THE FOUNDATION FOR SAN FRANCISCO'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

CHINATOWN

The Chinese experience in San Francisco differed in several important ways from the experience of other immigrant groups. While California in general and San Francisco in particular were amazingly tolerant to most immigrant groups, the Chinese encountered prejudice and discrimination virtually from the very beginning. This unique experience is illustrated in the architecture of Chinatown.

An anonymous observer quoted in John Frost's History of the State of California (1856) stated that the Chinese "had been consigned, with houses and merchandise, to certain Americans in San Francisco, to whom they were bound by contract, as laborers, to work at a scale of wages very far below the average paid to mechanics and others generally." He then described their buildings: "The houses they brought with them from China, and which they set up where they worked, were infinitely superior and more substantial than those erected by the Yankees, being built chiefly of logs of wood, or scantling, from six to eight inches in thickness, placed one on the top of the other, to form the front, rear, and sides; whilst the roofs were constructed on an equally simple and ingenious plan, and were remarkable for durability."

1. Center of Waverly and Clay looking toward Grant Avenue, circa 1880. In the mid-1860s, the corner building was a general merchandise store run by Sam Sun Lee and Yung Kee, and the elaborate central building housed the Canton Restaurant, a laundry and a temple. The illustration of the building replaced the shack shown in illustration three.

Several buildings similar to this description appear in G.R. Fardon's photographs of the city taken in the 1850s. The photographs show no evidence, however, of the elaborate balconies, canopies, and lanterns that would later characterize some of the buildings in Chinatown.

Population estimates for the Chinese at this time vary widely: one source states that there were 1,789 men and 2 women in January 1850; 4,018 men and 7 women in December; and 12,000 men and the same 7 women in 1851. The first Chinese theater (imported intact from China) was located at Dupont near Green.

In 1861, the population is listed at a more realistic 2,400 Chinese males over 18, 520 females over 18, and 210 children of both sexes under 18.

It is probably impossible to determine the exact population of Chinatown since it varied according to events in California and China. The completion of the railroad in 1869 and the increasing level of discrimination against the Chinese in the 1870s, for example, tended to increase the population in Chinatown. The Exclusion Act of 1882 and 1884 banning all Chinese immigrants except merchants and officials, reduced the population. The Act also tended to weaken the Chinese experience in San Francisco.

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1850 City Directory, on the other hand, contains only three Chinese listings: the Canton Restaurant at Kearny and Jackson; Lewis Gee, a printer on Dupont between Washington and Clay; and the Macao and Wosung restaurant at Commercial and Kearny. As these few listings suggest, the Chinese from their earliest arrival were located within the present boundaries of Chinatown, although these were not yet firmly fixed, since the...
the very close ties between San Francisco's Chinese community and the old country, increase the percentage of the population that was native-born, accelerated Americanization and, paradoxically perhaps, also tended to increase pride in Chinese culture and achievements. All these factors are reflected in the nineteenth century architecture of Chinatown.

Architecturally, the forces tending towards Americanization are represented in the mission buildings of the various Christian churches. The first of these was established by Reverend William Speer of the Presbyterian Church and was located in a two-story building at 800 Stockton Street. In 1882 it moved to 925 Stockton in a Gothic-style building appropriate to the church's English roots and cultural mission in Chinatown. The present church continues this tradition in a Palladian-style building on the same site.

Since both the owners of the land and architects of the buildings in Chinatown were non-Chinese, most of the architecture was similar to that elsewhere in the city of the best and earliest examples of this is the Globe Hotel located at the northwest corner of Grant and Jackson and designed by Victor Hoffman in a florid classical style reminiscent of Viennese palace architecture. In the 1880s it was used for gambling rooms with three barber shops in the basement (1881—82 Sanborn and 1884—85 Police report), miscellaneous stores including rice packers, and tin and woodware (1885 City Directory). Metal canopies are the only "Chinese" architectural elements on this otherwise entirely European-style building.

A more interesting adaptation of Western architecture was the Tienhou temple at 33 Waverly Street (now 125—29). Probably built sometime around 1870, it was a classical building with segmentally arched hoods over the entrance and Corinthian columns on the ground floor. The temple's facade was later enlivened with two fat fish flanking a flame—like ornament on the eave. Beneath the eave four panels of peaches and vegetation were painted on simulated stone. Paper banners were placed over the entrance and the facade decorated with golden plaques, ironwork, hanging bells, round paper lanterns, Chinese characters and flags. The adjacent building, which housed a Confucian temple, was also altered after construction with a curved hood and cornice, a canopy at street level and balconies.

Such temples offer the best examples of a unique hybrid Chinese-American architectural style. Although the majority of buildings in Chinatown featured some sort of Chinese element, usually this style was no more than a metal canopy trimmed with upside—down fleur-de-lys-like detail, a decorative feature apparently unique to Chinatown. Like the balconies, curved hoods and railings, these were evidently American mass—produced architectural elements combined in a unique new amalgam by the Chinese-Americans of San Francisco. Supporting evidence comes from B.E. Lloyd's Lights and Shades in San Francisco (1886).

"Therefore there are not many buildings erected by the Chinese, and the absence of the quieter Chinese architecture is remarked...The additions they frequently make to houses, together with the signs, placards, and various gaudy ornaments with which the outer walls, windows and doors, are bedizened, almost completely conceal the architectural style of the building." Reverend D. Gibson, one of the few American defenders of the Chinese, briefly described the architecture of Chinatown in his The Chinese in America of 1877: "Not here is a three—storied building, with balconies on the second and third stories, gaudily painted with deep green and trimmed with red. A profusion of Chinese lanterns suspended in these balconies helps to give the place a particularly Oriental appearance. This is a Chinese restaurant." He also noted that a "few old frame buildings are still standing, but as the whole of Chinatown has been for some time within the fire—limits, the most of the buildings occupied by the Chinese are of brick, two or three stories high with a cellar or basement." (64)
out the area, however, were factories, tenements, stores and restaurants.

