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Article

“Hot+Noisy” Public Space: Conviviality, “Unapologetic Asianness,” and the Future of Vancouver’s Chinatown

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Abstract

Questions of change and the future have become increasingly salient in Vancouver’s Chinatown in the last decade, as gentrification proceeds apace. Various actors have used the neighbourhood’s public spaces to express their visions of Chinatown’s future. These claims are articulated through attempts to demonstrate and strengthen the vitality of Chinatown in the face of growing narratives of its putative decline and death. By engaging with the contemporary sociological literature on conviviality, where relatively “thin” versus more radical conceptualizations of conviviality are being debated, and putting it into conversation with both the geographical literature on the politics of public space and political theory discussions of agonism, we argue that the uses of public space must be analyzed without romanticizing conviviality or consensus in order to understand the productive possibilities of “political conviviality” and agonistic encounters. Our focus is the “Hot+Noisy Mahjong Socials” held in recent summers in an iconic plaza in Chinatown. These are organized by a community group that builds connections between mostly Chinese Canadian youth and largely Cantonese-speaking seniors. These groups espouse a goal of “place-keeping” in the context of planning trends toward “placemaking.” Through this case, we consider how activists from marginalized communities build solidarities through agonistic “place-keeping” in the face of gentrification and threats of cultural erasure.

Keywords

Chinatown; gentrification; place-keeping; placemaking; public space

Issue

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1. Introduction

In October 2019, the Chinatown Transformation Team, a group of City of Vancouver planning staff, organized a presentation of four newly-commissioned murals that had been painted across the neighbourhood as part of the City’s Chinatown Mural Artist Call of 2018–2019. The showcase included a panel discussion with the artists and a subsequent walking tour to the locations of the artworks. The program aimed to help preserve Chinatown’s culture and heritage by funding public art that represented themes meaningful to the local community. It also hoped to contribute to the sensitive revitalization

of the neighborhood, rather than foster its destruction in the face of looming gentrification. During the tour, as the artists and their audience, including the authors of this article, stood in a public alleyway discussing a new mural, the Bagua Artist Association’s “Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea” (City of Vancouver, 2019), a white middle-aged male resident of an adjacent expensive condo, objected to people gathering in front of his building’s garage door. He made sure that everyone involved was aware of his displeasure, demanded to see a permit for blocking the right-of-way, called upon a private security guard for assistance, and attempted to phone the city planning department, even though it was a Sunday.

The tour organisers and participants seemed taken aback by the vociferousness of his reaction. He punctured the group's assumption that they were involved in a convivial encounter with each other and the neighbourhood. Suddenly, they were in a somewhat tense standoff. Braving the conflictual atmosphere, the mural artists continued to explain their artwork, which evokes a traditional Chinese folk tale. Ironically, given the circumstances, the artists' statement expressed hope that their "depiction of a classic legend can spark conversations between generations, and provide an opportunity to bridge cultures" (City of Vancouver, 2019). In the alley, they seemed to rush their presentation. The glowering presence of the condo owner—phone pressed to his ear—reconfigured the encounter markedly. He seemed uninterested in building bridges.

The next day, the Twitter account of the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown (YCC) reacted to the confrontation. In two tweets, accompanied by photographs, YCC said:

Tweet 1. Thoughtful #ChinatownYVR panel ytd on #publicart celebrating comm achievement+pride of new #murals ended in artists+organizers being challenged in public space while out on tours. "You are not allowed to be here" says condo dweller.

Tweet 2. Bullying, harassment, intimidation, entitlement against proper street use permit, legit comm event & 2 @CityofVancouver staff present. Standing ground w/@paulwongproject & Eight Immortals in #ChinatownYVR. NOT what we wanted to showcase but it's still here (racism). (YCC, 2019)

YCC was well-positioned to comment on the incident and its connections to white supremacy, public culture, and claims to space in the neighbourhood. YCC "practices, shares and celebrates the living culture and heritage of Vancouver's Chinatown" through "experiential programs connecting place and people across generations" and is dedicated to "growing a critical mass of young and old who care about the neighbourhood and its future" (YCC, n.d.).

Since 2015, YCC had been organizing summertime social events in a plaza three minutes' walk from the alley where the Eight Immortals mural is located (Figures 1 and 2). These events, the "Hot+Noisy Mahjong Socials," use the tile-based strategy game of Chinese origin, along with food, karaoke, ping-pong, crafts, and other activities to "focus on learning and sharing cultural encounters with the area's Chinese seniors" (YCC, n.d.). Like the mural art, the Socials position culture at the heart of discussions about and strategies intended to shape change in Vancouver's Chinatown. They both take public space for representation and community-building. As we will suggest below, they are intended, among other things, to promote and use conviviality in public spaces to build a community and a political public.

