildings, the conditions of daily life generated a separate dwelling reality. The Chinese American communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not import building types from their native places. Rather, their places of habitation reflected a modest adaptation of American building forms to their own purposes. Habitation for most Chinese Americans began as an alienated experience and only became “home” in the mid-twentieth century. The Chinese immigrants’ attitudes, the demographic structure of the Chinese American community, discrimination and legal barriers all contributed to the character of this group’s experience of habitation and its morphogenesis.

The most common image of the traditional Chinese house is the courtyard house of North China with its axially symmetrical plan ordered into a hierarchical composition extending from the entrance along the central axis to the back of the complex. This type of house tended to be only one story in height and expressed its hierarchic organization through the placement of spaces with respect to the primary axis. The origins of this compositional scheme extends back at least three-millennia to well before the birth of Christ. In a grand house of a notable, one might find a niche on the opposite side of the street from the main entrance gate to the house. This symbolically extended the primary axis of the house out across the public street and proclaimed the importance of the family residing behind the walled enclosure. The main hall with its family altar to the ancestors stood on the axis at the back of the main courtyard with secondary rooms forming symmetrically disposed wings to either side of it.

The majority of Chinese immigrants to the United States before 1965 came from Guangdong Province of South China, a province that contains only about 5% of China’s total population. It was relatively easy to travel to the colonial ports of Macao and Hong Kong from the densely populated farming areas of the province in and around the Pearl River Delta. This region was one of the most densely settled parts of China with villages tightly clustered together at the edges of the good farmland, at the base of hills or on sloping ground when possible. Individual structures had to fit into the compact pattern of the village. The vernacular houses often stood in neat rows with narrow spaces of only one foot front and back between houses. Alleys commonly ran along the other two sides, and there were often symmetrically disposed entries on opposite sides of a house. These houses had compact plans in which a large central room replaced the courtyard. The alleys fed into the main streets of the village.

The Chinese immigrants were predominantly males who began to arrive in the United States in significant numbers at the time of the California Gold Rush. Later, Chinese immigrants came in search of wage labor. Pioneer populations in the United States were commonly predominantly male. According to the 1850 U.S. Census the ratio of men to women in California was about twelve to one. The 1852 census of San Francisco found 83% of the Euro-American population to be male. The Chinese were an example of this phenomena, and continued to have an unbalanced sex ratio for many decades. As late as 1880 the male to female ratio was about 21 to 1, and in 1890 27 to 1.

Traditionally, a man from Guangdong Province married and began his family before going abroad in search of work. In this way a new generation could help to guaranty the survival of the family name, and the young wife could take care of the husband’s parents. This pattern strengthened the loyalty of the sojourner to the kinship group and the native place. This pattern had been established earlier in the immigration to Southeast Asia and the Philippines, and was carried over to the immigration to the Americas. A similar pattern existed for other immigrant groups to the United States such as the Italian Americans.

Discrimination contributed to making the United States appear to be only a temporary place of residence.
In 1854 the Federal District Court in San Francisco refused citizenship to a Chinese resident setting a precedent, and the Nationality Act of 1870 blocked Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. The California Alien Land Act blocked Chinese resident aliens from purchasing land. In 1882 the first of a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts barred Chinese laborers from immigrating; it was extended and expanded to include other Chinese classes in 1884, 1888, 1892 and 1902. Finally, in 1924 the Exclusion Act was made permanent and Chinese women were specifically excluded. Any American marrying a Chinese man or woman was liable to the loss of their citizenship. In more than 30 states laws against intermarriage with Chinese were enacted. The body of state and Federal legislation blocked the expansion of the Chinese American community by new immigration, and made increase by births exceedingly slow since there were so few Chinese American women (both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the Chinese American population) at the time the Exclusion Acts were passed. The legislation heightened the sense of being in a hostile environment since they were passed during a period of anti-Chinese hostilities throughout the Far West.

The predominantly male Chinese population tended to be clustered into urban and rural ghettos. There they found safety within an ethnic community and accommodations in lodging houses and residential hotels.

In San Francisco’s Chinatown possibly as many as 20,000 people lived in a twelve block area of one to four story brick and wood framed structures. Discriminatory housing practices and the desire of landlords to maximize their profits generated crowding and poor living conditions. Virtually all of the Chinese in San Francisco had to live within the confines of Chinatown except for those who were servants or who lived at the laundries at which they worked. Discriminatory rental policies and the threat of violence barred the Chinese from Euro-American residential districts. Absentee landlords had no incentive to improve or even maintain their Chinatown properties since they rented to a captive market. The landlords expected their tenants to maintain the property, and the Chinese tenants devoted as little of their modest incomes as possible to that task.

