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## Neighboring Development, Distant Goals: Competing Visions for Philadelphia's Chinatown North/Callowhill in Light of the Reading Viaduct Redevelopment

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### Abstract

Philadelphia's Chinatown has had a long history of land loss. Projects like the Vine Street Expressway and Philadelphia Convention Center have created contention between Chinatown and outside developers. Most recently, this conflict has come to a head over the proposed redevelopment of the Reading Viaduct, an abandoned rail viaduct from Philadelphia's industrial age. Friends of the Rail Park, a non-profit organization, seeks to transform it into an elevated park, and Phase 1 of the project is located in Chinatown North/Callowhill. This proposal has brought back old hard feelings and created a debate over the true identity of the neighborhood. Rail park proponents want to see a diverse community unified around a modern and high-end park, while Chinatown advocates wants to see an increase in affordable housing and community space. Despite the vast differences in these visions, both sides are poised to make them a reality; the Rail Park is in its final round of fundraising, and Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, a community development corporation in Chinatown, is set to break ground on a mixed-income residential and recreational space this June. With both sides working separately but effectively to realize their visions, development in Chinatown North/Callowhill complicates the traditional gentrification narrative and serves as an example of development without displacement.

### Disciplines

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**Neighboring Development, Distant Goals:**  
Competing Visions for Philadelphia's Chinatown North/Callowhill in Light of the  
Reading Viaduct Redevelopment

Emily Marcus  
University of Pennsylvania  
May 9, 2016

**Abstract**

Philadelphia's Chinatown has had a long history of land loss. Projects like the Vine Street Expressway and Philadelphia Convention Center have created contention between Chinatown and outside developers. Most recently, this conflict has come to a head over the proposed redevelopment of the Reading Viaduct, an abandoned rail viaduct from Philadelphia's industrial age. Friends of the Rail Park, a non-profit organization, seeks to transform it into an elevated park, and Phase 1 of the project is located in Chinatown North/Callowhill. This proposal has brought back old hard feelings and created a debate over the true identity of the neighborhood. Rail park proponents want to see a diverse community unified around a modern and high-end park, while Chinatown advocates wants to see an increase in affordable housing and community space. Despite the vast differences in these visions, both sides are poised to make them a reality; the Rail Park is in its final round of fundraising, and Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, a community development corporation in Chinatown, is set to break ground on a mixed-income residential and recreational space this June. With both sides working separately but effectively to realize their visions, development in Chinatown North/Callowhill complicates the traditional gentrification narrative and serves as an example of development without displacement.

## **1. Introduction**

Philadelphia's Chinatown has a bifurcated identity. It is both a community base for Asian Americans in Philadelphia and a commercial hub for non-residents. This two-sided identity has led to development conflicts between Chinatown advocates and outside forces. Most recently, this conflict has come to a head over the proposed redevelopment of the Reading Viaduct, an abandoned railroad viaduct that may be transformed into an elevated Rail Park in the Callowhill/Chinatown North area. The park's redevelopment has created a clash between the visions of private developers and Chinatown residents over the area's name, demographics, and plans for future development. While Rail Park advocates and private developers seek to create an upscale enclave near the city center, Chinatown residents want more basic needs, like affordable housing and community space. Despite these differences, both sides are on track to achieve their goals, with Friends of the Rail Park pushing forward with the Reading Viaduct redevelopment, and Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation breaking ground on an iconic new community center. While these two groups are working to shape the neighborhood in distinct ways, their separate but adjacent efforts form a sustainable means of development without displacement that complicates the traditional gentrification narrative.

## **2. Background**

### **a. History**

Philadelphia's Chinatown has had a long history of land loss that informs the debate over the Reading Viaduct today. Once Chinese immigrants had successfully formed an ethnic enclave just north of the city center by the mid-1950s, Chinatown

quickly became the target of various urban renewal projects and private developments.<sup>1</sup> In 1962, the Independence Mall project removed a quarter of the homes and businesses on Ninth Street.<sup>2</sup> In 1966, the city government proposed the creation of the Vine Street Expressway, which would transform the twelve-lane street into a covered expressway. This proposal divided the neighborhood and made it less pedestrian-friendly, creating a ‘noose around Chinatown’.<sup>3</sup> It also threatened to destroy of the Holy Redeemer Church and School, a cornerstone of the Chinatown community. Because of Holy Redeemer’s huge presence in the area, the Vine Street Expressway elicited extremely negative responses, and set off the conflict between Chinatown and the rest of the city that still exists today.<sup>4</sup>

With the introduction of the Vine Street Expressway proposal, the Chinatown community began to rally together against its development. In 1966, Chinatown residents held a town meeting and established a committee to fight against the Expressway. In 1969, this organization officially became the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), whose mission was to fight for the needs of Chinatown residents and advocate for equitable development in the area, like affordable housing and community centers.<sup>5</sup> While PCDC became the main voice for the Save Chinatown Movement, younger community members joined the Yellow Seeds, a social justice

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<sup>1</sup> Jian Guan, “Ethnic Consciousness in Philadelphia,” in *Urban Ethnic Encounters: The Spatial Consequences*, ed. Freek Colombjin and Aygen Erdentug, (London: Routledge, 2002), 128.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn E. Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia’s Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Yee, “The Save Chinatown Movement: Surviving against All Odds,” *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Legacies* (2012): 24.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia’s Chinatown*, 73.