The warmness of the Socials is evident when approaching the plaza from the surrounding streets. Chatter, laughter, amplified karaoke singing, bouncing ping-pong balls, and the distinctive clacking of acrylic Mahjong tiles being scattered, shuffled, gathered, and stacked on four-sided wooden tables are distinctive sounds echoing from the plaza on summer evenings. These sounds are soon accompanied by wafting smells of food and candles, burning in glass jars that children have decorated. Arriving at the plaza reveals an unusual sight for those familiar with the neighbourhood. The triangular Chinatown Memorial Plaza, formed by Keefer St. to the south, Columbia St. to the west, and an undeveloped lot to the north, is frequently empty. The eponymous memorial, which commemorates the sacrifices of Chinese Canadian railroad workers and war veterans, rises in light grey concrete from the ochre and dark grey concrete plaza, flanked by a flag pole with a Canadian flag. The memorial's central pillar, a stylized version of the Chinese character *Zhong*, meaning "centre" and connoting harmony and moderation, is flanked by black statues representing the two groups of ancestors (Government of Canada, 2023). Eight spindly urban trees dot the plaza and three underused benches line its northern edge. Yet, on a Hot+Noisy evening, the plaza is lively and vibrant. One hundred and fifty people attended the first of the events in 2015, bringing colour to the plaza—blue plastic stools and yellow folding chairs surrounding the Mahjong tables, a bright orange, green, and blue YCC banner strung from the trees, coloured chalk brightening the ochre pavers, while the leaves of the trees catch the setting summer sun, revealing various shades of green and casting pleasant, dappled light on the proceedings. Elders, dressed in eclectic, often vivid, clothing (recently captured in the book *Chinatown Pretty*; Lo & Luu, 2020) further brighten the scene as they skillfully manipulate the lilac, pink, green, and white Mahjong tiles. After sunset, lanterns and the screen of the karaoke machine illuminate the scene and allow the Socials to continue into the night.

While the Socials were welcoming, they were clearly intended to be primarily by and for the Chinatown and Chinese Canadian community itself. During a conference entitled "Whose Chinatown?," Doris Chow (2021), a co-organizer of YCC, explained why they created the events as a "cultural practice and expression as resistance":

It's really about being unapologetically and publicly Asian, as opposed to a tourist-driven kind of neighbourhood....I guess for me when we're talking about catering to tourists it's really about being "palatable." And so what does it mean when we're centering ourselves as a community and doing what we want to do? It looks like this: Mahjong taking up space, Karaoke, loud singing—very loudly to the wee hours. You know, when it's dark and literally everyone's still trying to huddle around a little screen to try and sing,



Figure 1. A Mahjong Social on the Chinatown Memorial Plaza. Courtesy of Jonathan Desmond Photography and YCC.



Figure 2. Playing Mahjong at a Social. Courtesy of Jonathan Desmond Photography and YCC.

sitting on the statue and playing ping-pong, eating “strange” foods.

The Socials represent “unapologetic Asianness” in a neighbourhood threatened by gentrification and the loss of its culture and community (in a similar way to many other Chinatowns in North America; e.g., Lou, 2010), within the wider context of anti-Asian racism which became more public during the pandemic. This is an acknowledgement of the need to sometimes close out other actors and identities when forming a group identity or public (Mansbridge, 1996; Parker, 2020). “Everyone and anyone” is invited to participate—posters announcing the event, circulated on social media and posted in the plaza, sometimes explicitly saying “everyone welcome.” The posters and other hand-written signs are written in Chinese and in English, but this is not necessarily a compromise or dilution of the events’ central cultural focus since, as we will discuss after, many Chinese Canadians do not read Chinese or speak Cantonese or Mandarin. But YCC, with its focus on the traditionally Cantonese neighbourhood, are intent on drawing in Chinese Canadian youth to engage with elders in the latter’s primary language and, in turn, to learn Cantonese for themselves. Everyone is indeed welcome, but crucially, on YCC and its community’s terms.

The Eight Immortals standoff and the Mahjong Socials are examples of what might be thought of as the politics of conviviality in cities. They suggest that conviviality is both an object and a practice of struggle over public space. While the Mahjong Socials organizers are clear that everyone is welcome to participate in the events, their insistence on “unapologetic Asianness” is an assertion of power whereby everyone is welcome to participate but not to define the character of the events or to demand that they be modified or banished, as the alleyway condo-resident tried to do. YCC and its community are in control. As Chow (2021) put it, “we are the centre and we’re doing what the hell we want, which is a very very powerful thing.”

