

---

## Chinatown and Monster Homes: The Splintered Chinese Diaspora in Vancouver

Laura Madokoro

---

Volume 39, numéro 2, Spring 2011

URI : [id.erudit.org/iderudit/1003459ar](http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1003459ar)

DOI : [10.7202/1003459ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1003459ar)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN 0703-0428 (imprimé)  
1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer cet article

Laura Madokoro "Chinatown and Monster Homes: The Splintered Chinese Diaspora in Vancouver." *Urban History Review* 392 (2011): 17–24. DOI : [10.7202/1003459ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1003459ar)

---

Résumé de l'article

Cet article propose une critique de la cohésion et de la solidarité sous-entendues dans de nombreuses études de la diaspora par le biais d'une exploration du rôle de la mémoire historique comme force perturbatrice sur les sites locaux de l'expérience diasporique. L'article porte sur une série de débats controversés autour des questions du logement et du développement à Vancouver des années 1960 aux années 1980, débats impliquant des groupes de Canadiens d'origine chinoise ou de récents immigrants chinois. Grâce à des recherches en archives et des entretiens, la controverse entourant la construction de « maisons monstres » par des investisseurs et immigrants chinois vers la fin des années 1980 se révèle être complètement détachée de la solidarité créée au sein de la communauté chinoise de Vancouver une génération plus tôt par des campagnes pour sauver le quartier résidentiel de Strathcona et la zone commerciale du Chinatown adjacente. L'article conclut que l'absence de mémoires partagées dans un espace local sape le potentiel de mobilisation politique au sein d'une communauté diasporique.

---

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 2011

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

---



Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. [www.erudit.org](http://www.erudit.org)

# *Chinatown and Monster Homes: The Splintered Chinese Diaspora in Vancouver*

Laura Madokoro

*This article offers a critique of the cohesiveness and solidarity implied in many studies of diaspora by exploring the role of historical memory as a disruptive force in the local sites of the diasporic experience. The focus of the article is on a series of controversial housing and development debates in Vancouver from the 1960s to the 1980s, all of which involved groups of Chinese Canadians or recent Chinese immigrants. Through archival research and interviews, the controversy over the construction of “monster homes” by Chinese investors and immigrants in the late 1980s is shown to be completely divorced from the solidarity generated within the Chinese community in Vancouver a generation earlier as a result campaigns to save the residential neighbourhood of Strathcona and the adjacent commercial Chinatown area. The article concludes that the absence of shared memories in a local space undermines the potential for political mobilization within a diasporic community.*

*Cet article propose une critique de la cohésion et de la solidarité sous-entendues dans de nombreuses études de la diaspora par le biais d’une exploration du rôle de la mémoire historique comme force perturbatrice sur les sites locaux de l’expérience diasporique. L’article porte sur une série de débats controversés autour des questions du logement et du développement à Vancouver des années 1960 aux années 1980, débats impliquant des groupes de Canadiens d’origine chinoise ou de récents immigrants chinois. Grâce à des recherches en archives et des entretiens, la controverse entourant la construction de « maisons monstres » par des investisseurs et immigrants chinois vers la fin des années 1980 se révèle être complètement détachée de la solidarité créée au sein de la communauté chinoise de Vancouver une génération plus tôt par des campagnes pour sauver le quartier résidentiel de Strathcona et la zone commerciale du Chinatown adjacente. L’article conclut que l’absence de mémoires partagées dans un espace local sape le potentiel de mobilisation politique au sein d’une communauté diasporique.*

## **Introduction**

“Chinatown didn’t matter. It was a part of history,” declared Peter Kwok.<sup>1</sup> Peter is an immigrant, and now a Canadian citizen, from Hong Kong. He arrived in 1988 and soon became embroiled in a protracted housing debate in Vancouver’s exclusive Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale districts that observers viewed as a kind of clash of civilizations: one that pitted Chinese immigrants against white Vancouverites. The conflict emerged as wealthy investors from Hong Kong bought up

and transformed properties with seemingly little regard for the traditional aesthetic qualities of these storied neighbourhoods. Those who objected to the developments did so on the grounds of cultural difference, manifested in the size and shape of the homes under construction. It was a polarizing dispute, and for scholars such as David Ley it came to epitomize the state of race relations in British Columbia’s most populous city at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Given the original emphasis on race as the explanation for the conflict that divided residents in two of Vancouver’s most affluent communities, Mr. Kwok’s comment is intriguing on several levels, pointing as it does to the temporal position of Chinatown in the mindset of newcomers to the city and the apparent irrelevance of history to contemporary housing debates in Vancouver. Mr. Kwok was one of the 700,000 immigrants who moved to Canada in the fifteen years preceding the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China. In doing so, he joined the global Chinese diaspora made up of migrants who maintain ties with others who leave China or Hong Kong to go abroad while maintaining tangible or nostalgic ties to their homelands.<sup>3</sup> The idea of a diaspora has become one of the most important ways to understand both contemporary and historical migration experiences, in large part because it shifts the focus of the migration experience away from the nation state. In the diasporic perspective, migrants do not move alone. They are connected as they journey with fellow migrants, and everyone who leaves a place is understood to retain some kind of connection to it, if not necessarily a desire to return.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the idea of a diasporic community implies some kind of solidarity in sites of migration around the globe. Since the transnational turn of the late 1980s, such analyses tend to reify ethnicity in particular as a means for migrants to counter the hegemonic impulses of coercive authorities generally and the nation-state specifically.<sup>5</sup> However, as Rainer Münz and Rainer Ohliger suggest, the term *diaspora* has come to describe groups “which were never conceived of as coherent ethnic entities before the wider dissemination and dispersion of the concept of diaspora.”<sup>6</sup>