<sup>5</sup> “History,” Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, last modified 2013, <http://chinatown-pcdc.org/about/history/>

activist group.<sup>6</sup> Together, they rallied against the Vine Street Expressway, with older residents leading peaceful protests and younger members of the Yellow Seeds physically blocking the construction—all to no avail. The Expressway was later built, demolishing Chinatown homes and businesses in its wake. Since then, numerous proposals have plagued Chinatown, from a baseball stadium, to a casino, to a convention center.<sup>7</sup> While some, like the Vine Street Expressway, have come to fruition, other more recent projects have not.

Even after the construction of the Vine Street Expressway, there was disagreement among Chinatown chroniclers as to the direction and end of this conflict. After the construction of the Vine Street Expressway, PCDC's main focus was to expand Chinatown North, seeing this as their next big development opportunity.<sup>8</sup> They first began by creating plans for an affordable housing complex, Hing Wah Yuen, in the late 1990s. This, coupled with PCDC's relocation to an office across the Vine Street Expressway, helped to anchor the Chinatown community north of Vine Street and transform what had previously been a post-industrial, vacant area into an identifiable part of their neighborhood. The 1999 Comprehensive Urban Design Plan for Chinatown North further defined this area as a part of Chinatown, and PCDC has continued to focus its efforts on this area well into the twenty-first century, particularly on a plan for a new community center at 10<sup>th</sup> and Vine Street.<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission set out to create a comprehensive plan for Chinatown North, which they defined as the area from Sixth

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<sup>6</sup> Yee, "The Save Chinatown Movement," 27.

<sup>7</sup> Jian Guan and J. David Knottnerus, "Chinatown Under Siege: Community Protest and Structural Ritualization Theory," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* (2006): 21.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

Street to Broad Street and Filbert to Spring Garden.<sup>10</sup> However, to many, this area was considered Callowhill, an industrial neighborhood thought to have a primarily Caucasian, artistic, and bohemian demographic. Chinatown and Callowhill representatives could not come to an agreement over these plans, with their debate centering on one main point of contention: the Reading Viaduct.

An abandoned viaduct used by the Reading Railroad in the late nineteenth century, the Reading Viaduct has since become deserted and overgrown with vegetation. Spanning ten blocks from Vine Street to Fairmont Avenue, it takes up a large chunk of overhead space in the Chinatown North and Callowhill areas—a whole mile and 4.7 acres of land.<sup>11</sup> As such, there has been much contention over what to do with it, with Chinatown community activists and rail park developers advocating for different end goals.



Figure 1: Map of the Reading Viaduct, Friends of the Rail Park

<sup>10</sup> Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC), *Chinatown Neighborhood Plan*, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown*, 145.



## **b. Debate over the Reading Viaduct:**

Many Chinatown advocates have argued that the redeveloping the Reading Viaduct would be bad for the Chinatown community. One position is that the Viaduct should be torn down to make room for the construction of affordable housing complexes in Chinatown North. Andy Toy, former Managing Director at PCDC, explained that the Reading Viaduct is seen as a ‘Chinese Wall’ that blocks Chinatown from further development.<sup>12</sup> PCDC, too, has published numerous articles advocating for the demolition of the Viaduct, with its Executive Director, John Chin, explaining that they must value “the basic needs of the community versus an amenity.”<sup>13</sup> To Chin, these basic needs have become PCDC’s primary development focus, from constructing mixed-income housing to streetscaping, greening, and creating more recreational spaces.<sup>14</sup> Without these necessities, advocates worry that Chinatown could become a sort of ‘amusement park’<sup>15</sup> or ‘ethnic Disneyland’<sup>16</sup> — a place where outsiders come to marvel at Chinese culture, but where Chinese immigrants themselves cannot actually live.

Others have harkened to the potential threat of gentrification in the area if the Viaduct were to remain and be developed into a public space. Some are concerned that Chinatown North is currently a ‘no man’s land’ that sits on the ‘frontier line’ of gentrification.<sup>17</sup> People fear that the development of the Reading Viaduct will bring new attention to the neighborhood—from both affluent city dwellers and private developers—that will drive out current Chinatown residents due to expensive new high-rise

