

Master of Science in Historic Preservation

Capstone Write-up

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From December 2023 to October 2024, I worked on the *Where is Denver's Chinatown? Stories Remembered Reclaimed Reimagined* exhibit at History Colorado. This process included historical research, exhibit design, and team communication. The exhibit opened on October 9, 2024 and will close on August 9, 2025.



Opening Night of the *Where is Denver's Chinatown?* Exhibit.

Historical Research

Design Studio *The Suppressed Interior*

I worked as a research intern for Assistant Professor Leyuan Li in October 2023. His undergraduate studio class, *The Suppressed Interior*, was studying Denver's Chinatown and I was brought on as a class assistant to check the accuracy of student research. In preparation, I did extensive historical research. This included reading available articles online, watching an *I Am Denver* documentary that interviewed former residents of Denver's Chinatown, scanning historic newspaper clippings from the Denver Public Library, and reading a manuscript containing a first-person account of the October 31, 1880 Chinatown riot.



Research Booklets produced by *The Suppressed Interior* class, December 2023.

Central Presbyterian Church National Register Amendment

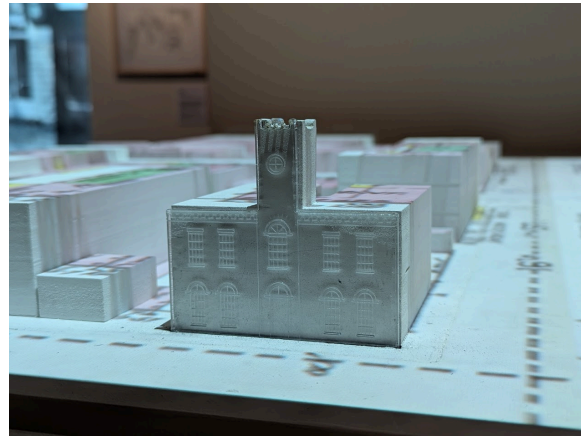
I also worked on a National Register Amendment for the Central Presbyterian Church in Denver. This Amendment adds the history of a Chinese School, where church members taught Chinese immigrants English, to the current National Register Nomination for the church. Todd Matuszewicz and I worked on the Amendment with Damian Pechota (History Colorado Staff) to add the Chinese School, which was located in the basement, to the nomination. The research for this Amendment included perusing meeting notes and membership records at Central Presbyterian Church. The Amendment was approved by the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places on August 23, 2024.



Central Presbyterian Church at 1660 North Sherman Street, Denver.

Historic Model for *Where is Denver's Chinatown?* Exhibit

Finally, I was the researcher for a historic model of Denver's Chinatown used in the *Where is Denver's Chinatown* exhibit. Because the area is not well documented, I used the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps to make a general massing model of the area. This required learning how to read all information provided in Sanborn maps, including building height, materiality, and the location of windows. Using this information as a reference, I matched the buildings with known historic photographs of the area. This information was used to model out the facades of some buildings. Due to time and size constraints, these facades were changed to etchings on acrylic panels.



Images of the Historic Model at the History Colorado Exhibit.

This research method which was used to create the *Where Is Denver's Chinatown?* historic model is now being used by researchers Jeffery Chin and Miho Asada in Los Angeles to create a 3D model of part of Historic Little Tokyo for a film.



Linework from select Exhibit acrylic panels.

Research for the exhibit also included extensive talks with cousins Linda Lung and Heather Clifton (nee Lung), two descendants of residents of Denver's Chinatown. Their interest in genealogy and family history are the basis for much of the exhibit. We often discussed their childhoods, their Grandmother Amoy Lung, and the family photos they would bring to the museum. These discussions lead to much of the "What was on the Menu?" section about restaurants run by the community and the "Who Lived Here? The Tongs in Denver" section about the groups Chinese Americans formed to protect themselves. The interior re-creation consists of photos from the Lung family albums, traditional clothing from their closets, and personal objects they loaned to the museum.

The Lung family also communicated with the Chin family, a family related to Chin Lin Sou (1836-1894). One of the earliest Chinese immigrants to Colorado, Chin Lin Sou was an important leader in the Chinese American community. He was a successful

businessman well received by the larger Denver community and is even featured in a stained glass panel in the Colorado State Capitol Building. The exhibit was able to feature some family photos and a Central City Opera House chair that was dedicated to him.

The Chin and Lung family histories were supplemented with an area survey done by Tom & Laurie Simmons, funded by Colorado Asian Pacific United (CAPU).

