

BECOMING CHINATOWN

Talks and Performances
on Possible Futures

Organized by
Leyuan Li at the
University of Colorado Denver

February 27
March 13
April 10, 2025

Chinatowns in the United States are diminishing. Hindered by social biases and political injustices, the multicultural and multigenerational communities in Chinatowns, such as those in Manhattan and Philadelphia, face the persistent threat of displacement due to political unrest, racial discrimination, and relentless gentrification. These challenges have even led to the erasure of some of the historically prosperous Chinatowns, including the one in Denver, which was considered the largest in the Interior West and is nowadays

largely forgotten by the public. Marked by conflicts over labor, immigration, culture, race, and identity, the future of Chinatowns remains caught in a constant influx of environmental, social, and political dissonance that destabilizes the prospect of a healthy, shared community for the constituencies inhabiting within. What are the possible futures for Chinatowns amidst gentrification emergencies and collective crises, particularly in cities where Chinatown is no longer a physical reality but endures in more conceptual forms? What novel

design practices address the questions of identities and politics around Chinatown? Building upon the existing efforts to unearth Denver's historical Chinatown, how can the reimagining of its future Chinatown draw inspiration from design experiences and practices in other Chinatowns across the nation?

In response to these questions, the performance/workshop series *Becoming Chinatown: Talks and Performances on Possible Futures* invites students, artists, architects, designers, urbanists,

community organizers, and the public to rethink and reimagine the future of Chinatowns in the contemporary built environment. Organized in partnership with Colorado Asian Pacific United and History Colorado, a series of performances, workshops, and roundtable discussions are hosted at the Fishbowl Gallery at the University of Colorado Denver that interrogates ideals and realities of Chinatowns in the United States. Formats of design outcomes and conversations will be displayed in the gallery as the *Talks and Performances* continue.

(Re)organizing Chinatown

February 27, 2025

This panel brings together four community organizers and activists to discuss the challenges and opportunities involved in organizing events and programs that address socio-political injustices while enhancing the cultural identities of Chinatowns across the United States. Focusing on various placemaking efforts, such as interactive kiosks, historical markers, block parties, and community-led exhibitions, this discussion will explore the strategies used by community organizations to engage diverse constituents in advocating for a vibrant future.

Panelists

Sophie Chien, Joie Ha, Yin Kong, Bz Zhang

Moderator

Samantha Martin

Sophie Weston Chien is a designer-organizer.

She is a practitioner and an educator who builds community power through social and physical infrastructure to ensure people can shape their own spaces. She views the disciplines of design and the roles of designers as sites of continuous self-construction. Sophie's practice draws on her training as an architectural and landscape designer, planner, and political organizer. This work integrates her experience in the built environment with writing, textile art, and graphic design. As a designer-organizer, her work builds spatial and social relationships.

Sophie is a Chancellor's Post-doctoral Fellow and Lecturer at the University of Colorado Boulder, Environmental Design Program. She is one-half of the collaboration just practice, a leader in the Design As Protest Collective and Dark Matter U. Multi-racial and liberation-oriented, her work with these collectives aims to infiltrate institutions in order to proliferate anti-racist design methods and research.

Joie Ha is the daughter of refugees and has been an organizer for minority communities in Colorado for over 15 years. She holds a B.A. in Anthropology and an M.A. in Development Practice, focusing on holistic mental health treatment for Vietnamese refugees. Joie has served in Malaysia as a Community Development Officer and in Cambodia as a researcher regarding how hip-hop can create fictive kin for youth. Joie currently serves as Executive Director for Colorado Asian Pacific United, which works to unearth, elevate, and preserve little known Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) narratives, and is on path to opening the first AANHPI history and culture museum in the Rocky Mountain region.