Inspired by Münz and Ohliger’s pointed critique, this article explores historical memory as a disruptive force in the outwardly cohesive diasporic impulse. The first housing debate to engage the Chinese community in Vancouver occurred in the Strathcona neighbourhood in the 1960s, yet both its legacy and any kind of ethnic solidarity were absent from the housing debate of the 1980s. This silence is particularly serious when, as Paul Gilroy suggests, diasporic identity “is focused less on common territory and more on memory.”<sup>7</sup> This article is therefore concerned

with what happens when members of an ethnic diaspora do not have shared memories of a local space. Simply stated, I argue that without shared memories, diasporic solidarity is undermined. To illustrate this phenomenon, I explore debates that involved Chinese residents and migrants in the shape and future of residential communities in Vancouver over the course of thirty years. Some of the most formative experiences for the Chinese community in Vancouver were the campaigns to preserve and defend the residential neighbourhood of Strathcona throughout the 1960s. These localized memories translate across time and space with difficulty. Exposing the fractured nature of the Chinese community in the city not only dispels notions of diasporic unity but also reveals how depictions of the housing debates as racial conflicts, rather than economic or aesthetic ones, perpetuate a trope of ethnic solidarity that longer-term, “outsider” residents, regardless of their racial categorizations, can use to conceal, suppress, and ignore the dynamism and internal complexity of migrant communities in a city.

### ***Setting the Stage: Strathcona***

Bounded by the city’s financial and tourist districts as well as the Downtown Eastside, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada, Vancouver’s Chinatown has experienced a decline in recent years, reinforcing a long history of highs and lows, fortune and decay.<sup>8</sup> During the exclusion era from 1885 to 1947, when Chinese migrants were subject to punitive head taxes and eventually an almost total ban on migration, the neighbourhood assumed the conventional characteristics of an ethnic enclave. Chinese migrants who came to Canada as merchants and labourers found many of the city’s neighbourhoods hostile to their residential aspirations and sought refuge among their fellow countrymen. The vast majority of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Chinese migrants came from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, and economic and political constraints limited female migration. In 1901, Chinatown’s population numbered 2,053 men, twenty-seven women, and twenty-six children.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Chinatown acquired a reputation as a den of vice and a bachelor society. Migrants relied on clan and village associations for contacts and business opportunities.<sup>10</sup> After the Second World War, migration laws evolved, and gradually opportunities for Chinese migrants to once again live on Canadian soil increased. The government permitted limited family sponsorships, and in 1962 it removed quota restrictions so that skilled workers and independent migrants from China could come to Canada on the same basis as migrants from Europe and the United Kingdom.

At first, new waves of migrants were drawn to Vancouver’s Chinatown where their families were well established and as a result, Chinatown grew rapidly. Many residents then moved to the nearby neighbourhood of Strathcona, which bordered Chinatown and was close enough to offer the same sense of security and familiarity. Between 1951 and 1961, Strathcona’s population doubled to 60,000. Originally a predominantly Eastern European and Italian community, by the 1960s half of Strathcona’s population was ethnic Chinese.<sup>11</sup> For newcomers from China, it represented a safe haven and a comfortable destination because of the ethnic ties it fostered. Mary Chan, who became a leading campaigner in the fight to save Strathcona in the 1960s, recalled the sense of security the area offered: “I thought that my children needed to communicate with other Chinese and learn the Chinese language, and I thought if I moved to other areas I would be surrounded by Whites. And

I was afraid if something happened, who would you turn to for help?”<sup>12</sup> However, by the late 1960s, increasingly diverse points of origin, and better-educated and more affluent migrants meant that people were not necessarily tied to Chinatown for economic and employment opportunities.<sup>13</sup> Strathcona was decreasingly a neighbourhood of choice. More migrants opted to settle in Richmond, Burnaby, and Coquitlam so that today these urban centres boast Chinese populations of 75,725 (43 per cent), 60,765 (30 per cent) and 20,205 (17 per cent) respectively.<sup>14</sup>

Vancouver boasts one of the largest Chinatowns in North America, but the space it occupies is relatively small and as a result, the battles to preserve its physical space and unique heritage have become part of the collective conscience of the Chinese Canadians who grew up or work and live in this area. When asked what distinguishes Chinatown from other Chinese communities in Vancouver, Albert Fok of the Chinatown Business Improvement Area declared simply, “We have the history. We have the heritage.”<sup>15</sup> This sense of ownership and responsibility is greatly shaped by the manner in which Chinatown was used to save the residential community of Strathcona, and vice-versa, during the heyday of planned urban renewal in the late 1960s. The relationship that was cemented between Chinatown and Strathcona during this time created a unique sense of place that many new migrants from the Chinese diaspora are not only excluded from, but are completely disinterested in engaging with.

### ***Strathcona and 1960s Urban Renewal in Vancouver***

Fights to save Strathcona and Chinatown brought the community together in the 1960s. Moreover, the historian Wing Ching Ng says, “The preservation of Chinatown acquired symbolic significance in the quest for local belonging” and created an upsurge in “local consciousness among the Vancouver Chinese” that spilled over to local politics.<sup>16</sup> Shirley Chan, who participated in the campaign to save Strathcona, recalls, “Never before had the city seen the level of organization and cooperation of citizens from diverse neighbourhoods working together to oppose bad public policy. These citizens took personal responsibility for the development of their city and in the process transformed the way the City of Vancouver did its business.”<sup>17</sup>

