



NeighborWorks® America

CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



**Chinatown Community
Development Center
Bright Spot Case Study**

April 2018

Working Together for Strong Communities





**Samantha Lo and her mother
at the “Eat Chinatown” opening.**

Photo credit: Chinatown Community
Development Center

COMMUNITY STORIES HARNESSSED FOR “PLACEKEEPING”

In January 2017, people flocked to the opening of a photography exhibit called “Eat Chinatown,” a product of interviews with restaurant staff and patrons. The exhibit highlighted four eateries that have called San Francisco’s Chinatown home for at least 40 years. “Eat Chinatown” serves as one example of how Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), a member of the NeighborWorks network, preserves the vibrancy and strength of the neighborhood by building collective efficacy at creating positive change. To do so, it uses creative community development strategies, such as festivals, murals and culturally relevant programming in local venues. These strategies value and amplify neighborhood knowledge, nurture grassroots leadership and activate the physical environment. While it has done this work for years, only recently has the organization named it “placekeeping” and partnered with artists and related organizations to achieve its community development objectives.

It is important to understand the history and context of CCDC and the Chinatown neighborhood. Founded in 1977, CCDC employs a staff of neighborhood advocates and planners, as well as developers and managers of affordable housing.¹ The organization cultivates deep tenant relationships and works with seniors, families and youth to advocate for their local concerns. Due to past discrimination,

¹ “About Chinatown CDC,” Chinatown Community Development Center, accessed September 21, 2017, <http://www.chinatowncdc.org/about-us>.

**Creative community
development
strategies value
and amplify
neighborhood
knowledge,
nurture grassroots
leadership and
activate the physical
environment.**

The organization plans to creatively engage residents so they have a say in shaping the physical terrain.

Chinese immigrants were often “herded” to this area to live and open businesses. More recently, immigrants have chosen to live in the neighborhood because of access to jobs, culturally specific businesses, language-appropriate services and affordable housing. At the same time, however, they face a constant threat of eviction, displacement and relocation due to San Francisco’s hot real estate market.

In addition to helping immigrant residents stay in their neighborhood, CCDC works to preserve the area’s unique culture. Several large infrastructure projects are in the works and the organization plans to creatively engage residents so they have a say in shaping the physical terrain.

Leveraging strategic partnerships to cultivate ‘belonging’

41 Ross, a gallery nestled in one of Chinatown’s many bustling alleyways, showcased local talent. Since 2014, CCDC has rented and co-curated 41 Ross in partnership with the Chinese Culture Center, a neighborhood nonprofit focused on promoting contemporary art and arts education. At 41 Ross, visitors view exhibits and performances and engage in art-making. This activity sometimes spills into the alleyway, creatively engaging passersby. For example, the opening of Summer Mei Ling Lee’s “Liminal Space/Crossings” included erhu (fiddle) music, while ocean scenes were projected on the alleyway.

Community engagement helps shape each 41 Ross exhibit. For example, for “Liminal Space/Crossings,” Lee interviewed eight multigenerational families over the course of a year about their immigration experience. Projects at 41 Ross seek to capture and honor Chinatown residents’ own “lived experiences rather than the stereotypes that have commodified the neighborhood,” explains Roy Chan, the organization’s community planning manager. Residents feel pride and a sense of belonging when they see artwork inspired by and reflective of their identities, adds Maria Wang, the Chinese Culture Center’s program and media associate.

CCDC and the Chinese Culture Center each bring unique skills and talents to the partnership. Using its expertise in working with artists, the Chinese Culture Center conducts significant legwork before selecting an artist to make sure his or her values and intentions align with the community’s. The center’s staff looks for artists who want “to learn from



“Liminal Space/Crossings.”

Photo credit: Chinese Culture Center



“Liminal Space/Crossings.”

Photo credit: Chinese Culture Center

“We’ve been able to tap into that connection through exhibits and stories designed to change perceptions and bring new life into important community gathering places.”

and benefit the community.” For its part, CCDC leverages its relationships with and connections to local residents and business owners.

“The amazing part is that Chinatown Community Development Center knows every family and every resident in Chinatown,” Wang says. “They know the real situations of families.”

For “Liminal Space/Crossings,” Lee wanted to interview multiple generations of family members. CCDC’s team members proved essential to helping Lee develop a relationship of trust with the residents, many of whom are private or feel their stories aren’t worth sharing.

Influencing property owners by showing value

CCDC curated “Eat Chinatown” to highlight the neighborhood’s unique character and promote local businesses, specifically those in the path of the subway under construction.² The exhibit attracted visitors new to the neighborhood as well as former residents. Chan points to Capital Restaurant as a business that has seen more patrons since it was featured in the exhibit.

“People will go to these restaurants because they or their kids have a deep emotional connection to place,” he explains. “We’ve been able to tap into that connection through exhibits and stories designed to change perceptions and bring new life into important community gathering places.”