In the context of this thematic issue on conviviality, it is worth noting that the Socials foster conviviality with a political as well a social purpose. Thus, they contrast with the liberal “thin” conviviality—one characterized by the suppression or “bracketing” of difference, conflict, and injustice in favour of consensus and cordiality. Thin conviviality is produced by and is the foundation for a hegemonic social order in which some social groups, their concerns, and their visions are marginalized in favour of others (e.g., Nowicka, 2020; Valentine, 2008). The Socials, on the other hand, assert the agency of a community has been frequently marginalized and stigmatized, most recently during the pandemic. Building on the case of the Socials, we make two related arguments: (a) The Socials and the politics they project highlight the limits of “thin” conviviality as the prevalent ideal of how people should interact in public space and (b) the Socials emphasize the possibilities of agonistic politics (Mouffe,

2000, 2005) and the creation of “political conviviality” as an alternative to “thin” conviviality and liberal “place-making” in cities (see Barry & Agyeman, 2020).

The article’s next section describes our methods and addresses questions of positionality. Section 3 outlines a conceptual framework, which brings works of literature on conviviality, public space, and agonism into conversation. Section 4 contextualizes the politics of change in Chinatown in terms of gentrification, violence, and public space. This sets the scene for Section 5’s discussion of the Hot+Noisy Mahjong Socials and Section 6’s account of the complex politics of planning, “place-keeping,” and agonism in the neighbourhood. The article concludes with a discussion of planning politics, conviviality, and the future of Chinatown.

2. Methods and Positionality

This article is based on a larger project (2020–2021) on the geographies of intangible heritage, public art, and gentrification in Chinatown (Mahieus, 2021). As the timeframe would suggest, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted the project, as it did the neighbourhood in more profound ways. Lise Mahieus was the lead researcher and, initially, when she arrived in Vancouver in the Fall of 2019 she had intended to engage in a community-based research project, ideally with YCC. By the time the project was ready to move forward, the pandemic had begun. An initial conversation with YCC co-organizers confirmed that the Socials were on hold (the last one held was in 2019 and, at the time of writing, they have yet to resume). It was unfeasible to proceed with a partnership model of research. At that point, the research was reshaped as a more conventional interview-based project. It draws on 10 semi-structured interviews with activists, planners, artists, and one journalist, variously conducted by Lise, Eugene McCann, and our colleague Friederike Landau-Donnelly, now of Radboud University, the Netherlands. Interviews were augmented by attendance at 11 public meetings—in person and online, including the “Whose Chinatown?” virtual conference at which Chow spoke. Extensive consultations of print resources, from media articles to books, on Chinatown’s past, present, and proposed futures were also central to the research and have continued to the present. These materials were analyzed to identify and categorize expected and emergent themes that, in turn, framed our analysis.

A discussion of methods must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of positionality. Neither of us is a resident of Chinatown or a member of the communities most affected by the processes we discuss. While race is a main factor in this instance, as we are both white people studying a community of colour, other positionalitys, such as gender, age, language (neither of us speaks Cantonese or reads Chinese and Lise is a native French speaker), and education and class should also be considered in an account of research positionality

(Fisher, 2015). While the project was initially intended to build from community engagement, in-person engagement proved impossible, except in the case of the 10 interviews and a few early meetings, so online engagements were more prominent but, given that most of the activism in the neighbourhood had pivoted from organizing events to organizing food deliveries and health care for suddenly home-bound seniors, they had no capacity for engaging in the proposed research. Our ability to continue with this form of research as an alternative is, of course, conditioned by the privileges we hold, not simply as white middle-class people, but because of our roles in our university—the type of institutional structure that encourages and rewards more conventional forms of research through the timelines it imposes on students like Lise. Therefore, we have endeavoured to be sensitive to issues of representation and exploitative research as we have written this article. For example, we acknowledge that our interviews centre actors who have public personas, as advocates, artists, or planners. The focus of the project, on political activism and planning, broadly defined, and the pandemic meant that conducting interviews with the other members of the community was not an option.

3. Conviviality, Public Space, and Agonistic Politics

Urban public spaces are complex and contested places where everyday encounters are political, both in the sense that they are always saturated with power (Low & Smith, 2013) and because they are objects of governance, through their management by state institutions, including urban planning. Indeed, the regulation of public spaces and what people and activities are permitted in them becomes particularly political when the spaces in question are iconic ones that receive significant public attention at certain times (Catungal & McCann, 2010). Massey (2005, p. 151) notes that these “[p]laces pose...the question of our living together. And this question...is the central question of the political”—a concern that she names “throwntogetherness.” Thus, an analysis of the politics of planning regarding public space demands attention to the everyday, the micro-political, and the cultural (Horgan et al., 2020; Koch & Latham, 2013), as well as the physical. In turn, this focus resonates with what Neal et al. (2013, p. 315) call a “convivial turn” in multicultural studies. Reflecting the contemporary usage of the term “conviviality,” which has a long history (e.g., Gilroy, 2005; Illich, 1973), Neal et al. (2013, p. 316) understand it as “a possible frame not only for describing interaction across cultural difference but also for transcending it.”