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<sup>12</sup> "Chinatown Leaders Favor Destruction of the 'Chinese Wall,'" *Philadelphia Free Press*, August 26, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Russ, "Some in Chinatown Favor Demolishing Part of Viaduct," *Philly.com*, August 29, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Craig LaBan, "The New Chinatown, Delectably Diverse," *Philly.com*, January 13, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

condominiums and rising rents. This is of the utmost concern to Chinatown advocates, as median house values have already risen dramatically, from \$69,800 in 1990 to \$262,700 in 2010.<sup>18</sup> In New York, the High Line has caused rents to nearly quadruple, kicking out mom and pop shops and small businesses that have been around for decades.<sup>19</sup>

Other Chinatown advocates believe that the viaduct's elevated nature creates safety issues underneath, as it is dark and nearly abandoned.<sup>20</sup> PCDC feels that the area underneath the Rail Park would be difficult to develop because of its "idiosyncratic lots created by the diagonal viaduct path."<sup>21</sup> They fear that, without further development, these areas will remain shadowy and closed off, continuing to enable the drug dealing, prostitution, and other illegal activity that already takes place near the Viaduct.<sup>22</sup> As Chin argues, "There's more crime in this area around the viaduct. Many bad things have been associated with the viaduct and the fact that it overshadows the streets."<sup>23</sup> This general opposition is likely a result of Chinatown's historical legacy of land loss. It has caused PCDC and other Chinatown advocates to remain cautious and pragmatic in the face of new development, as is evident in their response to the Reading Viaduct and the general conflict over the Chinatown North/Callowhill area.

### 3. Literature Review

While the word "gentrification" was introduced by Ruth Glass in 1964, its meaning has been contested ever since.<sup>24</sup> Neil Smith argues that gentrification has

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<sup>18</sup> Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), "Chinatown Then and Now," 2013, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah Moss, "Disney World on the Hudson," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2012: A25.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 89.

<sup>21</sup> Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) Newsletter, (PCDC Archives, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> "Chinatown Leaders Favor Destruction of the 'Chinese Wall.'"

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Silva Mathema, "Gentrification: An Updated Literature Review." *Poverty and Race*

economic roots, with a “rent gap” theory that hypothesizes that gentrification happens when there is a rent disparity between potential returns and actual economic gains. Development, then, is most profitable and desirable when there is a great difference between actual and potential land values.<sup>25</sup> However, David Ley believes gentrification has social roots, prompted by the emergence of a new middle class and professional elite. As individuals gain social and professional clout, white-collar groups have higher purchasing power and more lavish consumption habits, spurring neighborhood change.<sup>26</sup> In the case of Chinatown North/Callowhill, both social and economic forces are at play. The post-industrial nature of the area and its location near the city center make it a hotbed of economic opportunity, and the predominantly low-income, immigrant community is more at risk for social uprooting.<sup>27</sup>

There are theorists who suggest ways to mitigate the negative impacts of gentrification on long-term residents, particularly through democratic development. A true democracy does not bring simple harmony and agreement, but it comes with the “expectation of controversy, conflict, deliberation, and compromise.”<sup>28</sup> One of our fundamental democratic rights is the ‘right to the city,’ which is “the exercise of collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.” While urbanization is often seen in a positive light, as it fuels capitalism through the absorption of surplus value, it has become a barrier for true democracy:

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*Research Action Council*, October, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Smith, “Gentrification and the Rent Gap,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77.3 (1987): 462–465.

<sup>26</sup> David Ley, “Liberal Ideology and the Postindustrial City,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70.2 (1980): 238–258.

<sup>27</sup> Mathema, “Gentrification.”

<sup>28</sup> Charles E. Scott, “The Betrayal of Democratic Space,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (2008): 301.

Urbanization, we may conclude, has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses, at ever increasing geographical scales, but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that have dispossessed the masses of any right to the city whatsoever.

That is to say, wealthy developers “build the new urban world on the wreckage of the old,”<sup>29</sup> forcing out less affluent, more vulnerable residents to create a sort of ‘bourgeois playground,’” as is the case with traditional gentrification.<sup>30</sup> In order to combat this, the dispossessed must regain control through rebellion and social movements, like those that have occurred in Philadelphia’s Chinatown in response to numerous development proposals. But this backlash can also take the form of perseverance and pushing forward, with marginalized communities working to shape their neighborhood to their needs.

The key question at hand is whether groups like PCDC will be able to push forward with their own projects in spite of the Reading Viaduct project in order to limit gentrification and ensure a democratic redevelopment process. If so, the neighborhood will be a model of equitable development for a diverse community. But if the Rail Park causes uprooting and gentrification and usurps space for Chinatown’s continued development, it will be yet another symbol of land loss in Chinatown North.

#### **4. Research Methods**

Interviews were the primary data method in my research. I conducted in-depth, 1.5-hour long interviews with two Chinatown advocates and two Rail Park advocates. My first interview was with Nancy Chen, Senior Program Manager at Asian Arts Initiatives (AAI). AAI is an organization in North Chinatown that was created in 1993 to ease racial

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<sup>29</sup> David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* (2008): 23-37.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), 111.

tensions in the area and serve as a bridge between communities and competing interests.<sup>31</sup> They use art to bring people together and help build and express cultural identity, both for Chinese-Americans and other neighborhood residents.