Two battles to preserve Strathcona stand out as defining moments in the community’s history. The first began in 1957 when the City of Vancouver put forward a three-phase, twenty-year \$100 million slum clearance scheme, known as the Urban Renewal Project. At the heart of this scheme was a plan to bulldoze apparently derelict housing in Strathcona, identified as an area of blight by the city planners.<sup>18</sup> Leonard Marsh, author of a 1950 report entitled *Rebuilding a Neighbourhood: Report on a Demonstration Slum Clearance and Urban Rehabilitation Project in a Key Central Area in Vancouver*, called the area’s housing conditions “intolerable,” proposing the “acquisition and clearance of the existing housing and redevelopment with three types of rental housing; apartments, row-housing and small suites.”<sup>19</sup> No private housing was proposed. Yet as community historian Hayne Wai has shown, while Strathcona “was a low-income working-class area, it was not a slum.” Rather, “it was a low-crime area and had a strong sense of community.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that city planners failed to make this distinction made many residents feel that the area was being targeted because of its largely ethnic, and seemingly voiceless, Chinese population.

## *Chinatown and Monster Homes*

Differences in perception about life in the community among outside planners and experts and residents resulted in a prolonged debate about the nature of proposed changes to the area. As urban renewal plans went forward, the residents of Strathcona found themselves in a difficult position. The city froze repair permits and ceased regular maintenance of the area, hoping to convince residents that they would be better off in more modern public housing.<sup>21</sup> Residents were unable to improve their homes but they did not want to leave. For property owners, the expropriation of their homes meant dispersal, and many found the offer of \$6,000–\$8,000 for their homes unjust. Bessie Lee, a resident of Strathcona, claimed that to find a home anywhere else in the city would cost \$14,000–\$21,000, “and even at that, it would be hard to find a decent house.”<sup>22</sup> Opponents claimed that urban renewal and the loss of single-dwelling residents was particularly injurious to the Chinese, many of whom were seniors and had known no other home in Canada.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, while residents felt that the urban renewal plans discriminated against them because of their Chinese origins, they drew attention to the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the community in their defence. So persistent were proponents in pushing the argument about the Chinese character of Strathcona that the battle to preserve the community became one implicitly tied to the nature of multicultural Canada, which had become official federal government policy in 1971. The community’s defenders highlighted and essentialized the unique characteristics of the Chinese residents in the hopes that city planners would be convinced that a distinct heritage and way of life was at stake. City officials were told that the “Chinese, especially the elderly men, were not adept [sic] to living in high rise apartments.”<sup>24</sup> Newspaper accounts noted that the proposed clearance “clashes with one great fear in the Chinese mind—the prospect of change.”<sup>25</sup> In this respect, the conflict over the future of Strathcona was not only about what constituted appropriate housing but also a clash of values that pitted modernity and progress versus heritage and culture along ethnic lines. Ethnicity became the means to preserve the community. Counsel Charles Locke, acting on behalf of his Chinese clients, declared that the urban renewal plans would lead to the “destruction of Chinese merchants and could ruin the international flavor of the area.”<sup>26</sup>

Building on a perceived threat to the self-identified unique ethnic community, the campaign to preserve the heritage homes in Strathcona hinged on strategic appeals to Chinese identity and heritage. The earliest stages of the battle to save Strathcona fused the survival of the residential area with the survival of the Chinese community in Vancouver, rendering other residents, particularly those of European heritage, invisible in the fight to save their homes. Richard Nann, professor in the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia, described Strathcona and Chinatown as a “Chinese village” that “developed within the confines of a large Occidental city.” Nann declared, “This village has developed to the point where today it is a socially self-sufficient community.”<sup>27</sup> Equally significant, Nann alluded to a culture of property ownership because of the migrants’ backgrounds: since “most Chinese in Vancouver come from a background of poor, peasant tenant farmers, they place a great importance and significance upon property ownership.”<sup>28</sup> So not only were property ownership rates high compared to other neighbourhoods in the city, but the very concept of owning property was linked to cultural practices.

Furthering the argument that Strathcona deserved protection because it was a Chinese community and home to a distinctive way of life, opponents to the city’s urban renewal plans argued that in addition to the disruption that the relocation would cause residents, the plans would ruin the social life of the community, as it would be difficult for members of the many community organizations to attend social functions if they were not resident in the vicinity.<sup>29</sup> There was concern that the fraternal associations, so central to the social life of the community, would be dispersed. The Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA) expressed fears about the continued livelihood of commercial Chinatown and of Vancouver’s Chinese community and argued that what the City was proposing was racist.<sup>30</sup> The CBA’s leader, Foon Sien, wrote to City Hall in 1963, declaring, “Experience taught us that forced evacuation of Japanese Canadians from Vancouver’s ‘Little Tokyo’ created much hardship and suffering. Now twenty-one years later, the authorities intend to disperse the Chinese similarly. To me it is discrimination of the rankest kind.”<sup>31</sup> Mainstream media such as the *Vancouver Sun* did not support such claims, arguing that Strathcona residents should take advantage of the opportunity for “comfortable, fine new housing.”<sup>32</sup> Jack Stepler of the *Province* suggested that there was nothing worth preserving, declaring, “Chinatown isn’t what it used to be.”<sup>33</sup>

Arguing for the preservation of a residential community based on a unique way of life and heritage proved fruitless. In 1959, the City began Scheme I of its Urban Renewal plans with the construction of a public housing project at MacLean Park, followed by the clearing of ten acres of homes along Campbell Avenue. Scheme II got underway in 1965 with a 260-unit extension to MacLean Park. Until 1968, all efforts to prevent the expropriation of homes were unsuccessful, and over thirty acres of land were cleared while 3,300 people, most of whom were ethnic Chinese, were dispersed.

