

Experiencing Sense of Place of Cultural Landscapes: A Suburban-strip Chinatown Case Study

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Important cultural landscapes in the United States like Chinatowns are undergoing transformations as a result of the increasing threat of indiscriminate residential and commercial development. To suburban-strip Chinatowns, this threat is compounded by the lack of knowledge and understanding of the public's perception of the cultural, social, and economic role they play for nearby Chinese residents as well as the families and individuals living hundreds of miles away. A survey questionnaire was developed to elicit respondents' perceptions of two suburban-strip Chinatowns and sought to identify ways in which suburban-strip Chinatowns can become more viable in terms of cultural authenticity with a result of increased tourism, economic impact, and sense of place. The results suggest that built landscapes that include cultural motifs, artifacts, and landscaping provide spaces and facilities for social interaction and education, enhance the identity and sense of place in suburban-strip Chinatowns, and make such strip centers analogous to older Chinatowns in their cultural value to the community. The Florida horticulture industry can benefit from developing suburban-strip Chinatowns that take into account basic landscape elements such as traditional plant materials and themed landscape hardware.

Traditionally, a landscape is defined as an area of the earth's land surface that has been modified by human activity (Jackson, 1984). People have always altered the landscape to make it more responsive to their needs. Landscapes that epitomize this condition are known as cultural landscapes. A cultural landscape is defined as a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values. Sauer (1952) described the typical development process of cultural landscapes as being fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural landscape is the medium, and the cultural landscape is the result of their merger. Under the influence of a given culture, itself changing through time, the landscape undergoes development and phases, ultimately reaching the end of its life cycle (Sauer, 1952). With the introduction of a new culture, a redefining of the cultural landscape begins, and a new landscape is superimposed on the remnants of the older one. In the United States, this process applies to different types of cultural landscapes including historic sites, designed landscapes, vernacular landscapes, and ethnographic landscapes.

Important cultural landscapes in the United States that are undergoing such transformations are Chinatowns. There are three types of Chinatowns. The large-scale, urban Chinatowns, mostly founded in the 1800s, share important characteristics including clear cultural boundaries, proximity to the workplace, and serve as tourist attractions. Suburban Chinatowns emerged in the 1970s as new, more modern Chinese immigrants came to the US. As cultural landscapes, suburban Chinatowns also have common characteristics, including proximity to large cities, location within

typical suburban communities, and functioning as multicultural communities. Both types of Chinatowns have been widely studied. A third type of Chinatown has emerged more recently—the suburban-strip Chinatown. To date, very few researchers have recognized the value of this emerging cultural landscape. The suburban-strip Chinatown is not only the newest, but also the smallest of the three types of Chinatowns.

Unlike the first two types of Chinatowns, the suburban-strip Chinatown is not notable for its distinct decorative motifs, architecture, or other cultural symbols. Instead, the suburban-strip Chinatown has strong cross-cultural influences, so much so that they often are indistinguishable from other shopping centers in the region.

One of the problems facing suburban-strip Chinatowns in terms of their function as cultural landscapes is a lack of knowledge and understanding with regard to the public's perception of the cultural, social, and economic role that they have for nearby Chinese residents, as well as for those living hundreds of miles away. It appears that suburban-strip Chinatowns have been ignored by most academics and researchers because they have not recognized that they serve as cultural centers for many geographically scattered Chinese nationals. This research examines suburban-strip Chinatowns in order to assess their potential as cross-cultural, suburban, cultural landscapes. The goal of this study is to identify ways in which suburban-strip Chinatowns can become more viable in terms of cultural authenticity in order to facilitate increased tourism, greater economic impact, and an enhanced sense of place.

