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Research Proposal: A Comparative Study of Chinatowns and Historic District Designation in North America

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Summary of Research Paper

Background

Heritage conservation or historic preservation is an important element in urban planning. Historic preservation planning played an important role in inner-city revitalization in North America since the mid 1960s and 1970s. During this time, neighbourhood advocacy and anti-modern movements, such as Jane Jacobs' classic critique against the Robert Moses' era of clearance and destruction in New York City, promoted the preservation of old inner-city streetscapes. The historic preservation movement has been historically linked with the 1960s environmental movement where, not only natural resources, but also the maintenance of cultural resources was considered of inherent value (Tyler, 2009).

Urban revitalization programs and economic development have sparked a renewed awareness of historic inner-city neighbourhoods. With influential urbanist, Richard Florida, documenting the settlement choices and cultural preferences of the "creative class", cities have been eager to brand themselves with a unique urban identity to attract and retain the so-called creative class. The cultural economy of the 21st century causes cities to seek out historic districts as potential cultural consumption spaces as an economic development strategy. Questions of good urban form and urban liveability also support the heritage preservation movement where clusters of heritage buildings in historic districts exude a specific time, contributing to a 'sense of place'.

In Toronto, there has been an invigorated interest in heritage conservation as the city seeks to re-identify itself from "a city that works" to a city of the arts and culture. Major revitalization projects for Toronto's waterfront and Union Station have strong historic preservation elements. Moreover, the success of events like "Doors Open Toronto" has encouraged broad public interest in the city's built form and heritage.

Statement of Research Problem

Heritage conservation has become an important tool for planners in Toronto. Recent official plan amendments would allow *Section 37* funds (of the Ontario *Planning Act*) to subsidize heritage conservation district studies (Ostler, 2008). In response, the city identified 96 potential heritage conservation districts to be studied. However, considering the profiles of existing heritage conservation districts in Toronto, like Rosedale and Cabbagetown, heritage conservation practices seem to privilege an upper-, middle-class Anglo-Protestant heritage. Studies in the United States highlight that the historic landmark process in that country has "favoured the

history of a small minority of white, male landholders, bankers, business leaders and their architects” (Hayden, 1988). The driving motivation of the proposed research paper questions the role of historic preservation planning in multicultural cities like Toronto. What is heritage and who is defining it? Toronto is a multicultural city, but most its heritage honours a select, elite population; what are the opportunities and obstacles of non-Anglo-Protestant groups preserving their heritage in North American cities? And what can Toronto learn from the experiences of other cities in North America?

Since heritage preservation is generally concerned with old things, questions of heritage conservation and immigrant groups are difficult to answer considering many non-white groups are relatively new to North America. However, the Chinese North American experience offers a sufficiently long and detailed history, with its origins dating back to the mid 1800s. The proposed research paper explores the conflict of historic preservation planning and race in the context of North American inner-city Chinatowns. As is the case for many historic Chinatowns in North America, inner-city neighbourhoods that are rich in history have also been the traditional gateway for new immigrants. Indeed, immigrants have made a significant impact on the North American cityscape with almost every North American city having its own Chinatown or Little Italy. What is being done to preserve and celebrate this pivotal narrative of immigration in North American cities? Especially as traditional inner-city “ethnic enclaves” are showing signs of decline as new immigrants are increasingly choosing to settle in the suburbs (Huang, 2007).

Thus, research proposes to investigate two North American cities that are using historic district designation as a tool for urban revitalization of inner-city Chinatowns. Vancouver’s Chinatown has been designated a historic district since 1971. In the face of economic decline and competition with emergent suburban Chinatowns, the City of Vancouver initiated the Chinatown Revitalization Program that has been ongoing since 2000 (Ley, 2009). In New York City, recent pressures from real estate development led community groups to advocate for the joint historic district designation of the Chinatown/Little Italy neighbourhoods (Shapiro, 2009). It has recently been recognized by the state as an historic district and is currently undergoing procedures for national recognition to be finalized in November 2009.

As the City of Toronto engages in shaping the narrative of its cityscape through heritage conservation district designation, what can it learn from the experience of other cities that have been actively pursuing a diverse and multicultural preservation approach?

