

Chinatown, immigrant haven, fights for its future

Neighborhood confronts a construction boom

By [Maria Sacchetti](#) / Globe Staff / April 01, 2015

A few blocks from the famous Chinatown gate, past gleaming new high-rises and bustling shops, immigrants recently waged a battle to stay in a graffiti-scarred rowhouse. Paint corroded on the ceiling, the heat sputtered, and fissures criss-crossed the red-brick facade.

But the tenants feared that if they left their rundown home, they might never return to this neighborhood that has long been a haven for new immigrants. Here, grocers, hairdressers, butchers, lawyers, and bankers all speak their language.

“Having a home is really important,” said Pei Ying Yu, one of four residents of 103 Hudson St. who were forced to relocate earlier this year — she hopes temporarily — so the new landlord can make repairs. “We feel like we’re losing our home.”

Boston’s last immigrant enclave in the heart of the city is fighting for its life amid a construction boom, and the shift is setting off a mad scramble to preserve one of the largest Chinatowns in the United States.

A newly formed Chinatown Land Trust is trying to buy red-brick rowhouses like 103 Hudson and set them aside for working families. The Chinese Historical Society of New England is pinpointing buildings to submit to the National Register of Historic Places. And the City of Boston called a meeting last month to try to save the rowhouses. “The city is committed to preserving Chinatown,” said Sheila Dillon, Boston’s housing chief and director of the Department of Neighborhood Development. “It’s a wonderful neighborhood and the city is better for it.”

Some say Asians are a minority for the first time in Chinatown’s history — even though Asians are one of the fastest-growing groups in Massachusetts. Some residents have also criticized the city for green-lighting luxury high rises nearby that are driving up housing prices in Chinatown.

Andrew Leong, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the Boston Public Health Commission said in separate reports that the population of white people grew faster than that of Asians in Chinatown from 2000 to 2010. Now, they say, Asians make up roughly 46 percent of the 12,800 residents.

Leong said the shift shows Chinatown following a national trend: Working immigrants are being pushed out of downtown neighborhoods close to work and public transportation, while students, doctors, and others move in.

“We’re slowly being gentrified out of existence,” said Leong, an Asian American studies professor who coauthored a 2013 report on Chinatowns. “You’re talking about displacement of those kinds of people that have rented from these unattractive units for decades.”

Other observers, though, say Asians are still the majority of Chinatown’s residents, though their view of the neighborhood is more compact. The Boston Redevelopment Authority, the city’s planning and economic development arm, says Asians made up 77 percent of the neighborhood’s 4,400 residents in 2010.

Tunney Lee, a professor emeritus at MIT and a former BRA official, says Boston's Chinatown remains strong, fortified by hundreds of units of affordable housing with long wait lists. He said Chinatown remains a political and social hub, with nonprofits, schools, and a lively business district that attracts people from all over for dim sum and New Year's parades.

"The life is in the neighborhood, not just streets," said Lee, who grew up in Chinatown and later ran MIT's department of urban studies and planning. "The kids go to school. They go to the gym. They go to the swimming pool. . . . That's the life of the city. And Chinatown is full of life."

Preserving Chinatown was a major goal in 1990 — the first and last time the City of Boston and Chinatown's neighborhood groups published a joint blueprint for the neighborhood's future. They launched the effort after residents rebelled against plans for a hospital parking garage. After losing over half the neighborhood's land to the hospital and two highways, Chinatown was fed up.

Instead of allowing the parking garage, the city and the neighborhood created an ambitious plan to "protect Chinatown" from real estate speculation. They called for expanding businesses and housing into nearby areas and preserving Chinatown's history.

Boston's Chinatown first emerged in the late 1800s as a hub for immigrants who faced intense poverty and discrimination in the United States. Congress severely curtailed Chinese labor migration for over six decades and barred most of those here from bringing their families to join them. After a major immigration raid in Chinatown in 1903, immigrants banded together. They formed family associations to help one another find jobs and housing. Later, nonprofits fought for better living conditions.

But starting in the 1990s, the city's resurgence attracted new developers. Skyscrapers sprouted, such as the luxury Millennium Tower, with its \$37.5 million penthouse.

In 2010, 47 percent of Chinatown's housing was considered affordable. With the buildings under construction now, city officials say that share will slip to 36 percent. City officials say newer immigrants are bypassing Chinatown for suburbs such as Malden and Quincy.

Chinatown has held some ground: Boston has created nearly 500 new units of affordable housing in the neighborhood, despite federal budget cuts, in part with financing from the luxury developers, who must contribute to a city housing fund if they do not include low-income housing in their projects.

Chinatown also reclaimed a vacant stretch on Hudson Street where rowhouses were razed for the I-93 Central Artery in the 1950s. When the Big Dig later pushed the highway underground, the lot sat empty.

Some had hoped to rebuild the lost piece of the neighborhood. Instead, crews are finishing One Greenway, a mix of 217 luxury rentals, 95 affordable rentals, and 51 affordable condominiums.

A lottery will determine who moves in, so there is no certainty that it will restore places for Asians who once lived there.

Down the street from One Greenway, Pei Ying Yu stuffed her belongings into garbage bags in late January at 103 Hudson St.

The 66-year-old home care worker moved here in 2013 a few years after her son brought her and her husband to America. She tried living near her son in Atlanta, but felt isolated because hardly anyone spoke her language. She found her bearings in 103 Hudson St. Making just \$11.40 an hour caring for elderly immigrants, she said she could not afford more.

But the owners, Elizabeth Wing and Youn “Harry” Chung, let the building fall into such disrepair that the city went to court to force them to fix it.

The fledgling Chinatown Land Trust offered to buy 103 Hudson, but on Jan. 16, the day of the receivership court hearing, the siblings sold the building for \$480,000 to First Suffolk LLC. The siblings did not return calls from the Globe.

Hours after the sale, tenants said, First Suffolk’s agent, Timothy O’Callaghan, allegedly barged into one apartment through an open door and announced that the building had been sold. Without warning, they said, he later removed the second-floor stove and drilled holes in the walls and ceilings.

O’Callaghan said in brief remarks that tenants had to leave so he could make emergency repairs. He said they would be allowed to return at the same rent — \$700 to \$800 a month.

Tenants are skeptical. In late January, O’Callaghan moved the tenants to a hotel outside of Chinatown. He has since moved two of them to a nicer hotel in Quincy — but they say it’s far from public transportation.

The tenants still hope to return to Chinatown but advocates say there is no guarantee. Last year, the Chinese Progressive Association helped 27 families avoid eviction.

But in 2012, the city evicted 40 to 50 tenants from 25 Harrison Ave. because [the city feared the](#) filthy, rat-infested building would collapse. They were moved to public housing in South Boston, where they have since [struggled](#).

Members of the Chinese Progressive Association said they will march Tuesday from 103 Hudson St. to City Hall to advocate for tenants’ rights, just before a City Council hearing on the high cost of housing and the foreclosure crisis in Boston.

Suzanne Lee, a land trust board member, said she fears that developers will chip away at Chinatown if it is not preserved.

Lee remembers how her own father, whom she did not meet until she was 11 because of federal immigration laws, felt at home in Chinatown.

“This is how people looked at Chinatown, as their home,” said Lee, a two-time City Council candidate and the former principal of the neighborhood’s Josiah Quincy Elementary School. “This is why for me preserving it is so important. We cannot let it just disappear like other cities.”