Yin Kong 邝海音 is a community-based designer and curator living and working in Manhattan's Chinatown. Think!Chinatown is the culmination of her work in

urban design, museum, culinary & cultural instruction, and community engagement. Previously an Urban Curator of the Dashilar Project, she consulted a municipal agency of Beijing on urban revitalization strategies in the city's historic hutong core. She also spent time teaching at the Black Sesame Kitchen in Beijing and onboard Semester at Sea. She loves sharing Thomas Jefferson facts which she picked up at her time working at Monticello. Yin holds a Masters of Architecture, Urban Design from the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London and a Bachelors of Arts, Urban Studies from Columbia University. Her work has been presented at the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2016 and the Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture 2007 & 2009. In 2019 she was a fellow of both the New Museum's IdeasCity and Coro's Neighborhood Leadership programs. In 2020 she was a David Prize finalist.

Bz Zhang 张迪 is an architect, artist, organizer, and educator from Lenapehoking (纽约 New York), 安徽 Anhui, and 山东 Shandong, currently based in Tovaangar (洛杉矶 Los Angeles). They are a core organizer with the Design As Protest Collective and Dark Matter U, a member of the LA Chinatown Community Land Trust, and a project manager with the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, where they work with communities toward environmental justice through design, construction, and stewardship of public green spaces. Their design and research practice wonders aloud about representations of violence and the violence of representations by asking questions both using and about disciplinary tools of art and architecture. Bz is a licensed architect in California with degrees from UC Berkeley and Brown University.

Samantha Martin is a graduate of Wright State University with a MA in Public History. She joined History Colorado in 2023 as the Temple Buell Associate Curator of

Architecture. Samantha is responsible for collecting, preserving, and sharing contextual materials that tell the unique story of Colorado's built environment.



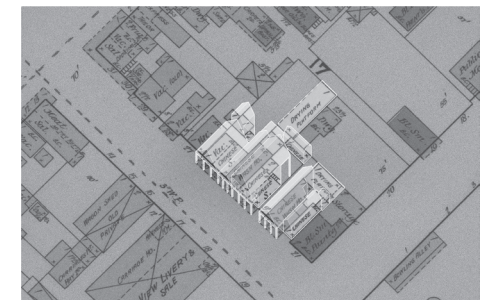
Sophie Weston Chien: DMUxLisbon, 2022. Photo credit: Shawhin Roudbari



Joie Ha: Plaque Removal, 2022. Image courtesy Colorado Asian Pacific United.



Yin Kong: Block Party organized by Think!Chinatown. Photo credit: Cindy Trinh



Bz Zhang: Study from *In Case of Fire 万一火灾*, digital collage, 2023. Reference: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from San Rafael, Marin County, California, 1887.

(Un)settling Chinatown

March 13, 2025

This panel brings together three art and architectural historians to recast Chinatown and its physical realities into a larger conceptual framework. From a Chinese folk art museum in Chicago in the face of multiple forms of displacement threats, to the material and knowledge circulations mediated by both Chinese labor and iron roads, this panel contributes to the talk and performance series by putting Chinatown into historical perspective, while probing perceived binaries including those of high and low, subject and object. It invites reflection on the possibilities for reimagining Chinatowns as dynamic spaces of cultural resilience and future potential.

Panelists

An Tairan, Chenchen Yan, Zhiyan Yang

Moderator

Sarah Hearne

Artifact Table sponsored by History Colorado

An Tairan is an architectural historian of the long nineteenth century whose work investigates the material processes, environmental impacts, and epistemological ramifications of human research activities. An completed his Ph.D. in History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University (2024), where he is currently a Postgraduate Research Associate. His dissertation examines how observatories, field stations, and expedition outposts—often conceived as neutral sites of inquiry—unwittingly became instruments of power in mid-to-late nineteenth-century Italy. For his dissertation work, he received a Citation of Special Recognition of the 2023 Graham Foundation Carter Manny Writing Award.