A survey conducted by a hostile Board of Supervisors in 1885 examined a residential hotel on Oneida Place. The plan showed a multiple storied rectangular structure with a short side (two rooms wide) to the main street and a long side along the alley. The ground floor contained twenty-two rooms in two rows with almost every room having direct access to an alley or yard. One staircase led to the floor above. The plan eliminated the need for an interior corridor on the ground floor. There were forty beds in the twenty-two rooms; five rooms had one bed each, and one room contained five beds, the most of any room. Cooking facilities were located outside in the spaces along the sides of the building. There the Chinese built simplified versions of the traditional brick stoves used in South China. “A brick bench laid in mud mortar, in a window, upon a balcony, or any like place, upon which the fire for cooking is built, leaving the smoke free to escape as it will, is all that is necessary for cooking purposes. Sometimes this plan is varied by the substitution of a tin box or vessel filled with earth for the brick platform, but the uses and purposes of the chimney, cooking or other stoves or ranges, are apparently unknown.” Since there was little storage space and no refrigeration, a person or small group had to purchase the food and fuel for cooking everyday at the various shops in Chinatown.

Activities normally considered a part of the “home” spilled onto the alleys, and streets, and into the businesses, and the institutions of Chinatown. One slept and stored one’s few belongings in a room which was often shared with a number of other men to keep the cost of rent down for each person. Some slept at their places of employment. The entertainment and social functions associated with “home” were scattered throughout the community. One would meet friends on the streets, in the association rooms, and have gatherings at the many Chinese restaurants.

The few families either squeezed into one or two rooms in a residential hotel, obtained one of the few available apartments or lived behind or above their businesses. The structures with frontages onto streets inevitably had commercial activities along the street, and residential hotels and association rooms above. Often small factories, gambling rooms, brothels, or more association rooms were wedged into the basements and back spaces of buildings.

Rural settlements also took on a dense settlement pattern. Rural Chinatowns served as service centers and temporary residences for the farm laborers that worked the agricultural areas of California. Since Chinatowns were almost totally erected on leased land, the Chinese had the simplest structures erected and utilized as close to the full lot as possible. Maximum site coverage was matched by the packing in of multiple uses and the desire for multiple stories when practical. The largest concentration of rural Chinatowns occurred in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The Chinese had come to the area to build the levees, set up agriculture, and work the farms as tenants and laborers. The Chinatowns tended to huddle at the edge of the levee roads and minimized the encroachment upon farmland.

The structures were commonly rectangular with an entry and false fronted facade facing the main street of the community. In the case of two-story structures along a levee road one might have a ground floor
commercial frontage facing away from the levee, and a second floor commercial frontage on the other end facing the levee top. Behind the commercial spaces one would find rooms lined up along a double-loaded corridor. These rooms could serve any of a number of purposes. The shop owner would occupy one or more. If he was an extremely lucky man, he would have his wife and children with him. Other rooms were for lodgings for farm laborers in the off-season or storage. A kitchen with a Chinese brick stove would be placed in a less desirable back room. Very little time was spent in the small rented rooms. As in the city, rural Chinese Americans would spend most of their free time with friends in the commercial establishments and the association rooms of the town. There they could meet with friends, gossip, and find out about employment possibilities.

The small rented room or bunk was not "home"; most likely "home" remained in the native place in South China where one's wife, children and parents resided.

While other ethnic groups rapidly shifted from single male to family centered communities, the Chinese only slowly made the transition. The Chinese community shrank while other ethnic groups increased steadily in numbers. The Exclusion Acts generated a decline in the male population, and the Chinese American population reached a low in the 1920 U.S. Census. As elderly men either died or returned to China to be with their excluded families, the slow growth of a native born population began to shift the Chinese community from one of single males, to a mixed community with a rising number of families. In 1920 the ratio of men to women was seven to one, and in 1930 it reached four to one.

The majority of Chinese, both single males and families, continued to live in residential hotels and apartments in and around the Chinatowns that hugged the edge of central business districts. These residential hotels normally occupied multi-storied mixed use buildings with commercial space in part or all of the street frontages, and individual rental rooms in the upper floors lined up along corridors. Interior rooms received some ventilation and light from light wells. Toilets, bath and shower rooms, and kitchens were located along the corridors for the use of the tenants. In San Francisco's Chinatown small residential hotels had as few as ten rooms, and large ones as many as 100. Families would try to rent two or more rooms next to each other, and the corridors became play areas for the children. Some cooking was done in the common kitchens or on the ad hoc cooking facilities set up in the rooms by the tenants. Many meals were taken in the Chinese restaurants which catered to the tenant market.