Next, I interviewed Sarah Yeung, Capacity and Projects Manager at Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC). PCDC was founded in 1969 to oppose the construction of the Vine Street Expressway and work to protect and unite Chinatown.<sup>32</sup> Since then, they have remained true to this mission, serving as Chinatown's largest voice in zoning and planning matters, developing affordable housing and recreational space in the neighborhood, and hosting programming and events.

In order to represent the Reading Viaduct, I first spoke with Michael Garden, who is Secretary of the Board of Directors of Friends of the Rail Park (FRP). For Garden, this is a volunteer position, and he works full time as a real estate agent at Space and Company in Center City. FRP is a 501(c)(3) that works to advocate and fundraise for the redevelopment of the Reading Viaduct. It was founded in 2010 from the merger of two earlier organizations, Viaduct Green and the Reading Viaduct Project.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, I interviewed Sarah McEneaney, who is the President of the board of directors of FRP and Co-founder of the former Reading Viaduct Project. McEneaney is also the Co-founder and President of Callowhill Neighborhood Association (CNA), which began in 2001. CNA is a 501(c)(3) organization that is dedicated to improving the

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<sup>31</sup> "Mission and History," Asian Arts Initiative, last modified 2015, <http://asianartsinitiative.org/about/mission-history>.

<sup>32</sup> PCDC, "History."

<sup>33</sup> "About," Friends of the Rail Park, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.therailpark.org/about/>.

Callowhill neighborhood through cleaning and zoning efforts and community programming.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to interviews, I attended a presentation hosted by Venture for America as part of their Intersect Philly series. The Intersect Philly program seeks to unite and create a dialogue between two organizations working in a similar space but towards a different end goal. As such, they hosted a panel on the redevelopment of the Reading Viaduct on October 21, 2015. Yeung was present to represent PCDC and Chinatown North, while Garden spoke on behalf of the Reading Viaduct. Each gave an in-depth presentation on their organization and its goals, providing insight for my research.

In order to supplement interview material, I consulted past census surveys for demographic information. I looked at the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses, along with the 2013 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) estimates. I focused specifically on race and population density tables, also consulting Social Explorer for some thematic maps. I then used this data to create various tables, charts, and other graphics that are included throughout my paper.

Finally, observation provided background knowledge and a visual understanding of the site. On September 11, 2015, I attended a walking tour of the Phase 1 site led by Garden. This tour helped me visualize plans for the park and get a better understanding of the space itself. I also used this observation time to take notes and photographs, some of which are included within this paper.

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<sup>34</sup> “About Us,” Callowhill Neighborhood Association, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://callowhill.org/aboutus/brief-history/>.

## 5. Analysis

With two sides working to shape one neighborhood, there has been much disagreement over its identity—starting with its name. To some, the area North of Vine Street, South of Spring Garden Street, East of Broad Street, and West of 8<sup>th</sup> Street is Chinatown North. To others, it may be Callowhill, the Loft District, Eraserhood, or any one of the other titles it has assumed over the years. Each of these names provides a different perspective on the neighborhood, as well as different ownership.

For Chinatown advocates, calling the area “Chinatown North” is an important way to claim the space. As Chen explains,

We choose organizationally to call it Chinatown North, not to be in opposition—because we are also happy to call it Callowhill—but for us it is about this constant reminder of Chinatown as a presence socially and physically above Vine Street, so it is a political decision for us to keep that in the foreground. If we didn’t call it that, we think it would contribute to the receding presence of Chinatown on this side of Vine Street.<sup>35</sup>

For these advocates, using “Callowhill” instead of “Chinatown North” ignores the Asian-American community in the area.

For others, “Callowhill” connotes neutrality and diversity. McEneaney, for one, uses “Callowhill” because she moved to the neighborhood before it had a Chinese-American population. “If this is Chinatown North,” she says, “I, too, am the face of Chinatown North.”<sup>36</sup> In her eyes, while this area is certainly home to Chinese-Americans, it has a more diverse history and community base as well. While she does not mind “Chinatown North,” she asserts that calling it the “Loft District” relinquishes ownership of the area to realtors and private developers, who have recently coined this term as a

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<sup>35</sup> Nancy Chen, Interview with Emily Marcus, Philadelphia, October 23, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah McEneaney, Interview with Emily Marcus, Philadelphia, November 13, 2015.

marketing ploy.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Garden alludes to the manipulation of names depending on circumstances. He cites that real estate agents often use terms to make neighborhoods seem more affluent and appealing, while those fighting against development use names that highlight the underprivileged, at risk nature of these same areas:

Francisville is interesting because, as far as I know, it has historically been a predominantly black neighborhood...But I noticed in the real estate industry going back ten years, as the Fairmount Art Museum development was expanding towards Broad, properties that were being developed in the Francisville neighborhood were being referred to in real estate terms as being Art Museum and Fairmount. And I saw this also happen as properties were being developed West of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and South of South Street. It was being referred to as Bella Vista, and it's not. It's Hawthorne. And Hawthorne is primarily a black neighborhood. But now there's these rollbacks on it. Now Francisville and Hawthorne are being identified as is.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, these names are constructs of identity in this neighborhood, with little consensus as to which is most appropriate. This simple disagreement exemplifies the much larger debate over this neighborhood's identity.