The objective of this study was to determine if the inclusion of built landscapes that include cultural motifs, symbols, and artifacts enhances the identity and sense of place in suburban-strip Chinatowns and contributes to their role as cultural landscapes within their communities. The implications of the results of the

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study to the green industry in general and to the horticulture industry in the state of Florida are addressed in the conclusions and implications of the study.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted at two sites in Atlanta, GA. The two sites, located 1.17 miles apart, are China Town and Asian Square. The sites were selected for two reasons. One, the Atlanta region has a large Chinese population. Two, their proximity to Buford Highway, oftentimes referred to as the “International Corridor” of Atlanta, places them near a diversity of establishments that cater to the Chinese community. China Town is a 65,000 square-ft facility that includes an enclosed shopping mall with a Chinese food court, two stand-alone restaurants, several jewelers, a video rental store, a beauty salon, and other retailers that offer Chinese products and services. It also includes a Chinese garden and two traditional Chinese stone lions as a prominent entry feature. Atlanta Asian Square includes Chinese retail and service outlets including a medical clinic, restaurants, optical store, bank, jewelry store, music store, pharmacy, and other retailers. Large parking lots provide free parking for shoppers at each facility. Asian Square follows the typical layout of suburban-strip shopping centers.

Background information for both study sites were obtained using the case study method and key-informant interviews with the respective managers of each site. A survey questionnaire was developed to elicit respondents’ perceptions of suburban-strip Chinatowns. The questionnaire was prepared both in Chinese and English and was distributed on-site to respondents using systematic sampling, in which every fifth person encountered was asked to participate in the survey, during 2-h periods in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings of 19–21 Aug. 2006. The responses to each question on the survey concerning overall perceptions of the characteristics of Chinatowns and the role they play in the community were rated using a 5-point Likert scale: totally agree (2), partially agree (1), neither agree or disagree (0), partially disagree (–1) and totally disagree (–2).

The data were validated and double-checked to minimize errors prior to analysis. The responses to each question in the survey were recoded and their associations with the respondents’ demographics were evaluated using chi-square analysis (SAS Systems, SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

Results and Discussion

RESPONDENTS’ CHARACTERISTICS. Socioeconomic information gathered included gender, age, distance traveled, frequency of visits to the site, and the number of years each respondent had lived in the United States. The respondents at China Town were evenly distributed between Chinese and non-Chinese respondents, but there were 12% more Chinese respondents than non-Chinese at Asian Square. The distribution of respondents by gender was very similar at both sites (Table 1). At both sites, the majority of respondents were at least 36 years old, and visited the sites either often or occasionally. A large majority drove at least 3 miles to the sites and an overwhelming majority had lived in the US for more than 5 years.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUBURBAN-STRIP CHINATOWN. Figure 1 shows the responses to the statement “*I think of this shopping center as a Chinatown,*” by ethnicity. The majority of Chinese and non-Chinese respondents perceived both sites as Chinatowns. For China Town, all the non-Chinese respondents and about

79% of the Chinese respondents agree it is a Chinatown. In contrast, 68% of the non-Chinese respondents agree that Asian Square is a Chinatown, compared to about 60% of the Chinese respondents.

Figure 2 shows the perceived impacts of suburban-strip Chinatowns based upon the strength of agreement of the respondents’ responses to survey items 2, 3, and 4. Those items were: “*Chinatowns bring Chinese culture to the surrounding communities*”; “*I would be more likely to patronize retail establishments if this shopping center included ethnic motifs in the architecture and landscaping*”; and “*The presence of this shopping center increases my perception that the residents of the neighborhood are predominantly of Chinese background.*” The three statements address the typical features and potential impacts of suburban-strip Chinatowns as cultural landscapes. The results suggest that respondents who agree with all three statements were more likely to agree that one site is more of a Chinatown than the other.

One of the goals of this research was to gather empirical data about the utilitarian functions of Chinatowns. Figure 3 shows that the majority of the respondents visited the shopping centers for similar reasons. The top three reasons for visiting either site are to: “*Visit a Chinese Environment,*” “*Buy Chinese Products,*” and “*Eat Chinese Food.*”

Previous studies have shown that the value of a place is not determined or limited by its appearance or aesthetic qualities but rather by its potential for affording different activities. To this end, the study sought to gather empirically-based information regarding functional and symbolic features that augment non-traditional aspects of potential cultural landscapes. Survey participants at both sites were asked what changes at the sites would increase their frequency of visits to the sites. The results were analyzed, and three major categories emerged: 1) economic features, 2) social/educational features, and 3) aesthetic and landscape features (Fig. 4). The following are specific examples for each category that were cited in the respondents’ responses: economic—“*Increased and Larger Variety of Chinese Products*”;

Table 1. Comparison of characteristics of respondents between two sites in Atlanta, GA.