² “Eat Chinatown,” Chinatown Community Development Center, accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.chinatowncdc.org/eat-chinatown>. The San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development and the city’s municipal transportation agency supported “Eat Chinatown,” which was part of a larger Chinatown Community Development Center initiative, Spotlight Chinatown.



“Eat Chinatown” in 41 Ross.
Photo credit: Linda Ly/Chinatown
Community Development Center

“Eat Chinatown” coincided with the creation of a citywide Legacy Business Registry and Preservation Fund. CCDC hopes the exhibit shows the community value of these businesses to the property owners who will decide their futures—and encourage them to embrace cultural preservation rather than rent to the highest bidder, which could radically change the neighborhood, says Erika Gee, a CCDC senior planner.

The organization also has used art and cultural understandings to communicate otherwise dry and technical concepts, from environmental sustainability to urban planning.

Harnessing creative strategies to plan the future of the neighborhood

Chan and Gee have had particular success with their work with the Committee for Better Parks and Recreation in Chinatown. The goal: to create culturally relevant public outdoor spaces and programming. Informed by deep community participation, the Committee for Better Parks and Recreation, a coalition of Chinatown stakeholders, worked with the city of San Francisco to use tai chi, a youth-led Lion Dance and other culturally relevant programming to transform formerly underused parks into vibrant places. CCDC plans to engage residents to provide feedback on several upcoming infrastructure projects, such as a rooftop plaza at the Central Subway Station.

The organization also has used art and cultural understandings to communicate otherwise dry and technical concepts, from environmental sustainability to urban planning. For example, CCDC is educating residents on recycling and climate change. Chan says there was a disconnect between consultants’ technical language and residents’ everyday lives. To help residents relate, CCDC tapped into Chinese cultural traditions, which revolves around the lunar calendar—including honoring the moon and the sun.



Celebrating the opening of 41 Ross.

Photo credit: Chinatown Community Development Center

The organization has used creative community development as a “way to affirm and highlight [our] impact in the community in a way that we couldn’t just write about in a report or talk about.”

Building internal appreciation and capacity

CCDC’s creative community development work relies on broad buy-in. Its “Coming Home Project” serves as a good example. Through oral histories, photographs and video, the project documents the transitions experienced by residents (mostly seniors and adults with disabilities) during a major renovation of their large housing complex, 990 Pacific. The renovation occurred when the San Francisco Housing Authority transferred to CCDC responsibility for management of four properties that had lacked services and proper maintenance for years. That meant temporary dislocation for the many tenants. CCDC’s resident services coordinators worked with artist Emma Marie Chiang, a photographer and video journalist, to capture residents’ hopes and experiences in temporary housing and their eventual return to 990 Pacific. The “Coming Home Project” helped build community among an increasingly racially diverse group of tenants during a disruptive time in their lives and “humanized” the relocation process. The project also provided a creative way for resident services coordinators to begin to build relationships with the tenants. The organization will display the photographs and video in the 990 Pacific community room, as well as create a website for the public to engage with these stories.

As the resident services coordinators worked with Chiang on the “Coming Home Project,” Chan and Gee recognized a need to build internal capacity of CCDC staff in creative community development. The routine duties of resident services coordinators include translating utility bills and letters from English into Chinese, facilitating monthly residents’ meetings and organizing activities. However, their work for the “Coming Home Project” required additional skills.

Although this work requires takes extra time and capacity, CCDC has found that creative community development strategies strengthen internal processes and communication, such as interdepartmental collaboration.

In an environment of “constant stress and burnout, this work lets us pause and connect the dots and affirm each other,” Chan says. The organization has used creative community development as a “way to affirm and highlight [our] impact in the community in a way that we couldn’t just write about in a report or talk about.”

Lessons learned

- ▶ **Strategic partnerships between arts and community development organizations results in robust resident engagement.** The success of 41 Ross hinges on collaboration between CCDC and the Chinese Culture Center. Each organization contributes unique strengths: The former has deep relationships with residents and business owners, and the latter knows how to identify and work with artists. Through this collaboration, artists who genuinely desire to engage with the community have opportunities to do so, and residents feel respected and reflected in the artists' work.
- ▶ **It is critical to set and communicate realistic expectations for artists when working within communities.** CCDC and its partners had to develop mutually agreed-upon project goals and stipulate realistic deliverables. Ultimately, the goal is for Chinatown to achieve neighborhood stabilization, but Gee knows she can't realistically ask artists to be responsible for this large, complex task. Rather, she might charge an artist with highlighting legacy businesses or residents' stories to help weave a larger narrative and reach different audiences in creative ways. These creative strategies then become tools to help contribute to the larger goal of neighborhood stabilization.
- ▶ **Creative community development strategies strengthen internal processes when embedded within an organization.** CCDC has found that strategies based on arts and culture help highlight and celebrate community development work. The organization's leadership, for example, used stories collected through the "Coming Home Project" to effectively communicate with its partner, the mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development, about the relocation process.



999 North Capitol Street NE, Suite 900
Washington, DC, 20002
(202) 760-4000