But regardless of what it is called, far more important is the neighborhood's historical and demographic identity, another cause of contention that reveals the neighborhood's differing directions of development. From the late 1800s well into the twentieth century, this area was an industrial hub. It was home to large-scale manufacturing and countless factories, with remnants of industrial buildings and steel structures still around today. When McEneaney moved to the neighborhood thirty-six years ago, almost nobody lived there. She chose it because she found an affordable and spacious house that could double as a residential space and a studio. At this time, the only piece of Chinatown North of Vine Street was Holy Redeemer Church and School.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Garden, Interview with Emily Marcus, Philadelphia, November 3, 2015.

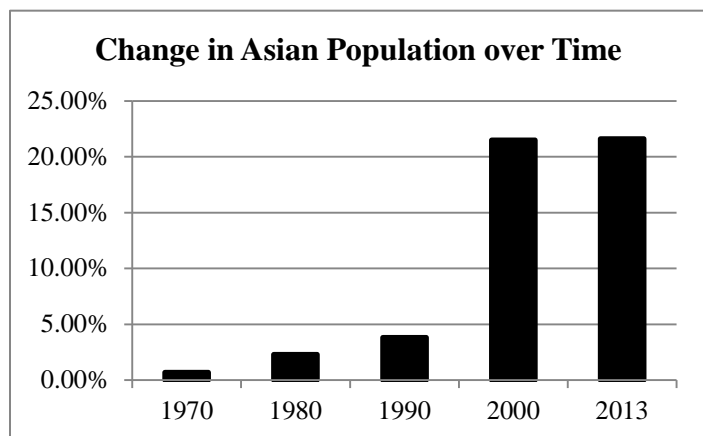


Eventually, after the Vine Street Expressway’s completion, PCDC also crossed the street, along with AAI, and they built Hing Wah Yuen, an affordable housing complex. As McEneaney recalls,

Slowly, a lot of the older businesses that had been up here, like a lot of print shops and stuff, started leaving, and some of the businesses that started moving in were what I call ‘the backbone to Chinatown’—restaurant supply, food supply, stuff like that. So I saw that it was becoming part of Chinatown, but the neighborhood has always stayed, and even how it’s grown since then, very mixed...it’s like a microcosm of the whole city in terms of white, Asian American, African American, and Hispanic.<sup>39</sup>

From this perspective, the area has shifted in ownership, and does not have one clear group that has absolute rights to it. Instead, McEneaney feels that “the neighborhood belongs to everybody.”<sup>40</sup> Or, as Garden puts it, perhaps the neighborhood belongs to nobody: “these boundaries are of an industrial neighborhood that predates Chinatown and the Loft District. Anyone living there is displacing [industrial] businesses, and those businesses displaced farmers, and those farmers displaced Native Americans.”<sup>41</sup> Either way, both contend that there is not one clear group that can assert ownership over this area.

For the most part, McEneaney’s demographic theories are correct. While the proportion of Asians living in the area has risen drastically in the past few decades—from almost nothing in 1970 to over



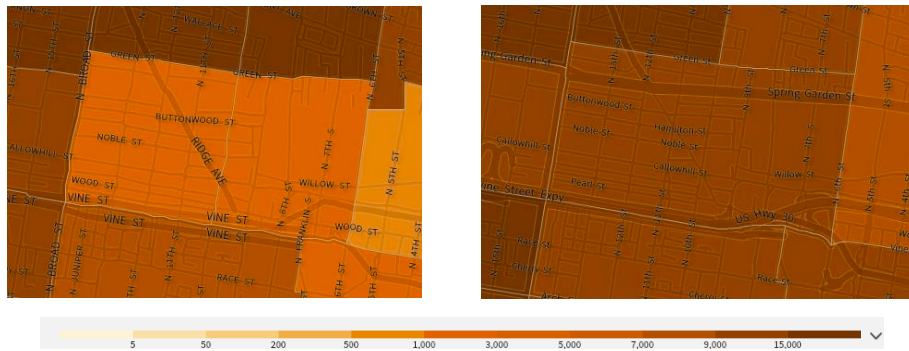
**Figure 2: Change in Asian Population over Time, 1970-2000 U.S. Census and 2008-2013 American Community Survey**

<sup>39</sup> Sarah McEneaney.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Garden.