Yet, the contemporary conviviality literature has been criticized for being too celebratory, by focusing on fleeting encounters that are not often meaningful in the context of countering entrenched power relations or for building solidarities that empower marginalized groups. Valentine (2008) argues that while coexistence

in urban spaces creates moments of contact, different groups tend to mix very little and have a preference for self-segregation—a point also made by the gentrification literature as a counter-argument to the naive narrative of “social mix” (see Vigneswaran, 2014).

Recognizing this limit, van Leeuwen (2015, pp. 802–804) calls for a “side-by-side civility,” derived from “civic inattention” in which people can be together in urban spaces and ignore differences. For him, this is the best practical option when trying to achieve not the ideal “good city” (Amin, 2006) but the “good-enough city.” Nowicka (2020), on the other hand, sees this kind of “thin conviviality” as simply courtesy, which maintains social order by creating the expectation that people should suppress differences in their interactions. She suggests that courtesy simply reinforces “the fantasy of equality” (Nowicka, 2020, p. 32) that obscures identities and injustices, rather than correcting them. Instead, as Valentine and Sadgrove (2012, p. 2061) argue, urban life is improved through efforts to transcend a thin “tolerance or understanding of ‘difference’” in favour of relations of “‘closeness’ or intimacy.” This point about solidarities built from collective self-knowledge is one to which we will return below.

If we are to conceptualize conviviality as something more than civility, courtesy, or tolerance (the “tepid tolerance”—we are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this phrase—of those who promote the “creative class” thesis and who, by extension, provide a justification for gentrification; McCann, 2008), our definition of convivial interactions would include those that foreground, negotiate, and contest injustice. As Mouffe (2000, 2005) argues, contest or conflict is ineradicable in politics and social life. Therefore, aiming for consensus, or striving to make all interactions comfortable and all differences generally “palatable,” can obscure and reinforce injustices and tensions instead of giving them a place to be addressed through agonistic, rather than antagonistic, engagement. Indeed, several authors debating conviviality list theories of agonism as inspirations, although they do not systematically explain the connection between the concepts (Amin, 2008; Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006; Nowicka, 2020). This leads us to ask how we might think about the political geography of urban conviviality and the role that urban planning (broadly defined) might play in it or work against it.

4. Gentrification, Anti-Asian Hate Crimes, and Taking Space for the Future of Vancouver’s Chinatown

Recent decades have seen a decline in the social and economic vibrancy of Vancouver’s Chinatown and increasing worries about its role as the home for a community of low-income, Cantonese-speaking residents. This change has led to claims, mostly by outsiders, that the neighbourhood is “dead,” or nearly so. In this discourse, gentrification and associated “revitalization” strategies are hailed by some as panaceas. For example, the editor of

the *Daily Hive*, a local news website, in one of his opinion pieces, argues that “Revitalizing Chinatown depends on...bringing in new residents to support its businesses” (Chan, 2017). Yet, Chinese seniors are still vital and very much alive, even if their numbers are dwindling. They are some of the longest-term residents of the neighbourhood and they hold much knowledge and experience of its intangible cultural heritage. They are also one of the groups most threatened by gentrification. Through interviews with the elderly and low-income population of Chinatown, Fung (2012) shines a light on their exclusion from new businesses on the bases of language and affordability, and on how the displacement of significant numbers of residents negatively impacts social life and the ability to organize as a community. The Mahjong Socials and other public space activations indicate a concern among community activists and urban planners about the exclusion of senior residents in decision-making, events, and the neighbourhood’s public spaces—exclusions that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In 2021, community activist and co-organizer of the Mahjong Socials, Chow, highlighted traditional urban planning as a problematic force in the neighbourhood’s tribulations and the similar decline or destruction of Chinatowns elsewhere. This ineffective planning-as-usual, she argued, includes, “conventional interventions [like] neighborhood meetings, plans, visions for Chinatown, Chinatown strategies, scoping projects, guiding principles maps. In Vancouver we’re undertaking a process [intended to achieve] UNESCO heritage status” (Chow, 2021). Referring to a screenshot of a City of Vancouver webpage listing 29 plans, strategies, reports, resources, and decisions pertaining to Chinatown from 2012–2018 (City of Vancouver, n.d.), Chow continued:

And here is just a snapshot...[of] the many investments that the City of Vancouver and community have put in. And there’s a joke in Chinatown, in Vancouver’s Chinatown, that this is where neighbourhood plans go to die. And honestly, all these plans say the same thing. I’m sure everyone...if you search up your own cities’ Chinatown plans, they all kind of say the same thing: that they want a vibrant, thriving, inclusive, intergenerational neighbourhood, with lots of cultural activities that honour the history. I’m sure those, at least a combination of some of those exact words, are in your plans. But these are just words. What do they actually mean, what do they look like, what does it feel like? (Chow, 2021)

The scepticism toward standard planning approaches for “revitalization” expressed here stems from and is exacerbated by evidence of the City of Vancouver, local developers, and some neighbourhood business interests’ long-standing agenda to redevelop the neighbourhood.