### ***Showdown: Strathcona Gets Strategic***

By December 1968, the first two phases of slum clearance were complete and the City was preparing for the third and final phase. In a last-ditch effort to save the community, the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA), claiming many ethnic ties to Chinatown, was formed to prevent further destruction and to demand community involvement in city planning. SPOTA proved successful in this final standoff, exhibiting a high degree of sophistication and political strategizing in its battle with City Hall. The executive was composed of both Chinese and non-Chinese community members, and the organization deftly used the public arena to advance its cause. SPOTA brought municipal, provincial, and federal politicians to the community to see for themselves the kinds of homes that were under attack. Invitations for “highly visible, symbolic roles, from ribbon cutting to sod-turning ceremonies,” brought politicians to Strathcona.<sup>34</sup> Walking tours were organized as well as bus tours.

Shirley Chan recalls being the twenty-one-year old English voice of SPOTA. Acting as an interlocutor, Chan sat next to the federal minister responsible for housing, Paul Hellyer, on a bus tour around Strathcona carefully pointing out the care that was being taken to maintain homes slated for destruction.<sup>35</sup> Another young activist, Jo-Anne Lee, recalls the hours of door-to-door canvassing that she and her mother engaged in, and the significance of large banquets involving municipal and federal

## *Chinatown and Monster Homes*

politicians in the community. Lee explains that residents “found ways to present themselves in terms that best suited their objective. To this end, it is clear that they were fully conscious and aware of how they were being interpreted by the media and politicians.”<sup>36</sup> Lee believes that once politicians appeared in Strathcona, it was difficult for them to go against the will of the increasingly vocal residents. When the federal government withdrew funding for urban renewal schemes across Canada in 1969, the City of Vancouver was forced to abandon its plans for Phase III. According to one participant, “The federal government seemed to recognize that the Strathcona Community was a group with special needs because of their distinct ethnic origin and the location of the community in relation to Chinatown.”<sup>37</sup>

The successful battle to save Strathcona brought the ethnic Chinese community together at a time when new waves of Chinese immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan threatened to fracture traditional ties.<sup>38</sup> In observing the politicization of the Chinese community in Chinatown during the 1960s and 1970s, historian Wing Ching Ng argues, “Not only did the neighbourhood residents themselves participate in the struggle for Chinatown, but other Chinese who had not previously been involved in Chinatown activities now found reasons to embrace their ethnic community.”<sup>39</sup> The fight to save Strathcona came to define the Chinese community in Vancouver, linked as it was to the broader emergence of vocal minority rights groups in Canada in these years.<sup>40</sup>

### *No Time to Rest: Freeways on the Horizon*

The campaign to save Strathcona enabled the community to mobilize concurrently against another plan that would have transformed the geography of the neighbourhood. In 1967, news stories started to appear regarding the City’s proposal to construct a freeway right through the heart of Chinatown’s commercial district, eliminating a historic area known as Shanghai Alley that now hosts the Chinese Cultural Centre and the award-winning Sun-Yat Sen Classical Garden. Although opposition to the project was city-wide, Chinatown was unique in making claims to heritage and history to block the construction of the freeway. At two successive City Council meetings, SPOTA packed the galleries with protesters, and organizations such as the Chinese Benevolent Association made vigorous pronouncements about how the freeway would be the death of Vancouver’s Chinatown.<sup>41</sup>

People opposed to the freeway project emphasized Chinatown as a residential as well as a business area. After a decade of protesting the planned destruction of Strathcona, housing had become an integral part of Chinatown’s identity.<sup>42</sup> A symbiotic relationship developed between commercial and residential interests in Strathcona and Chinatown, each using the other to pursue its own agenda.<sup>43</sup> Both SPOTA and the Chinese Benevolent Association went beyond earlier arguments about the community being home to a unique way of life, with deeply entrenched social relations that deserved to be protected. Instead, SPOTA used the Chinatown business area to convince urban planners that it would be a mistake to destroy what remained of the Strathcona residential area.<sup>44</sup> The commodification of Chinatown, and the fusion of residential and commercial interests between merchants and residents in Strathcona, became an immutable force at a time when civic activism was on the rise across the country.<sup>45</sup> Opponents to the project were victorious, and the freeway project was cancelled.

It was another success story for community activists in Chinatown and Strathcona. However, the history of civic activism in Vancouver, especially when it is rooted in particular neighbourhoods, is easily lost and fragmented, and despite parallels with later housing conflicts in the city, the history of the preservation of Strathcona and Chinatown increasingly belongs to the former activists alone.

### *Monster Homes: Whither Chinatown?*

A few kilometres across the Burrard Inlet and up the Granville rise, but a world away from Strathcona and Chinatown, are two of Vancouver’s most exclusive postal codes: Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale. Home to some of the oldest houses and properties in the city, the two neighbourhoods have long drawn aspiring homeowners for their aesthetic appeal. Residents chose the neighbourhoods specifically for the peace and quiet they projected, the historical nature of the homes, many of which were built at the turn of the twentieth century, and the equally majestic trees.<sup>46</sup> In 1988, these same “long-time residents,” self-declared after sometimes a mere two decades in the area, petitioned City Hall to prevent the construction of the large homes that were transforming their streetscapes. The so-called monster homes maximized the allowable building sizes on the lots and in many instances involved the clearing of older homes and trees. The new properties, many of them shoddily constructed, nevertheless sold for millions of dollars as developers targeted an emerging and fabulously lucrative market: wealthy migrants from Hong Kong who were looking for business and investment opportunities before the 1997 handover of the colony to the People’s Republic of China and who found it in “prime real estate territory.”<sup>47</sup> The spacious lots for sale in Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy were seen as a bargain compared to the cost of real estate in Hong Kong.<sup>48</sup>