For those with only a vague memory of the native place in China, and for the American-born the residential hotels and the apartments of Chinatown were "home".

The Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943 and Chinese Americans were allowed to become naturalized citizens as a gesture to China who had become an ally of the United States in World War II. Jobs in industry and government opened up, and the Chinese American middle class grew. This did not immediately lead to a migration out of the Chinatowns. Discrimination in housing kept middle class Chinese families in the Chinatowns and back rooms of businesses. The Alien Land Law of California was not found unconstitutional until 1952, and it took the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to open many residential areas to the Chinese.

Given the opportunity middle class Chinese Americans dispersed into residential areas and suburbs. After being stigmatized for more than a century, the Chinese who moved out of Chinatown had no desire to differentiate themselves from their new neighbors. On the outside they adopted the conventions of the suburban home. Only a wok in the kitchen, and some rugs, vases and paintings of Chinese origin might suggest any difference between themselves and their neighbors.

Three groups continued to dwell in Chinatown in large numbers, the working poor, the elderly, and the new immigrants. The working poor could not afford to purchase homes in the suburbs and often needed to live near their jobs. The single elderly knew no other lifestyle except that of Chinatown where they could live out their lives in a familiar setting. For many of the elderly with children in the suburbs, the suburbs posed a life of unbearable alienation. When the children were at work, and the grandchildren were away at school, they would be left alone in the house. Rather than suffer from the isolation, many elderly with Children choose to reside in Chinatown. The new immigrants of Chinese descent from various parts of Asia found Chinatown to be a more familiar environment with low quality housing that was affordable.

Elderly couples, widows, and single men continue to rent rooms in the residential hotels of San Francisco's Chinatown. They might raise their beds high above the ground for warmth and for extra storage space underneath. They shared facilities with others on their floor, and often set up small cooking arrangements in their rooms.

Many immigrant families found themselves in the residential hotels and small apartments of Chinatown. In 1980 an immigrant family of four (a husband, wife, and two young sons) lived in a 10' X 10' room. They cooked in the community kitchen and ate on their folding table in their room. They all slept in one bed.

The American experience has not supported the transferal of traditional dwelling practices from China to the United States. In the Chinatowns of America
Chinese Americans have had to adapt to environmental conditions over which they have had little control. After having been trapped in urban ghettos for a century, Chinese American escapees eagerly adopted the values and comforts of suburban life. This became possible after the Civil Rights Act and the decline of segregated housing practices. Second, third and fourth generation Chinese Americans fled from the housing conditions towards the suburban ideal. First generation immigrants of Chinese ancestry began entering the United States in increasing numbers after the 1965 Immigration Law abolished national origins as the basis of immigration quotas. The poorer immigrants refilled the Chinatowns of the United States, and the more wealthy created new suburban Chinatowns where American images of house were synthesized with various Asian patterns of living.

Chinese American housing history cannot be assumed to be the same as that of other immigrant groups to North America, or some mythical norm. Nor can it be assumed that there is a simple importation of cultural patterns from the native place. Instead we find a more complex interweaving of at least two sets of cultural patterns within the context of historical conditions. For this or any other ethnic group in the United States one needs to uncover the subcultural differences that have gone into the making of place rather than assuming that the archetypal period styles of designing and building describe the experience of any and all groups. Each ethnic group inhabiting the American landscape must be examined for its own particularities if we are to understand the true history of the built environment.

Understanding general stylistic archetypes is not enough to explain the richness and diversity of the American built environment. If we as teachers of architecture and architectural history are to accurately explain the processes by which places come into being and to solve the problems of the contemporary environment, we must have a fuller and more accurate description of how our multicultural landscape has evolved. Uncovering the particularities of the actual environment and its people offers a basis for much exploration and richness in the design process. This may reduce the need for so much emphasis on the generation of abstract and formalist designs devoid of any sense of a particular place on the one hand, and the tendency to recreate versions of a supposedly universal history for individual projects.

Also, architectural history must find a way of engaging the particular personal environmental histories at some point in the training of architects, and to relate the personal history to the larger currents in the history of architecture.

One must learn to seek out the actual particularities of a design situation on the one hand, and the study of architectural history must figure out ways of directly engaging the personal histories of its students if it is to be a fully engaged portion of the architect’s experience.

NOTES
1 For an historical analysis of Chinese American demographic characteristics see: S. Lyman, Asian in the West (Reno: University of Nevada, 1970)
4 San Francisco Daily Report - Supplement, July 1885.