20% by 2000—so, too, have the percentages of other groups.<sup>42</sup> According to the 2013 American Community Survey, 48.7% of the neighborhood is White, with 24.3% Black, and 21.6% Asian.<sup>43</sup> The rest of the neighborhood is comprised of those of “other races” and two or more races—categories that have only emerged on recent census surveys. Overall population today is also far greater than ever before, with population density rising consistently over the past fifty years.<sup>44</sup> Most recently, from 2000 to 2010, the population in the Callowhill/Chinatown North area rose 91.7%, and the total number of housing units increased 73.32%.<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 3: Population Density 1980 and 2013, *Social Explorer* and 1980 and 2008-2013 American Community Survey**

The census data actually show that African Americans have been driven out of the neighborhood, not Asians. The 2000 census indicates 25.5% White, 21.5% Asian, and 47.6% African American.<sup>46</sup> Census data before 2000 also reveal a high percentage of African American residents, with an almost equal split between African American and

<sup>42</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Race: 1970-2000” *1970-2000 Censuses*. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

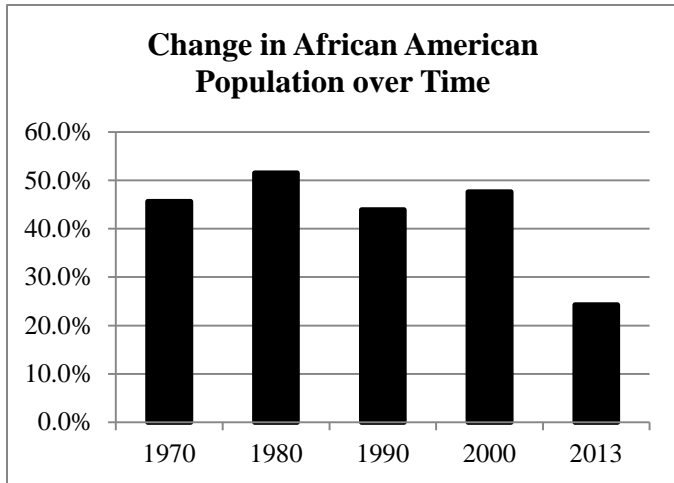
<sup>43</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Race.” *2008-2013 American Community Survey*. U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey Office, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Total Population.” *2008-2013 American Community Survey*. U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey Office, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Philadelphia City Planning Commission, *Philadelphia 2035: Central Business Plan*.

<sup>46</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Race.” *2000 Census*. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

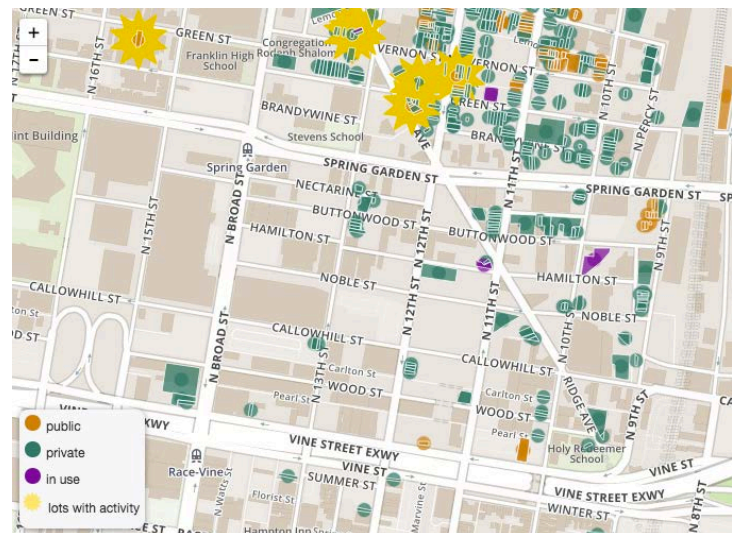
Caucasian residents in 1970, 1980, and 1990.<sup>47</sup> However, by 2013, the number of African Americans shrunk by 16%—from 744 to 624 residents—and their presence in the neighborhood’s population went



**Figure 4: Change in African American Population Over Time, U.S. Census 1970-2000 and American Community Survey 2008-2013**

from 47.6% to 24.3%, likely due to the general population increase and rise in number of Asian and Caucasian residents. While Asian percentages have remained stable in the twenty-first century, it is plausible, given the trend among African Americans, that their rates will also decline as the presence of Caucasians increases and the population continues to grow. But, as the neighborhood stands now, while it does have a substantial Asian population, it is certainly quite mixed.