Characteristic	Category	China Town	Asian Square
		(%)	(%)
Ethnicity	Chinese	50.00	56.00
	Non-Chinese	50.00	44.00
Gender	Female	41.07	40.82
	Male	58.93	59.18
Age	Under 20	7.41	4.35
	21–35	35.19	43.48
	36–50	40.74	32.61
	Above 50	16.67	19.57
Frequency of visits to shopping center	Daily	5.17	10.64
	Weekly	27.59	34.04
	Often	17.24	14.89
	Occasionally	41.38	36.17
	Seldom	8.62	4.26
Distance traveled from origin	1–3 miles	7.02	2.17
	3–5 miles	26.32	13.04
	5–10 miles	21.05	15.22
	10–25 miles	35.09	28.26
	Over 25 miles	10.53	41.3
No. of years in the US	Less than 1 year	1.75	10.87
	1–3 years	14.04	10.87
	3–5 years	15.79	6.52
	Over 5 years	68.42	71.74

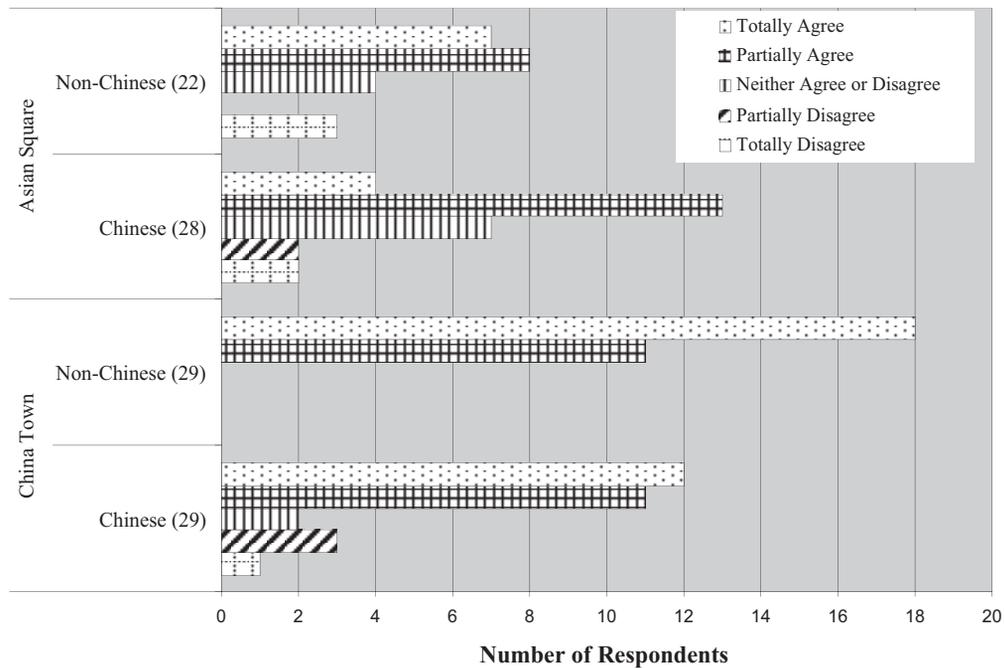


Fig.1. Responses, by ethnicity, to the statement "I think of this shopping center as a Chinatown."