An holds a bachelor's degree in Urban Planning from Peking University and an MDes in History and Philosophy of Design with distinction from Harvard GSD. His articles have appeared in publications including *Lapis, Log, e-flux Architecture, Pidgin, Time+Architecture* 时代建筑, etc. His research has been supported by grants from the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Lemmermann Foundation for Research in Rome, Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, the High Meadows Environmental Institute of Princeton University, as well as by a Harvard University Frederick Sheldon Traveling Fellowship. He was a Research Associate for the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (Shenzhen), and, more recently, assists with the Sterling Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale as Curatorial Research Coordinator.

Chenchen Yan is a PhD candidate in History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University. Her research explores processes of “becoming Chinese” of objects that were introduced into American cultural institutions around the turn of the twentieth century, during the same period when Chinese immigrants were discriminated against and excluded from the US. Her dissertation, “Becoming

Chinese: Taxonomic Anomalies and the Transformation of the American Cultural Landscape,” examines how these objects—ranging from imperial treasures to specimens of flora and fauna, from archaeological spoils to rare books—defied taxonomic parameters and disciplinary boundaries, resulting in not only the invention of Chinese architecture but also a corollary and unexpected shift in the epistemic structures of discourse on art and architecture in the US. Her work has been supported by the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Society of Architectural Historians, and the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies.

Zhiyan Yang is an architectural historian whose research spans the art and cultural history of the built environment in East Asia in the long twentieth century, the intersection of non-Western traditions and modernism, the theory and historiography of Chinese architecture, contemporary art and visual culture in East Asia, and diasporic architecture. His work includes a book-in-progress, *Culture in Revolution: Contemporary Chinese Architecture and Its Public Discourse, 1978-2008*, which draws on a diverse range of built, visual, and textual evidence to explore the cultural shifts in post-Mao Chinese architecture.

Yang earned a B.A. in Art History from Sarah Lawrence College and completed his Ph.D. in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago. He served as a postdoctoral fellow at the Princeton-Mellon Initiative in Architecture, Urbanism, and Humanities at Princeton University and is currently the Harper Schmidt Fellow in Society of Fellows and Collegiate Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago.

Sarah Hearne is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver. She is an architectural historian, educator, and curator. Her background includes training as an architect in Australia and several years practicing

in offices including Ateliers Jean Nouvel in Copenhagen and Paris. Sarah received her Ph.D. in Architectural History at the University of California Los Angeles in 2020 with her dissertation “Other Things Visible on Paper: Architectural Writing and Imaging Craftsmanship 1960-87.” Sarah’s independent work includes an exhibition and symposium on information management and display in contemporary architectural research, titled *Fieldwork* (2015) at the University of Technology Gallery in Sydney. More recently, she was a co-curator on *Schindler House: 100 Years in the Making* (MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 2022), *Architecture Itself and Other Myths of Postmodernism* (Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2018), and the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial with Johnston Marklee for which she co-edited the corresponding catalog, *Make New History*, published by Lars Müller.



An Tairan: “The Chinese Junk Illuminated—The Assault of Arms,” from *The Illustrated London News*, August 2, 1851.



Chenchen Yan: The “Chinese Wall,” an elevated railroad viaduct in central Philadelphia, Broad Street Station, Pennsylvania Railroad. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



Zhiyan Yang: Museum No More: The Lost History of Ling Long and the Politics of Display.

(Re)imagining Chinatown

April 10, 2025

This panel brings together three designer-educators to reimagine Chinatowns through design and storytelling endeavors. It aims to foreground design tools as active agencies contributing to the reimagination of social and spatial contexts of Chinatowns. It asks: how can we reconstruct a spatial narrative that encapsulates the silenced stories of the displaced communities? How can we cultivate a shared repository of design knowledge and expertise to repair cultural identity and reshape the collective milieu for these communities?