In 2004, for example, the then co-director of the Vancouver Planning Department, Larry Beasley, in a

speech to the Urban Development Institute, the association representing the interests of the local development industry, noted developers’ worries about reduced opportunities for building lucrative residential condo towers in the central and western sectors of the downtown core. He laid out the City’s vision for facilitating similar development in adjacent lower-income historic neighbourhoods. “In simple terms, we’re looking to the east,” he proclaimed:

We’re beginning to identify a different development potential...The areas of focus include: Gastown, Chinatown, even the Downtown Eastside, the False Creek Flats, and, of course, Southeast False Creek....Right now, we’re in the middle of framing a new Chinatown Plan...We’ve hired architects to generate different kinds of infill models in an historic setting—and this we will translate into new zoning and further incentives. We like to say we’re targeting 10,000 new people to live in a revitalized but well preserved Chinatown—including both market and non-market housing. (Beasley, 2004, pp. 7–9)

As the planner most closely associated with the much-vaunted and locally-dominant “Vancouverism” model of urban development, that encourages dense downtown in high-rise residential developments, framed in terms of sustainability and livability (McCann, 2013), Beasley’s pronouncement was more than idle talk. His speech defined the agenda for future plans and rezonings which led to a developer’s application, in 2014, to build a condo development on a lot adjacent to the Chinatown Memorial Plaza, across the road from the neighbourhood’s traditional Chinese garden and Chinese Cultural Centre Museum. This development proposal—commonly known by its address, 105 Keefer—became a lightning rod for debates over planning, gentrification, and the future of the neighbourhood. While proponents argued that it would “revitalize” a dying neighbourhood (Howell, 2021a), opponents asserted that it would add fuel to ongoing gentrification and displacement and proposed instead that the site should be used for social housing and social spaces for existing low-income Chinatown residents (Howell, 2023a).

While gentrification is a profound concern, seniors and their allies also point to another way that they feel increasingly excluded from their neighbourhood: many fear that they will be targets of violence in Chinatown’s streets and alleyways. They have reported aggressions and insecurity in public spaces for many years, but their fears have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which encouraged a dramatic rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. According to Vancouver’s police department, the city experienced a 717% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes from 2019 to 2020, with almost 100 acts of aggression reported and many more that have likely happened but have gone unreported. This figure was shared in the local and mainstream media, each article highlighting

different aggressions, many of which were experienced by seniors from Chinatown (see Baylon & Cecco, 2021; Chau, 2021; Howell, 2021b). For instance, Chau (2021) interviewed a senior woman living in Chinatown, who is a Cantonese speaker, and explained that: “Diep, like many other Chinese-speaking seniors in Vancouver’s Chinatown, has been wary of leaving home in recent months, fearful of the hatred that exists beyond her front door.” If this worsening of the situation is dramatic, the systemic racism and feelings of insecurity experienced by these residents are far from new, either in Vancouver’s history or in North America, more generally. Particularly telling parallels can be drawn to late 1800s San Francisco, in which Asian Americans were targeted by white locals and city officials based on false narratives accusing them of responsibility for epidemics of smallpox and syphilis (Craddock, 1999). A similar historic pattern in Vancouver has been documented by Tsang’s (2023) recent book *White Riot*.

Yet, despite these threats and traumas, YCC, Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice, and Youth for Chinese Seniors have argued that seniors cannot simply be regarded as helpless recipients of protection from the state or be left out of discussions around what the neighbourhood should be like in the future. For Chow (2021), these groups’ activism, including when they “go out into Chinatown and take up space very publicly,” is partly:

About portraying our seniors in a different light....They’re also very dynamic and very strong people. They have lived a very long life of resilience and beauty...as opposed to them constantly being portrayed as and defined as being vulnerable and at risk. (Chow, 2021)