The monster homes controversy of the 1990s and the most recent debate over multi-family residences in Surrey represent a successive series of confrontations over the construction of aesthetically questionable homes in Vancouver.<sup>49</sup> The geographer Katharyne Mitchell traces the origins of the debate to housing controversies over Vancouver Specials that were built in east-side communities in the 1960s and 1970s. The Vancouver Specials were distinguished by their large box-like structures with imposing balconies stretched across the front. According to Mitchell, the specials, which maximized allowable zoning rules, provoked fear that the “carefully regulated borders demarcating communities would be lost in the advent of rapid urban transformation.”<sup>50</sup> The campaign against the monster homes in Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy was also about bounded communities, but in this case, the boundaries were not simply geographic. They appeared to be racial as well. The campaign against housing developments in these exclusive areas soon took on intolerant overtones as evidenced by this excerpt from a letter to City councillors:

The face of Vancouver is changing far too quickly. We—the fairly reasonable people—fear the power that the Hong Kong money wields. We resent the fact that because they come here with pats of money they are able to mutilate the areas they choose to settle in. Our trees are part of our heritage. These people come—with no concern for our past. They have not been part of the growth and development of our beautiful city. They have not been paying taxes for years. They have no right to devastate the residential areas.<sup>51</sup>

## *Chinatown and Monster Homes*

Such inflammatory comments prompted Mayor Gordon Campbell to declare that the battle over housing was to be understood as a zoning issue, not a racial one.<sup>52</sup> Yet it was difficult for both sides of the debate to distinguish between the two. One builder, who worked on more than one hundred homes in the 1980s and 1990s, recalls finishing a home to be put on the market, only to discover on the day of the open-house that someone had spray-painted “ugly” on the side in large letters. On other occasions, his properties were picketed by local residents. However, Barry Hersh rejects suggestions that the debate was racist, asserting that it was not migration residents were objecting to, “it was the homes they didn’t want.”<sup>53</sup>

The federal government had been encouraging business-class migrants to invest in Canada since the late 1970s. However, the City of Vancouver was not prepared for the fact that new migration meant new aesthetic and political values. Moreover, the mayor’s insistence on framing the controversy as anything but a racial issue disguised the fact that mobile capital and mobile migrants from Hong Kong brought with them political views that were far more liberal and laissez-faire than those prevailing in the municipal culture of Vancouver, including among the established Chinese community. Residents and business people in Chinatown, while establishing and maintaining an extensive network of trade contacts overseas and clan associations to protect their economic interests, frequently sought support from City Hall to guarantee the security of their community after the urban renewal and freeway battles of the 1960s. Heritage preservation had been welcomed in Chinatown, particularly since 1971 when the City designated the area a historical district.<sup>54</sup> Not so by new Chinese migrants in Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy who were seeking freedom to invest and prosper. The rigidity of the residential spirit in Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale and the governmental controls and zoning by-laws residents welcomed to curb perceived excesses were neither anticipated nor appreciated by the new arrivals.

While the public hearings and the media controversy were noted in international publications such as the *South China Morning Post*, archival evidence and interviews with representatives of Chinatown’s heritage and business interests reveal an almost complete lack of interest by Chinatown’s representatives in lending support to this particular housing battle. When the City organized public hearings to debate the issue, the hastily convened Shaughnessy Property Owners’ Rights Committee, of which Peter Kwok was a member, asked its members to find supporters among the Chinese in the Lower Mainland so that their presence at local hearings would be more forcibly felt.<sup>55</sup> Few residents of Strathcona or the Chinatown business community attended, revealing how superficial the ties between the ethnic Chinese non-residents and Vancouver’s Chinatown were, twenty years after the successful battle to save Strathcona. The values and culture that defined the Chinese community in Strathcona were not shared by new arrivals to Vancouver.

On social, political, and economic levels, the residents of Strathcona and Chinatown had little connection with the Chinese newcomers to Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy. These differences were compounded by the stark contrast between Chinese migrants and the more settled Chinese-Canadian community in Vancouver and their respective relationships with the residential communities of which they were a part

or in which they wished to invest. Those interested in the Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale neighbourhoods used arguments to stake their claims that were very different from those evidenced in 1960s Strathcona. Where community organizations had cited a unique heritage and a distinct way of life to make their case against the modernist vision at City Hall, the investors of the 1980s resorted to ideological and economic arguments. Many appealed to liberalism and democracy—traits they identified with Canadian society generally—to argue for their right to build homes according to their wishes. At one hearing, one investor (speaking through a translator) declared, “We had planned to build a home that we liked very much. But now we can’t do it anymore. So our only choice was to build a house that is not even adequate for our own use . . . That’s against our wish.”<sup>56</sup> With this line of argumentation, new homeowners and investors made rights-based claims based on liberal democratic discourse, epitomized by freedom of choice, rather than the appeals to unique heritage and community preservation, as evidenced by the residents of Strathcona and businesses in Chinatown in the 1960s.<sup>57</sup> Rather, it was the residents of Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy who appealed to a sense of history to battle the developers and investors. One opponent declared, “Our sense of historic links and continuity with the past will and is being destroyed at a rate that is unheard of in the history of a modern community.”<sup>58</sup>