Panelists

Xiaoxi Chen, Lily Wong, Linda Zhang

Moderator

Leyuan Li

Other exhibition contributors

Xuanyu Wei, Zihao Zhang, Singwei Ling

Xiaoxi Chen uses architecture as a framework to investigate and articulate critical contemporary cultural, spatial, and political practices. Her work seeks to expand ruptures to affirm political possibilities across disciplines. Her design work has been shown at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, the Andy Warhol Museum, De Young Museum, The Legion of Honor, Moody Center for the Arts, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Currently, Xiaoxi is the Assistant Director of the M.S. of Advanced Architectural Design at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University. She has taught at GSAPP Columbia University, Barnard College, and the Cooper Union.

Lily Chishan Wong, is an architect specialized in spaces and programs for cultural and educational settings, focusing on the relationships between architecture, plant life, and different forms of understanding the environment. Her practice, *beep beep*, based in New York and Miami, is devoted to confronting the urgency of ecological justice and the legacy of colonialism through creating spaces, systems, performances, texts, and media. All of these are grounded on her academic research and upbringing in British-colonial Hong Kong. Lily is currently an assistant professor at the University of Miami School of Architecture in South Florida. She was awarded the Harry der Boghosian Fellowship at Syracuse University in 2022-23 and has taught graduate studios at Columbia University.

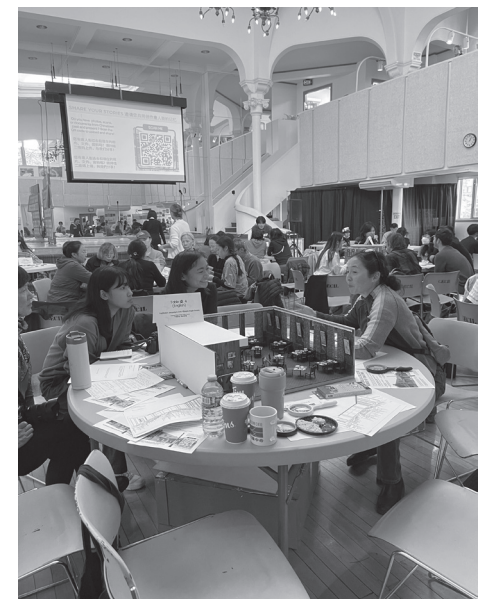
Linda Zhang is an architect (OAA, AIA), interior designer (NCIDQ), creative technologist and educator. She is the founder of Studio Pararaum / Para Lab and an assistant professor at University of Waterloo School of Architecture. Her spatial practice and research supports community ownership and anti-displacement through architectural co-design. Since she returned to Toronto's Chinatown in 2018, she has been documenting Chinatown East and West by 3D scanning the neighbourhoods' built environments. From these 3D models, she creates architectural memory

technologies and co-design platforms to build community power in Chinatown through co-imagination and co-remembering to envision a more generative, affordable and culturally meaningful shared future(s) for all.

Leyuan Li is a Chinese architect, educator, and researcher whose professional and academic work focuses on the agency of the architectural interior in the articulation of spaces and societies. He has practiced architecture internationally at OMA and SOM before founding his practice, Office for Roundtable, a design collective exploring different forms and events of sharing. Li is organizer and curator of *Becoming Chinatown: Workshops and Performances on Possible Futures*. He is an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Colorado Denver, and has taught at the Rice School of Architecture and the University of Houston. His work has been exhibited at the History Colorado Center in Denver, the 9th Bi-City Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism in Shenzhen, and the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. Most recently, he was awarded the 2024 AIA/ACSA Housing Design Education Award.



Xiaoxi Chen, Lily Wong: Moonrise: Embodying the Mid-Autumn Festival, University of Miami, September 2024. Image credit: Benny Rebecca



Linda Zhang: Planting Imagination, 2023.



Leyuan Li: "Where is Denver's Chinatown" Exhibition, Image credit: Jesse Kuroiwa

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Colorado Asian Pacific United

Installation

Max Bravo (Studio Everyone)

Graphic Identity

Julio Correa Estrada, Kaming Lee

Funding Support

CU Denver Inclusive Excellence Initiative Grant

CU President Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Grant

CU Timmerhaus Fund Ambassadors