5. The Hot+Noisy Mahjong Socials: Strengthening Community and Defining Public Space

YCC, who organized the Hot+Noisy Chinatown Mahjong Socials, and other groups were created during a time when opposition to the proposed 105 Keefer condo complex roiled Chinatown. Opponents argued that the new development would be unaffordable for the seniors of the neighbourhood, that it threatened to have gentrifying ripple effects on surrounding property prices, and that its design was disrespectful to the community and heritage of Chinatown by dwarfing existing landmarks, such as the Chinatown Memorial on the adjacent Memorial Plaza (Mackie et al., 2017) and the Classical Chinese Garden, across Columbia St. to the west. These concerns were evident among numerous Vancouverites with connections to Chinatown. Helen Lee (2021), chair of the Vancouver Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee, noted in a tweet:

I can’t recount how many times I’ve heard this from the media—‘#ChinatownYVR is [declining, dying, or dead].’ This narrative has been around for so long,

but the fact is....IT’S STILL HERE!!! Chinatown may be ‘dead’ to some, but it’s a way of living for many.

Local planner and academic Andy Yan put it this way: “The reports of the death of Chinatown have been greatly exaggerated. Let’s begin with that initial acknowledgment...to understand that Chinatown has a future only if you want it” (Yan, as cited in Galloway, 2020).

YCC started to hold its Hot+Noisy Mahjong Socials on the Memorial Plaza in 2015, in opposition to 105 Keefer and to demonstrate that Chinatown is alive, that the plaza is meaningful to the residents, and to validate the neighbourhood’s intangible culture (rather than simply the physical heritage represented in the neighbourhood’s built environment). In this way, they engage in what Koch and Latham (2013) and Horgan et al. (2020) note is the important political work of “domesticating” the plaza through “public sociability.” As the YCC website explains:

“Hot+noisy” is a literal translation of the Chinese phrase 熱鬧 [Canto[nese]: *yeet naau*; Mando[rin]: *re nao*] used to describe the liveliness of an atmosphere. We continue to host the Chinatown Mahjong Social to bring the “hot+noisy” back to the area’s streets and public spaces. (YCC, n.d., emphases in original)

The fact that people in Chinatown need to prove that their neighbourhood is not a dying place and that their cultural practices and usages of public space are vital, points to the underlying racial logics in narratives associated with gentrification (Kern, 2022) and attempts by activists to resist and reframe what Roy (2017, p. A3) calls “racial banishment.”

Through hosting “Unapologetically Asian” public events by and for the Chinatown community, YCC was using public space to express its idea of who has control over the neighbourhood, who is represented in it, and who has a right to use it. Chow (2021) explains the importance of being able to celebrate community identity in such a highly visible way through food and ceremony. “Every year,” she remembered as she reflected back on the series of summer Socials from 2015 until 2019:

We would bring out a full roast pig. We’ve been told all their lives, “Oh, you Asian[s] eat weird animals,” or, like, “There’s heads and tails and stuff!” Well, we’re going to be unapologetically Asian and bring out the whole roast pig and we’re going to celebrate and practice our culture of Qingming [the annual festival honouring ancestors] at the memorial statue and we’re going to do it with anyone and everyone who wants to come and we’re going to [be] cutting up the roast pig and sharing it with different generations. (Chow, 2021)

Hence, by bringing this practice to public space during the Mahjong Socials, YCC reshaped the perception of the

space in a way that made it friendlier for those sharing culture and community in ways that are not necessarily accessible or accommodating to others living in, or visiting, Vancouver. Appealing to tourists (both from far afield and from other parts of metro Vancouver) is something that other groups such as the Chinatown Business Improvement Association are more interested in and this kind of use of public activity might not be one they would favour, since it can be seen as driving a wider diversity of people (customers) away. Indeed, a planner for the city of Vancouver stated that “we’ve gotten complaints about people saying, ‘It’s too Chinese,’ or, ‘I don’t feel welcome as a white person in this space during this time’” (interview, 2020).

Instead of tourists, YCC puts the emphasis on making public space accessible for the senior residents of the neighbourhood as well as those who do not speak English or do not speak it fluently. By building the Socials around them and their interactions with Chinese Canadian youth, YCC focuses on strengthening both relationships within the community as well as the community’s relationship with the space. Activists in Chinatown argue that seniors are usually excluded from the sorts of public space “activations” associated with the increasingly popular notions of “placemaking” that define discussions in planning and design professions. As community activist Kevin Huang (interview, 2020) explains:

We don’t talk...in Chinatown, or in North America, [about]...the racialization of everything, and the racism of that, and discrimination that does exist. So, when we think about activation of public spaces, there was quite a lot of effort put in by the city to activate public spaces, but are these spaces comfortable for the Chinese seniors? Are they centring what *they* want to see and what *they* want to do? Because if you think about a well-meaning new entrant to the neighbourhood, they might bring in activities or programming that are completely out of reach language-wise, or physically, or whatever, for a lot of Chinese seniors.