Exhibit Design

Interior Gallery Space

For the *Where is Denver's Chinatown* exhibit, Leyuan Li and I designed the museum's gallery space. After reviewing the proposed floor plan, we redesigned it for better flow and spatial organization. Although well intentioned, the original plan did not give enough room to display CAPU's current efforts to remember Chinatown or CU Denver's efforts to reimagine a future Chinatown. The original circulation plan also had multiple dead ends, however, all these issues were addressed by the redesign.

The museum wanted to feature a re-creation of an interior in the exhibit. To do so, we created a central structure within the gallery. Inside the structure is the re-creation of a conceivable living room for a family's dwelling in Chinatown. There is a window in the front of the structure which is to pique people's curiosity about what is inside. The window also creates a striking visual for the exhibit, for it allows people to look through the structure to a mural in the back of the exhibit, as if the visitor is looking through history.

The orientation of the structure creates a subtle entrance into the space, directing visitors to the historic part of the exhibit first and then leading them through the historical progression, although I have seen many people ignore it. This structure also provides

more wall space for information and artifacts. The silhouette of the center structure mimics that of historic buildings seen in Denver.



Center Structure and Entrance to the Exhibit.

Graphic Design Identity

We also worked with graphic designer Trevor Motzko on the graphic identity of the exhibit. Motzko had been a former student of *The Suppressed Interior* class. His design included large vinyl supergraphic prints for most of the walls and multiple panel layouts. There was a “cut corner” motif throughout the design to symbolize pages. Unfortunately, part of his design was simplified due to time and budget. However, the panels still have a cut corner and the orange panels separate the information displayed in the exhibit into chapters.

Team Communication

I attended monthly meetings with History Colorado, Colorado Asian Pacific United (CAPU), and descendants of Chinatown residents during the development and production of the exhibit. During these meetings, I presented design options for the floor plan and graphic identity of the exhibit and gathered feedback on preferred elements, potential issues, and unexpected requirements of the design.

It was necessary to involve the Chinese-American community in this exhibit. Most of our information came from the Lung and Chin families preserving their own history. Moreover, the community was wary of how their history would be presented due to previous experiences. I believe it was essential to involve the CAPU team. CAPU is a trusted community organization and a feasible intermediary between the community and the museum. Fortunately, the team at History Colorado was extremely open to communication and the descendants had a very positive experience sharing their thoughts, history, and artifacts.

Lessons Learned

After three months of the exhibit being on display at History Colorado, there are a few points for further consideration. First, at the physical exhibit, the models received more wear and tear than expected. *The Suppressed Interior* student model that was given to History Colorado now has a protective bonnet on it for protection. The acrylic facades on the historic model have all been rearranged and one has been broken in half. The flimsiness of the connection between the model and the acrylic is due to a proposed interactive element of the model that is not being utilized. It would have been better to secure the acrylic facades in a way that did not take public interaction into account.

Second, student Scope of Work documents need to be honored to a higher degree. Two CU Denver College of Architecture and Planning students were contracted by History Colorado, both of whom had previously been students of *The Suppressed Interior* class. Although one student's SoW was honored, the other student's workload was greatly expanded. He was hired to repair *The Suppressed Interior* model and to build the historic model. However, he ended up having to help extensively with building the general exhibit. This was not in his Scope of Work and led to major delays during the production of the historic model. This situation escalated into a number of issues with the historic model that all needed to be resolved in the span of two weeks before opening. These difficulties of this experience have given me insights and skills in project management and supervision.

Third, avoiding crunch-time during production would have been good for the accuracy of the exhibit. Due to limited time during the production of the *Where is Denver's Chinatown?* exhibit, aspects of the exhibit design were cut. Many elements were simplified or not present at the opening of the exhibit. Text for the exhibit was posted in English, Simplified Chinese, and Spanish: however when the exhibit opened, three panels accidentally contained the same text under the Chinese section. Due to other exhibits opening at History Colorado, this was only recently fixed.



Three text panels with the same Chinese text.

Conclusion

History Colorado's *Where is Denver's Chinatown?* exhibit is an impressive display of Community-Institution collaboration that was a positive experience for the parties involved. The museum centered the voices of Chinatown descendants and their families. Community members were also compensated for their work by the museum.

Work on this exhibit is being discussed across the country at several conferences. I have presented at APIAHiP Forum in Seattle, Washington, and at the Saving Places conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In April, I will be presenting at the Colorado-Wyoming Association of Museums Annual Meeting in Greeley, Colorado.

Moving forward, I am the Assistant Curator for a CU Denver lecture series called *Becoming Chinatown*. These three lectures will bring together scholars and activists from across North America to speak about the issues Chinatowns face, the work currently going on in North American Chinatowns, and the possible future for Denver's Chinatown.



The first *Becoming Chinatown* lecture: (Re)organizing Chinatown.