City Council eventually introduced design controls and retained rules on the possible size of developments.<sup>59</sup> The City also passed by-laws on the removal of trees from neighbourhood residences. The compromise seemed to satisfy most parties as investors had the option of trading off historical design for more space and the “long-term residents” note with approval the manner in which newer constructions generally blend into the scenery.<sup>60</sup> According to some scholars, it was the monetary power of the new Chinese investors and homeowners that enabled them to forge an alliance with local politicians who understood the economic value, and potential investments, that they and possible future migrants represented. City Hall’s desire to facilitate their migration is seen as the key element in the compromise.<sup>61</sup> As such, ethnic solidarity was unnecessary for Hong Kong migrants to muster the support required to ensure their investment opportunities. Nevertheless, the newer migration had a significant impact on the Chinese residents of Vancouver who had been in Canada for generations and who were content with seeing themselves, and their history, in a particular light. As a result, long-time Chinese residents of Vancouver and British Columbia’s Lower Mainland were rendered uncomfortable by the fact that great gulfs of aesthetic and economic difference separated generations of Chinese Canadians from newer and wealthier migrants from Hong Kong who embodied the “astronaut” lifestyle.<sup>62</sup> Albert Fok of the Chinatown Business Improvement Association affirms that it was the fear of renewed racism, provoked by the monster home debate, that most interested residents of Strathcona and the Chinatown business district.<sup>63</sup>

Colleen Leung, a local journalist with BCTV and a self-identified Chinese Canadian told CBC’s Peter Gzowski during a national broadcast of *Morningside*, “Conspicuous consumption . . . That bothers non-Asians, and makes people like me feel self-conscious.” In describing her series on racism in British Columbia, Leung explained, “I wanted to make the point that it wasn’t fair that the Chinese were being criticized. But at the same time, the Chinese, in a way, are not blameless either for bringing

this on. Because some are arrogant.” Returning to her point about conspicuous consumption, Leung claimed that buying BMWs for teens or paying for annual trips to Hawaii made those with “generations of Canadianhood” sensitive to the possibility that their social positions were being usurped. Leung concluded that the money, power, and clout of new migrants “disturbs Canadians who are not Asians.”<sup>64</sup> Yet Leung’s comments suggest that Chinese Canadians were also disturbed by events in Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale. Where did established Chinese Canadians fit into this new power dynamic? The brief answer is that they did not. So distant were the prosperity and real estate interests of the new migrant families that, despite the apparent diasporic unity, a complete paradigm shift had taken place.<sup>65</sup>

By the late 1980s, residents of Strathcona and Chinatown were engaged with a different set of concerns—ones that, in turn, did not engage Chinese newcomers to Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale. Chinatown’s commercial district was once again struggling. Crime in the Downtown Eastside was on the increase, and new malls that catered specifically to Chinese clients (particularly newer immigrants) were being built in the neighbouring city of Richmond. Fewer and fewer people were making their way to Chinatown to buy products. Merchants in Vancouver’s Chinatown worried that the cost of real estate and limited parking spaces were crippling their potential to turn a profit. Campaigns to save Chinatown became specifically geared to promoting commercial interests.<sup>66</sup>

Strathcona’s population was also changing. According to the 2006 census, English was the mother tongue of 49.1 per cent of the residents, while 25.3 per cent identified as Chinese-language speakers. Half of the population had moved either to or from the area since 2001.<sup>67</sup> The neighbourhood was becoming increasingly gentrified and did not escape the housing boom that makes Vancouver one of the most expensive cities in Canada to live in.<sup>68</sup> Only 26.6 per cent of the population lived in low-income housing, as compared to 64 per cent in 1996.<sup>69</sup> When the first million-dollar home sold in Strathcona in 2007, one that probably would have been destroyed under the urban renewal plans of the 1960s, it was a sign that the community had indeed been transformed and that the historical and cultural ties that once held Strathcona close to Chinatown were also weakening.<sup>70</sup> Chinatown now focuses on the business of heritage and tourism, as opposed to community interests, to survive. Hayne Wai regrets that “Chinatown’s role as a community focus has diminished.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The history that defined the experience of so many Chinese migrants to Vancouver slowly disappeared after the fights to save Strathcona and Chinatown were won, and vanished almost completely as migrants from Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s discovered new neighbourhoods and new places to settle. Ironically, given the centrality of homeland in theories of diaspora, it was the location of people’s homes in the city of Vancouver that most reflected the social, economic, cultural, and political divides in the localized diaspora. Newer migrants, however permanent or unsettled their time in Vancouver, disrupted diasporic unity as their aesthetic and social values clashed with those of more permanent and settled residents. While the clash was rarely overt among members of the so-called diaspora, its reverberations affected all those identifying

with a sense of Chinese community in Vancouver or the global Chinese diaspora.

In moving beyond Chinatown, new Chinese migrants transformed the historic ties to Strathcona and Chinatown and the privileged positions that these two sites had occupied for decades in the collective memory of the Chinese in Vancouver. The housing debates in Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale were not about Chinese migrants fighting to save a community, as had been the case in Strathcona in the 1960s. That role fell to longer-term residents who resented aesthetic encroachments on neighbourhoods to which they felt a strong sense of entitlement, having moved there “first.” Rather, Chinese migrants were fighting for the right to pursue the *laissez-faire* economic policies and the investment freedom they had enjoyed in Hong Kong and expected in Canada. Most newcomers were unaware of the sense of empowerment that had been fostered among Chinese-Canadian residents of Vancouver as a result of the civic campaigns and activism three decades earlier. To this end, the masses of archival material and research conducted on the Strathcona campaigns, is revealing in itself. The 1980s housing debate, by contrast, is rarely contextualized in terms of its enduring impact on participants or the older Chinese community in Vancouver. While earlier campaigns were rooted in a particular place, the 1980s controversy involved a very transient group, and the perspective of the investors and speculative homeowners is much harder to extricate.<sup>72</sup>