Facing this lack of appropriate activation from city initiatives in Chinatown, YCC started their Socials without asking for a permit (Chinatown Today, 2017). The Mahjong Socials were therefore held technically illegally for the first two years (the overbearing alley-policing condo resident would not have been impressed). In this instance, YCC’s strategy is to enact its vision for the neighbourhood before planners and other stakeholders can enact theirs. In advance of the Socials’ third iteration, in 2017, YCC was contacted by VIVA Vancouver, the city’s planning department team in charge of public space activation. VIVA offered to sponsor the Mahjong Socials, to cover YCC’s expenses, and, according to a planner on the VIVA team, they required no modifications of the event in exchange for the funding.

6. Planning, “Place-Keeping,” and Agonistic Public Space

Earlier in our discussion, we highlighted how, in 2004, the city of Vancouver’s planning department encouraged developers to turn their attention to “revitalizing” Chinatown with as many as “10,000 new people” (Beasley, 2004). Planning departments, as institutions of neoliberal states, are never neutral in questions of development and gentrification. Yet, there are various positionalities and outlooks among planners themselves. Many subscribe to the ideals of planning for the public good and designing “places for people” (Gehl, 2010; McCann & Mahieus, 2021). Certainly, as the city’s VIVA team’s approach to the Socials suggests, planning as an institution of the local state, is never monolithic, particularly in the actions of its “frontline” or “street level” agents (Lipsky, 1980/2010). As a member of the VIVA team put it:

Our mandate is funding community organisations who want to do stuff in public space. We give them funds because we identify that their activity has a public benefit....And in this case [the Socials], we funded very Chinese work. I’d say ethno-specific activities with a conscientious effort to make sure that these things aren’t Anglicised. We don’t ask people to do things in English. We don’t ask them to try to make sure every white person walking by feels welcome. It’s been a conscientious effort to make sure that these things celebrate being Chinese....To me that’s an ethical debate. Like who gets to influence the future of Chinatown? (interview, 2020)

Echoing YCC’s community-first ethos, the planner, who is not Chinese Canadian, also noted that:

Until about a year ago no one on the VIVA team was of Chinese descent. We were in no position to judge whether the activities being requested funding for were...how Chinese were they? How culturally significant were they amongst Chinese culture? That wasn’t our right to say that. (interview, 2020)

YCC’s positionality was crucial, therefore, in securing funding: “I think a group saying, ‘This is our mandate,’ and having a proven track record of doing Mahjong gave them credibility” (interview, 2020). This credibility also resonated with the city’s Chinatown Transformation Team. One of that group’s planners, who is Chinese Canadian, argued, “It’s about equity....Obviously, righting historical wrongs that we’ve had, the historical discrimination, the parts that we know. The impact that discriminatory policies have had” (interview, 2020).

The organisers of the Socials have a complex relationship with the state, then. They oppose the gentrification of Chinatown in the face of a general City mandate for “revitalization” and development, including

mounting numerous challenges in the city's planning permit approval process that have stalled 105 Keefer for several years (although at the time of writing, in July 2023, the condo has been approved by the city's Development Permit Board, after its developers appealed to the BC Supreme Court courts to overturn a previous city decision that stopped building and over 100 community-members and supporters spoke to the board during a two-day hearing opposing the decision; see Howell, 2023b). Yet, groups like YCC are also willing to work with other planners to fund the Socials, as long as there are no strings attached. Planners "talk a lot about placemaking," Chow says:

But really [for us], it's about *place-keeping*. There is already something here in Chinatown, and there's a real desire to keep alive the place our community created over generations. We wanted to show people that this is our neighbourhood, and we're not going anywhere. (Chow, as cited in Wiebe, 2020, emphasis added)

Her definition resonates with Dempsey and Burton's (2012, p. 13) definition of place-keeping as "long-term management which ensures that the social, environmental and economic quality and benefits the place brings can be enjoyed by future generations," although "enjoyment" would need to be defined politically for the Mahjong Socials' organizers. Place-keeping nonetheless resonated strongly with the VIVA planner, for example:

So much of public space literature is about activations and vibrancy, which is kind of coded like place brand, marketing, and hipsters....And they [YCC]...push back on the whole framing of public space as a venue to gentrify a neighbourhood and to brand a neighbourhood as sexy or hip. They push back on it whilst [taking] money from the programme that ostensibly should fund those awful activities....They even chafe at the word place-making because they like the word place-keeping, saying that Chinatown is already perfect the way it is so do not try to remake a space which is super cool now. "It's perfect. Our cute old seniors are perfect the way they are. Don't try to make it hipster." I love it, it's super surreptitious. (interview, 2020)