Scope and Objectives of Proposed Research

The scope of the proposed research will be limited to the Chinese North American experience and the process of designation and legislation of historic districts – as opposed to historic landmarks or cultural heritage landscapes. The

comparison of two other North American cities, Vancouver and New York, with Toronto will provide a case study analysis of the effectiveness of historic preservation in different provincial and federal jurisdictions.

The objectives of the proposed research are fourfold. First, it will highlight the theoretical underpinnings of race and the politics of historic preservation planning in diverse and multicultural cities. Second, it will outline the history of the Chinese North American experience in three cities as a case study in the practical application of race and historic preservation planning. Thirdly, it will investigate the effectiveness of historic designation to the revitalization of inner-city Chinatowns. And finally, the proposed research seeks to highlight lessons learned to inform the heritage district designation and urban revitalization process in Toronto.

Research Method and Data Sources

The main method of research is a comparative case study of the process of heritage conservation district designation in three North American cities (Vancouver, New York and Toronto) in reference to historic inner-city Chinatowns. The following aspects of each case will be considered:

1. Legal and institutional framework

Research will involve general inquiry of the framework of heritage preservation in different jurisdictions within Canada and the United States to compare approaches in reference to the availability of legal and institutional tools. This requires analysis of relevant legal documents such as the *Ontario Heritage Act*, the *British Columbia Heritage Conservation Act*, the *U.S. National Historic Preservation Act*, and local government legislation on heritage conservation districts.

3. Comparison of goals in historic designation and revitalization

Comparing the implementation of historic conservation districts will provide opportunity to explore the effectiveness of historic designation in urban revitalization. Thus, the goals and implementation of Vancouver and New York's historic Chinatown revitalization programs will be compared. Meanwhile, the absence of similar processes in Toronto's Chinatown will also be considered.

4. Implementation process and local conditions

Key information interviews will be conducted with municipal heritage planners, professional heritage consultants and architects, government heritage preservation officials, Business Improvement Area representatives, residents' associations and other community leaders involved in the heritage designation process in New York and Vancouver. The comparison of opinions of heritage designation and the conflicts that may arise between private landowners, neighbourhood residents' associations and/or different levels of government will qualify how heritage preservation planning is achieved in different contexts and

why different players may or may not look favourably upon heritage conservation.

Potential contribution to the planning profession

The proposed research project's contributes to literature on planning the postcolonial city. Seminal work like Leonie Sandercock's *Cosmopolis and Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century* (2003), begins to tackle questions of urban citizenship and co-habitation in multicultural, diverse, and sometimes fragmented urban societies. My research proposes a practical application of Sandercock's theories to heritage preservation, a specific land-use planning tool. Moreover, the tendency to reduce heritage preservation to architectural merits in aesthetics also erases the impact of social constructs and distributions of power (Miller, 2008). Who defines heritage and who's heritage is being privileged?

The City of Toronto is finally embracing heritage preservation in its planning agenda. Recent amendments to the official plans sparked a proliferation of studies on potential heritage conservation districts (Ostler, 2008). However, considering the profile of the existing designated districts, like Cabbagetown, Rosedale, Fort York, and the districts under study, like Casa Loma and Summerhill, the City of Toronto seems to be engaging a very narrow narrative of the city's history. Especially when cities like Vancouver and New York have actively included immigration in the history of their cities through historic district designation, Toronto has much to learn. Although the proposed research focuses on lessons learned for the City of Toronto, it makes the general argument that minority histories are too often ignored in heritage preservation planning. This has implications for the planning profession in Canada as a whole. The unwritten history of immigrants in the city of Toronto continues the present under-valuing of Toronto's so-called new comers who arrived as early as the mid 1800s (Kwong, 2009).

Moreover, much has been debated and written about the gentrification of inner-city neighbourhoods, however, the intersection between gentrification and race has not adequately been problematized. It is generally recognized that inner-city neighbourhoods have been the traditional gateways into Canada. Yet, most of the literature has complacently turned its focus to the suburbanization of so-called ethnic enclaves without questioning the impact to inner-city Chinatowns, Little Italys and so forth. Concerning the right to the city, should cities be complacent to allow culturally vibrant and historically rich communities dwindle to commercial or tourist districts, no longer supporting a local community? Despite the contribution that Chinatowns, Little Italys and other ethnic enclaves have made on many North

American urban landscapes, they remain as spaces of otherness and their historical contributions to the making of the North American city has not been collectively recognized.

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