The fallout of the monster home debate had profound implications for the Chinese who identified with the politics and culture of Vancouver’s historic Chinatown. Chinese Canadians whose families had been in Canada for generations had to confront what it meant to be Chinese in Vancouver as new migrants, propelled by concerns about their economic and political futures in Hong Kong, moved to a city that had long been a site of racial conflict and therefore self-definition in the Chinese-Canadian imagination. As Colleen Leung’s positionality reveals, there was a dual impulse at play: concern for the apparent racism that fuelled the housing debate, mixed with discomfort about displays of wealth and liberalism that were in excess of what conservative Canadians considered appropriate. The housing debates in Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale disrupted the narratives of good behaviour, community-based activism, and loyal citizenry that had been forged, in part, by the historic campaigns to save Strathcona. The migrants of the 1980s were loyal to different pursuits: their family’s welfare and global economic interests. The apparent lack of any sense of community among new migrants or curiosity about Vancouver’s heritage affronted residents in Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy and further separated newcomers culturally from the Chinese community defined by earlier housing battles in Strathcona. The lack of diasporic solidarity during the housing debates of the 1980s suggests that the power of ethnicity to bind members of a diaspora together crumbles in the face of both localized politics and globalized capital flows. The idea of an ethnic diaspora, bound by nostalgic dreams of the homeland, suppresses the significance of local experiences and local histories in the fostering of community identities and therefore supports imagined linkages over the concrete evidence of splintered and divergent diasporic life.

### *Acknowledgement*

This article was researched and written with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Trudeau Foundation. The author gratefully acknowledges the generosity of all those interviewed for this work as well as the helpful feedback and support received from Franca Iacovetta, Jordan Stanger-Ross, Kelly Cairns, and two anonymous reviewers.

### *Notes*

1. Peter Kwok, interview with the author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 10 June 2010.
2. David Ley, "Between Europe and Asia: The Case of the Missing Sequoias," *Ecumene* 2, no. 2 (1995): 185–210. Ley has significantly reworked his original thesis, pointing to the economic issues at stake in migration from Hong Kong to Vancouver in the pre-Hong Kong handover decade. See his *Millionaire Migrants: Trans-Pacific Lines* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
3. Adam McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842–1949," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 8 (May 1999): 319.
4. Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.
5. Linda Bash, Nina Glick-Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nation Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994).
6. See Rainer Münz and Rainer Ohliger, "Diasporas and Ethnic Migrants in Twentieth-Century Europe: A Comparative Perspective," in *Diasporas and Ethnic Migrants: Germany, Israel and Post-Soviet Successor States in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Rainer Münz and Rainer Ohliger (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 4. Similarly, Anthony Reid argues that classic definitions of diaspora that include religious characteristics, involuntary migration, and the establishment of some kind of authority structure (military or governmental) do not work for Chinese migrants because "they were defined not by religious or cultural exclusiveness (they spoke many languages) but by being subjects of a powerful state." See "Introduction," *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific*, ed. Anthony Reid. Vol. 16 of *The Pacific World: Lands, Peoples and History of the Pacific, 1500–1900* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), xv.
7. Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora," *Paragraph* 17, no. 1 (1994): 207.
8. David Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), xvi.
9. Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 74.
10. Paul Yee counts twenty-six clan associations and twelve Old Country home-district organizations in Vancouver's Chinatown by 1923. Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988), 47.
11. Hayne Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown 1960–1980: A Community Perspective," *New Scholars, New Visions in Canadian Studies* 3, no. 1 (1998): 3. Jo-Anne Lee underscores the diversity of Strathcona in the pre-war and immediate postwar periods. She notes that in a study of the neighbourhood conducted in 1957, only 30 per cent of the population was identified as Chinese. The neighbourhood still bore the strong influence of earlier migrant groups from Italy and Eastern Europe. Jo-Anne Lee, "Gender, Ethnicity and Hybrid Forms of Community-Based Urban Activism in Vancouver, 1957–1978: The Strathcona Story Revisited," *Gender, Place and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2007): 389.
12. Mary Chan, "Mary Chan's Story, November 2005," trans. Jonathan Lau, transcription Xiao Ping Li and Jo-Anne Lee, *West Coast Line* 58 (2008): 41.
13. Until the 1970s, the majority of migrants to Canada came from Hong Kong, but there were also significant numbers from Taiwan and, by the 1990s, the People's Republic of China. Peter Li, "The Rise and Fall of Chinese Immigration to Canada: Newcomers from Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China and Mainland China, 1980–2000," *International Migration* 43, no. 3 (2005): 2. David Lai describes the new migrants as "urban dwellers, who did not need Old Chinatown as a transitional place." Lai, *Chinatowns*, 279.
14. Data tabulated from the 2006 census, accessed 9 June 2009, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/ethnicorigin/vancouver.cfm>.
15. Albert Fok (chair of the Chinatown Business Improvement Association), interview with the author, 1 May 2009.
16. Wing Ching Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver 1945–1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 99.
17. Presentation to the Strathcona Residents Association by Shirley Chan, 2 May 2007.
18. Chinese residents made up 75 per cent of the community's population by the 1970s so that the area became known as "China Valley." Ng, *Chinese in Vancouver*, 97.
19. Folder 2, file 583-C-6, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
20. Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 5.
21. *Ibid.*, 4.
22. Bessie Lee, "Bessie Lee's Story," trans. Jo-Anne Lee, *Active Geographies: Women & Struggle on the Left Coast* 58 (2008): 44.
23. Hayne Wai describes their residences as "bachelor homes," "a type of communal household, which had been forced upon them as the *Exclusion Act* and the War in Asia prevented any reunion with their families." Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 5.
24. "History of Strathcona," folder 2, file 583-C-6, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
25. "Pancakes, Seaweed Too, Rice Wine and I Love You," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 February 1961.
26. "They Will Be Eating Cakes and Writing Poems to Moon," *Province*, 5 October 1960.
27. The idea of a self-contained village had important repercussions. As Nann himself observed, those who were not born in the "village" were not tied to its "traditions" and therefore had no vested interest in fighting redevelopment. Richard Nann, "Why Chinese Oppose Redevelopment," *Chinatown News* 8, no. 7 (3 December 1960), 5.
28. *Ibid.*, 7.
29. Ng, *Chinese in Vancouver*, 98.
30. "History of Strathcona," folder 2, file 583-C-6, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
31. Letter reprinted in *Chinatown News*, 18 February 1963.
32. Quoted in Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 6.
33. Reprinted in *Chinatown News*, 3 October 1960.
34. Jo-Anne Lee, "Gender, Ethnicity," 395.
35. Shirley Chan (CEO, Building Opportunities with Business), interview with the author, 1 May 2009.
36. Jo-Anne Lee (professor, Department of Women's Studies, University of Victoria), interview with the author, 26 May 2009. See also Jo-Anne Lee, "Gender, Ethnicity," 395.
37. Folder 2, "An Overview of the Strathcona Experience with Urban Renewal by a Participant," 1971, 23, file 585-C-3, MSS 734, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
38. Ng notes that in 1961–62, the Chinese Benevolent Association resisted demands from a "younger generation of postwar immigrants" to admit