The presence of empty space in the area shows that there is room to accommodate both newcomers and original Chinatown North/Callowhill residents, as the neighborhood remains in flux. In fighting against the Rail Park, PCDC has asserted that they would like more space for the development of affordable housing. One solution for this



**Figure 5: Vacant Parcels 2015, *Grounded in Philly***

<sup>47</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Race: 1970-1990” *1970-1990 Censuses*. U.S. Census Bureau, 1990.

is to demolish the Viaduct entirely, but they have also proposed demolishing only parts of it, to create land where they most need it and make the demolition more affordable.<sup>48</sup> But demolishing the Viaduct would be prohibitively expensive, with an early estimate citing around \$35 million, and a more recent one citing over \$50 million; developing the park would be a cheaper and more eco-friendly option.<sup>49</sup> Demolishing only part of the Rail Park would come at a lower cost, only about \$9 million,<sup>50</sup> but McEneaney states that this would make even less sense: “that was the silliest, because it was like leaving chunks, so you’d have these tall stacks that you couldn’t get to that weren’t connected. The great thing about the whole rail park is the connectivity that it creates.” Further, not only are there many empty lots in the area—from above ground parking garages to undeveloped spaces purchased by developers before the 2008 recession—but much of the developed residential and retail space is not filled, either.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, from 2000 to 2010, the number of vacant housing units in the area grew by 11.76%.<sup>52</sup>

In fact, this empty space is much needed. In speaking against the Viaduct, PCDC claims that public space is simply “not a priority,” with “basic needs” like affordable housing demanding more attention.<sup>53</sup> Yet, at a recent presentation on PCDC and its work in Chinatown North, Yeung stated that “public space is one of the greatest needs in Chinatown and Chinatown North, since Chinatown South is very densely built and Chinatown North has a blighted and industrial landscape.”<sup>54</sup> Currently, the only public space in either of these Chinatown neighborhoods is 10<sup>th</sup> Street Plaza, which is little more

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah Yeung.

<sup>49</sup> Reading Viaduct Project, “Home,” Accessed April 12, 2016, [www.readingviaduct.org](http://www.readingviaduct.org).

<sup>50</sup> “Chinatown Leaders Favor Destruction of the ‘Chinese Wall.’”

<sup>51</sup> Sarah McEneaney.

<sup>52</sup> Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Yeung.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Yeung, Lecture.

than a converted seating area on the pedestrian bridge over the Vine Street Expressway. While PCDC has worked to beautify the area around the Vine Street Expressway and even attempted to cover the ‘big lid’ above it with green blocks or a ‘town-square’-style park, they have had little success.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, Chen and the rest of AAI are in favor of the development of the Rail Park, stating that “we’re definitely supportive of increasing the green space in the neighborhood, and the Viaduct is the most prominent example of that.”<sup>56</sup> And, while Yeung and her PCDC colleagues have not expressed similar sentiments, they are certainly aware of the need for more recreational space in their neighborhood; they just have a different vision of how to create it.

Given this empty space, as well as the area’s desirable location near Center City, it seems the neighborhood is almost up for grabs. Developers have coined this area the “Loft District” as a way to expunge its “Eraserhood” identity—a title given to the neighborhood after it inspired David Lynch’s horror film about a gritty, post-industrial city.<sup>57</sup> Now, it serves as a hotbed for new developments, but FRP claims that the Viaduct is not to blame. McEneaney asserts that “speculation [about the neighborhood] happened before the Rail Park was even on anyone’s radar.”<sup>58</sup> And Garden feels strongly that “[development in the area] will happen with or without the Rail Park.”<sup>59</sup> As such, there have been residential developments, like the Goldtex Building on 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine, which used to be a shoe factory. This apartment complex offers luxury amenities at a high price, and they have been generous supporters of Friends of the Rail Park. But, Garden was sure

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<sup>55</sup> DVRPC, *Chinatown Neighborhood Plan*.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Chen.

<sup>57</sup> Anna Orso, “Eraserhood? Callowhill? How the Neighborhood David Lynch Made Famous is Changing, and Showing Its Roots,” *BillyPenn*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah McEneaney.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Garden.

to clarify, while the Goldtex building is in favor of creating the Rail Park, that is not why they moved into the area; their decision was simply because it is an underdeveloped neighborhood right next to Center City—a hidden gem for private developers.<sup>60</sup> On the non-residential side, Arts and Crafts Holdings has purchased over 200,000 square feet of property around 10<sup>th</sup> and Hamilton and 10<sup>th</sup> and Ridge. Their plans are for retail on the ground floors, with offices and artist studios above. Goldman Properties, the redevelopers of 13<sup>th</sup> Street, have purchased land in the area as well, with plans for green spaces and dog parks that would very much align with the Rail Park’s vision.<sup>61</sup> These developments, among many others, show the area’s increased desirability.