To some extent, the collaboration between YCC and VIVA can be seen as an attempt to coproduce a new form of placemaking that, as Barry and Agyeman (2020, p. 34) argue, transcends "simply...pursuing...outcomes for those that are not well represented in mainstream planning processes" (a type of "thin inclusion") in favour of more profound changes in planning thought and in the power relations that define planning practice. Another term, as well as coproduction, that is relevant here is agonism—connoting an alternative to liberal "thin consensus." Given that they acknowledge differences

instead of silencing them, the Mahjong Socials could be considered to be an agonistic use of public space (Mouffe, 2000, 2005). As the planner suggests, the "placemaking" language of public space "activation" is often associated with gentrification (see Caramaschi, 2020), yet in this instance, activation is intended to push back against Chinatown's gentrification by creating convivial encounters. However, as the confrontation with the condo resident and the complaints about noise and strange food suggest, physical proximity does not always lead to social closeness. The fleeting encounters that are sometimes generated by proximity and "social mix" might therefore be attributed to urban etiquette and civility, rather than a deeper conviviality. In turn, urban etiquette can lead people to repress their prejudice in public yet maintain and express it in private (Valentine, 2008). This analysis matches the argument that the hegemonic liberal notion of convivial public space "implies...a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 56).

On the other hand, an attention to agonism defines public space as a political "battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted" (Mouffe, 2007, p. 3). Reading Valentine's (2008) discussion of encounters in the light of the divergence between a liberal consensual ideal of public space and Mouffe's critical agonistic approach suggests that meaningful contact is encouraged and enhanced through urban politics. For Valentine (2008, p. 325), meaningful contact "actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for—rather than merely tolerance of—others." According to Valentine (2008), policies and practices through which marginalized people confront and address inequalities help realize meaningful encounters rather than a fantasy of equality. The Socials further confirm Valentine and Sadgrove's (2012, p. 2060, emphasis added) argument that deep change in values is more likely to be built on closeness, "by which we mean relations that make something or someone *known*." These are solidarities constructed within communities and among their allies, through encounters that strengthen their knowledge of each other and of what Chinatown's activists call intangible culture. Therefore, it can be argued that "internally convivial activations" (ones held in public spaces but with the purpose of primarily encouraging intra-group—rather than inter-group encounters) are more effective in strengthening closeness, a sense of community, and a political public than events catering to a general audience.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Murals and other artworks, complaining phone calls, protests against gentrifying condos, and summer Hot+Noisy social events all seek to define the public spaces of a neighbourhood and its future. "Place-keeping" events are opportunities to shift mainstream

perceptions of a place like Chinatown, but, importantly, they also strengthen community networks as they enable people to come together and become known to each other as people with common interests—they offer the opportunity for publics to form. As such, they play a role in dissipating feelings of helplessness regarding the idea that Chinatown is decaying. They enact care for the neighbourhood and its people, and they form the grounds for political claims to be made about the future of the place.

Given planning's general adherence to consensual, rather than agonistic, models of community engagement, the institution may not be well-equipped to deal with dissensus, even though many individual planners are well aware of the complexities and power relations that define the field and use their discretion to support "insurgent" forms of urban interventions, as we have shown above (Bayat, 2000; Miraftab, 2009). Certainly, a lot of dissatisfaction remains regarding how the city is handling Chinatown, while planners and activists continue to search for new practices that will help mobilize or preserve Chinatown's tangible and intangible characteristics and will also improve how community involvement in policy-making is conducted.

It is too early to judge how effective planning and activist initiatives have been in the neighbourhood. What appears clear, however, is that the pandemic will leave a profound mark. Several interviewees were rather pessimistic about the future of Chinatown, despite their efforts to keep the community afloat. After all, they had recently witnessed many key businesses, which were beloved meeting places and locations for low-income residents to purchase cheap and culturally appropriate goods, close their doors. They also suggest that community networks were damaged by the lockdown and their inability to gather and organize events. Moreover, many activists are feeling fatigued after having to take care of the many issues that arose during the pandemic, such as getting food to seniors or fighting for translation services in the case of vaccination appointments. Many also feel that they have been let down by the city once more as they received very little financial help. All of this is shadowed by accelerating gentrification, represented by the recent approval of the 105 Keefer proposal.

Yet, none of this necessarily signals the death of Chinatown. Many activists are still organizing and fighting for their community (it took an immense amount of work, and new alliances, especially with the burgeoning Vancouver Tenants Union, to organize the 100+ speakers who yet again opposed 105 Keefer in 2023, for example). Many point to the liveliness of the arts in the neighbourhood as a possibility to bring people together and show their care for Chinatown. New planning initiatives have undergone consultation with the community, such as a proposed redesign of the Memorial Plaza, which we can assume will be central to shaping the direction that Chinatown's public spaces take in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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