This extremely complex city within the City was entirely destroyed by the Earthquake and Fire of 1906, although it is unknown how much damage was done by the tremor itself.

More durable than the buildings were the property lines and tenacity of the residents. According to the building permit records, Chinatown did not rebuild immediately. This was probably due to two factors: the white property owners preferred to concentrate their limited capital on rebuilding their downtown commercial properties (for without those the city could not regain its previous economic vitality), and there were continued but unsuccessful efforts to remove the Chinese to less valuable areas of the City, particularly Hunter’s Point.

Another possible reason for the delay in reconstructing Chinatown is that the buildings there were probably underinsured, for insurance rates must have been very high, as the Sanborn maps make clear. Whatever the reason, widespread construction apparently did not begin until 1907 or 1908. When it occurred it followed the general pattern of earlier development, as did the City as a whole.

There were certain important differences between the architecture of pre and post 1906 Chinatown.

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The building that replaced this structure in 1907 was very different in design and intent. A newspaper article described it in flowery terms as “Truly the gateway to the orient of the Golden gate.” The purpose of the architecture was clearly to attract tourists and outsiders: “To the tourist from the east [of the United States] it is an introduction and an invitation to Chinatown. To the curiosity seeker from the city or elsewhere it is a revelation and delight.”

The building was prominent in the 1907 Chinatown map, the first official map of the city to depict the island in a detail. The building was the Yee Fung Toy Family Association Building at 1331-35 Grant Avenue, designed by Hamilton Murdock in 1907.

The original Sing Chong was constructed in 1905 in an entirely Western design with cornice, corner turret, and witch’s cap roof. This must have seemed inappropriate to the company, which was described as a “new concern of large capital” intending to “open an Oriental department store such as has never before been seen in the United States.”

Characteristics of this hybrid architectural style, which is really neither Chinese nor Western but unique to San Francisco, were the tiered corner pagoda roofs, Mission-style fringe tile roofs, curving eaves and trigram and dragon decoration. This Chinese-American style (sometimes referred to as “Chinese Renaissance”) was combined with modern construction and “practical American business requirements.” The roots of this style were, of course, in the earlier decorated buildings of the nineteenth century, but the twentieth century buildings were entirely self-conscious and designed by professional architects rather than being an organic expression of their Chinese occupants.

This combination of American and Chinese elements was illustrated in the electric lights on the “Chinese” exterior, and an interior as commodious as any American store. Contrast this with the more traditional interior of the Sam Hop Company at 851 Clay Street.

While the Sing Fat and Sing Chong Bazaars provided the model for many of Chinatown’s commercial buildings, particularly those on Grant Avenue oriented towards the tourist trade, most of the buildings were typical early twentieth century Edwardian brick buildings, just as those they replaced had been typical nineteenth century Italianate brick buildings. In their material, scale and massing they continued the tradition of not only nineteenth century Chinatown, but also San Francisco of the 1850s through 1870s.

There is even scattered but intriguing evidence that this unique Chinese-American style went beyond decoration and dealt with structure and function. The Yee Fung Toy Benevolent Association Building at 1331-35 Grant Avenue, for example, was designed by Hamilton Murdock and engineered by the Delmar Smith Company to meet the special requirements of its Chinese tenants. It was “constructed with special regard to strength, which meets the Chinese idea of permanency, cast iron columns, heavy joists and girders being employed.” An article appearing in the Architect and Engineer, April 1908 provides a
A glimpse into the life behind the generally mute brick facades is provided by census information on the Hop Wo Benevolent Association Building at 913-17 Stockton Street constructed in 1908 and designed by the O'Brien Brothers in a Classical Revival style. The Sanborn map for 1913 gives the basic structural information on this 2,920 square-foot building: three stories, forty-three feet high with brick or metal cornice and thirty-six inch firewall above the roof. There were two wired glass skylights, a fire escape in front, and the brick walls on the first and second stories—thirteen inches thick while those on the third floor were twelve inches. On April 19, 1910, the building was occupied by thirty-eight males and two females. Chun She Leong was the twenty-seven year old, Chinese-born wife of She Nam Leong, thirty-two years old and born in California, their eight-year old Chinese-born daughter living at home. The other child does not appear in the census records and thus probably still resided in China with relatives. She Nam worked as the manager of a general merchandise store and could read and write, as could his wife.

With them on the second floor of 915 Stockton Street were five lodgers, all men, varying in age from seventeen to thirty. Three were born in China (although the father of one was born in California), one was born in Hawaii, and the fifth in China. Of the three born in China, one was an alien who could speak English; the other two had arrived in California in 1906 and 1908, probably as "Paper Sons" taking advantage of the loss of records during the Fire. The five lodgers, husband, wife and daughter all had the common last name of Leong, although the exact relations between lodgers and the family is not known.

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Such detailed Sanborn and census information allows a more sophisticated and accurate analysis of the complex architecture of Chinatown. While there are a few Chinatown buildings that are significant from a purely design aspect (particularly the Nam Rue School at 775 Sacramento, 1925, Charles E.J. Rogers, architect; the old Chinese Telephone Building at 743 Washington, 1909, C.W. Burtkat, engineer; and the Chinese Six Companies Building at 843 Stockton, 1908, Burkett & Nahoney, architects); most buildings in Chinatown are important as the architectural embodiment of the lives, work and cultural aspirations of the Chinese-American community in San Francisco from the 1840s to the present. Although nineteenth century Chinatown was destroyed in the great conflagration of 1906, the lives of the people, their history and tradition continue, a precious legacy to the future.