## *Chinatown and Monster Homes*

- representatives from their group. Ng, *Chinese in Vancouver*, 4.
39. *Ibid.*, 109.
  40. Hayne Wai calls the Strathcona Rehabilitation Project, begun in 1971, "a model for national programs of urban rehabilitation." Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 14. Jo-Anne Lee contends that the campaign to save Strathcona is evidence of a grassroots campaign that was energized by the activities of ethnic minority women. Jo-Anne Lee, "Gender, Ethnicity," 397.
  41. Quoted in Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 9. "Chinatown's Opportunity," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 August 1961.
  42. SPOTA to Vancouver City Council, 5 May 1976, folder 4, "Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee, 1974–1977," file 585-C-3, City of Vancouver Archives.
  43. The proposed schemes eventually failed when the federal government withdrew its proposed funding in 1972.
  44. Folder 4, "The Strathcona Story," file 583-C-6, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives.
  45. For an interesting study of the nature of Asian Canadian activism, see Xiaoping Li, *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).
  46. Roberta MacFarlane, interview with the author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 15 June 2010.
  47. Ley, "Between Europe and Asia," 191.
  48. Peter Kwok, interview.
  49. The 2009–2010 debates over "monster homes" in Surrey relate to the construction of large homes to accommodate extended families. Mainstream media outlets present the issue along racialized lines, "Monster Surrey House Is Forcing Her to Move," *Province*, 1 November 2009, p.1.
  50. Katharyne Mitchell, "Conflicting Geographies of Democracy and the Public Sphere in Vancouver, British Columbia," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s. 22, no. 2 (1997): 168.
  51. Maureen Thakray to Carole Taylor, 5 August 1988, folder 7, file 937-E-4, City Council and Office of the City Clerk Fonds, Public Record Series #62, City of Vancouver Archives.
  52. Cited in Ley, "Between Europe and Asia," 200.
  53. Barry Hersh (founder of Westside Builders Property Association), interview with the author, 22 June 2010, Vancouver, British Columbia.
  54. For instance, in 2009, the City of Vancouver and Proponent Group (a community organization) submitted a nomination package to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to have Vancouver's Chinatown designated a National Historic Site of Canada.
  55. Mitchell, "Conflicting Geographies," 172.
  56. Anu Sahota, "Ideas of Home," accessed 15 June 2009, [http://www.cbc.ca/asianheritage/2007/05/post\\_1.html](http://www.cbc.ca/asianheritage/2007/05/post_1.html).
  57. Katharyne Mitchell and David Ley both offer similar analyses in their studies of the monster home debates. Mitchell, "Conflicting Geographies," 172; and Ley, "Between Europe and Asia," 198.
  58. Folder 7, file 937-E-4, City Council and Office of the City Clerk Fonds, Public Record Series #62, City of Vancouver Archives.
  59. David Carrigg, "Former City Planner Remembers Vancouver's Monster-House War," *Province*, 7 December 2006.
  60. Walking tour with resident of Shaughnessy, 15 June 2010.
  61. Mitchell, "Conflicting Geographies," 172.
  62. The astronaut lifestyle refers to elite migrants who maintain multiple households on the basis of calculated decisions about the locations of the best places to work, play, educate their children, and eventually retire. Sahota, "Ideas of Home."
  63. Albert Fok, interview.
  64. "The Hong Kong Influx," broadcast 13 March 1990, accessed 14 June 2009, <http://archives.cbc.ca/society/immigration/clips/9250/>.
  65. Wing Chung Ng made similar observations about the ability of community organizations to represent the increasingly diverse Chinese community. He singles out the Chinese Cultural Centre in particular. Ng, *Chinese in Vancouver*, 3.
  66. The decline was the subject of much media attention. See "Distance, Parking Keep Chinatown Visitors Away," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 June 2001.
  67. "Strathcona," accessed 7 June 2010, <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/census/2006/localareas/strathcona.pdf>.
  68. "Toronto Remains Canada's Most Expensive City, But It Has Nothing on Moscow. Survey Finds," *National Post*, 19 June 2007.
  69. "Strathcona", accessed 7 June 2010.
  70. John Mackie, "It's a Buyers' Feeding Frenzy," *Vancouver Sun*, 13 April 2007.
  71. Wai, "Vancouver Chinatown," 32.
  72. Barry Hersh, interview.