And, as of this year, the Viaduct can be added to this list. FRP is only waiting on one more leg of funding for Phase 1 of the project, which will span from North Broad and Noble Streets to Callowhill Street, in what many consider the Chinatown North area. Currently, SEPTA owns this section of the Viaduct, but they will likely release it to Center City District, which will then give it to the City, who will turn it over to Parks and Recreation. FRP is in talks with the City and Parks and Recreation to facilitate this turnover and make plans for maintenance. Overall, developing Phase 1 is estimated to cost 9.6 million dollars, and over 5.5 million of that has already been committed. FRP applied for a 3.5 million dollar Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s Office of the Budget, which is pending. While this would still leave them short of their 9.6 million dollar goal, the RACP grant would give enough to put it out to bid, and the final legs of funding would likely come in quickly thereafter. Further, FRP has been in talks with Center City District (CCD) to plan

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Garden.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah McEaney.

some events to work towards closing the final fundraising gap so they are not just waiting around for the state. At this point, raising these final funds is quite likely.<sup>62</sup> McEneaney stated confidently that “[the Viaduct] is never going to be torn down now, I feel like I can say that with authority. It’s too expensive to be torn down, and the neighborhood is full of empty lots.”<sup>63</sup> But Garden expressed it best: “the Viaduct is coming, whether any of us like it or not...It’s designed, engineered, and ready to go.”<sup>64</sup>

But PCDC is working to shape the neighborhood, too. While FRP seeks to create recreational space in the form of an outdoor rail park, PCDC is planning a state of the art community center, also set to break ground this year. Their Eastern Tower Community Center (ETCC), located at 10<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets, will be a 227,000 square foot building with residential, office, retail, and community space. On the residential side, it will have 103,160 square feet of space, spanning 17 floors. There will be 143 residential units, 22% of which will be low-income apartments, making it a mixed-income building. While ETCC’s residential complex is expected to house at least 200 people, its other spaces will reach over 97,000 people annually. ETCC will have 10,000 square feet of retail space on the ground floor and 16,300 square feet of office space. Recreationally, ETCC will have 2 full-size basketball courts and a fitness room, making it the only recreation space of its size in Chinatown. There will also be programs to help improve community health and wellness, like physical therapy and exercise classes for seniors and youth, as well as a rooftop garden. ETCC’s recreational spaces will also work to preserve Chinese art and heritage, with lion dancing, kung fu, and calligraphy classes, as well as event space for cultural banquets. To improve community education offerings, ETCC will house

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Garden.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah McEneaney.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Garden.

childcare and after-school programs that primarily serve low-income, immigrant, and limited English proficiency families. These various spaces and programs will enable ETCC to have a profound impact on its community. Therefore, even though the Rail Park may be garnering attention in the development sphere, its presence has not kept PCDC from shaping the area, too.<sup>65</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

Disagreement over the Reading Viaduct in Callowhill/Chinatown North has caused confusion over the area's name, demographics, and development plans. Out of this uncertainty have emerged two separate visions for the neighborhood: one from rail park proponents, who want to see a lush and modern elevated park, and one from Chinatown advocates, who want to see an increase in affordable housing and community space. While these groups have different goals, both are poised to accomplish them, with FRP's Reading Viaduct redevelopment and PCDC's Eastern Tower Community Center project. For the foreseeable future, this means of separate but adjacent development is sustainable, as there is enough vacant land in the area to allow both sides to forge their own paths. As such, this is not a traditional story of gentrification in which one group uproots another—although there is certainly a substantial “rent gap” that keeps the neighborhood in the eye of developers.<sup>66</sup> Instead, both Chinatown advocates and Rail Park proponents are using the same space to further their different agendas.

While this is working for the time being, neighborhood identity is likely to change once the Reading Viaduct and Eastern Tower Community Center actually open, as these

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<sup>65</sup> Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, “Philadelphia Chinatown Eastern Tower Community Center Development Project,” July 17, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, “Gentrification and the Rent Gap,” 462-465.



newcomers may sharpen the conflict between these competing visions. Chinatown will have to continue development at a pace that matches or exceeds that of private developers, a near impossible feat for a non-profit organization like PCDC. Perhaps mixed-income developments, like ETCC, will enable non-profit groups to develop Chinatown North at a more rapid pace while still creating affordable housing. This seems like a plausible strategy given PCDC's strong track record with mixed-income development; since the 1980s, they have added 226 affordable units to the Chinatown area through mixed-income residences like Hing Wah Yuen and the Francis House of Peace, a partnership with Project HOME.<sup>67</sup> Further, in a recent statement on PCDC's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Chin described a development future that continues on this trajectory:

“Our vision is that Chinatown becomes a part of the larger city — our planning perspective is not inward looking, but outward looking...We welcome opportunity and diversity. Yes, we have a huge need for affordable housing as the neighborhood improves and develops, but we absolutely believe in a mixed-income neighborhood. It's the only way to succeed.”<sup>68</sup>

With this in mind, PCDC is likely to push forward with mixed income development, possibly leading to direct partnerships with private developers and maybe even Friends of the Rail Park. Garden, too, seemed quite open to this, as he explained that private developers could benefit greatly from the zoning incentives that come with creating affordable or low-income units, like extra floors and added amenities.<sup>69</sup> With both sides on board, a future of community cohesion and mixed-income development may become a reality, but this possibility rides on the success of ETCC, which is yet to be seen. Until

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<sup>67</sup> Joann Greco, “Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation at 50,” *Plan Philly*, May 2, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Michael Garden.

then, Chinatown North/Callowhill remains an area in flux, with two sides working separately but effectively to bring their differing visions to life.

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