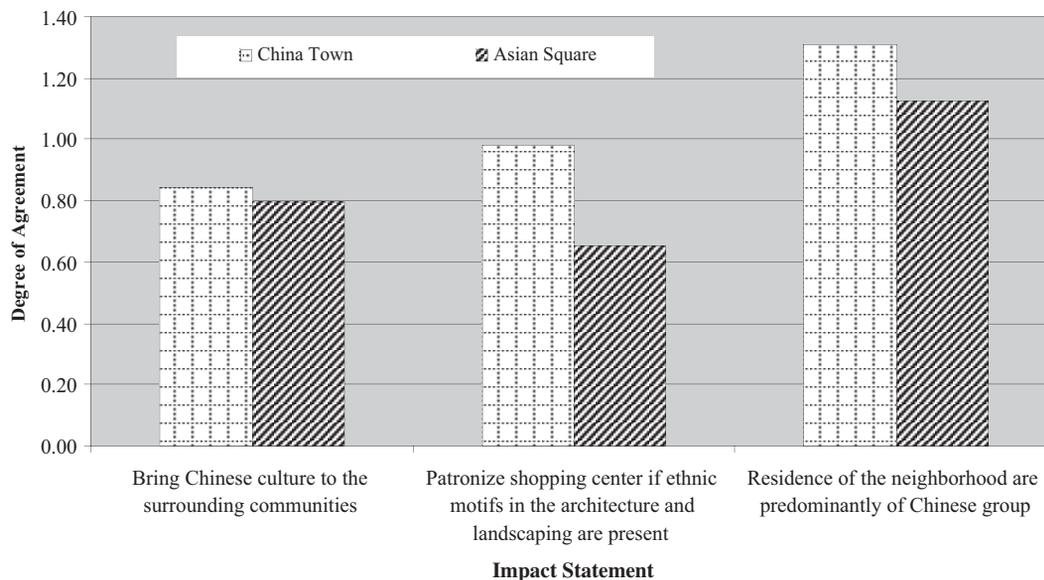


Fig. 2. Perceived roles and impacts of suburban-strip Chinatowns.

social/educational features—"Educational Workshops," "More Chinese Activities," and "Community Forums"; aesthetic and landscape features—"Chinese Gardens" and "Chinese Architecture and Chinese Motifs."

Conclusions and Implications

A clear understanding of the public's perceptions of the characteristics, role, and potential impact of Chinatowns in general and suburban-strip Chinatowns in particular can strengthen programs and efforts designed for the protection and preservation of any cultural landscape. The results of the study strongly suggest opportunities exist to enhance public's appreciation and experience of suburban-strip Chinatowns. For instance, survey results

indicate that the presence of Chinese motifs and Chinese garden features enhance the perception of spirit of place in suburban-strip Chinatowns.

The results suggest that if facilities for social interaction are provided, social life will occur. Conversely, the lack of such facilities effectively precludes such interaction. The presence of social interaction is cited in the literature review as an essential component of cultural landscapes (Baum, 2002).

Most suburban-strip Chinatowns serve utilitarian functions similar to all suburban-strip shopping centers. The results strongly suggest that a suburban-strip Chinatown with a Chinese motif, Chinese-themed landscaping, and facilities for Chinese social activities offers more than only utility.

Moreover, the research indicates suburban-strip Chinatowns

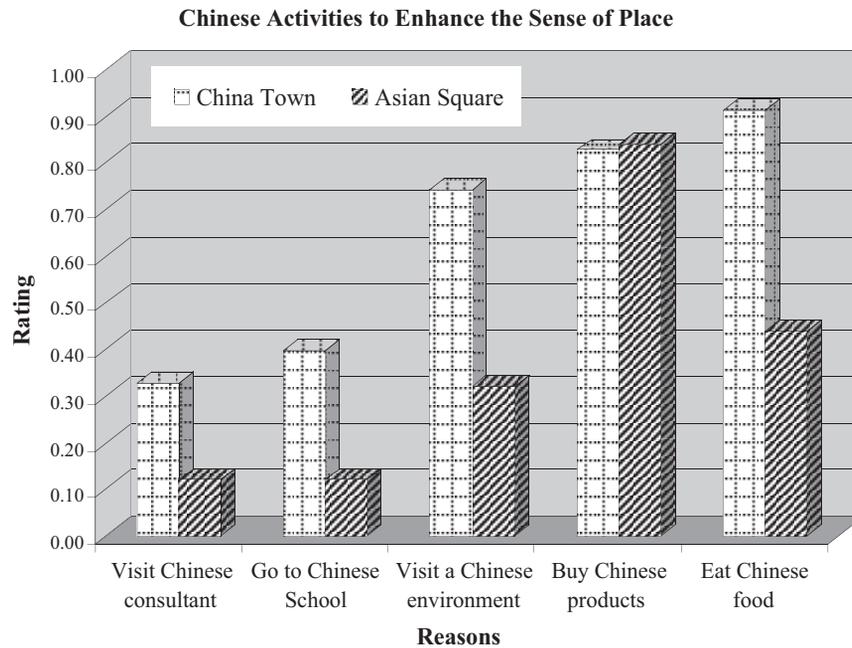


Fig. 3. Mean rating of reasons respondents visit suburban-strip Chinatowns.

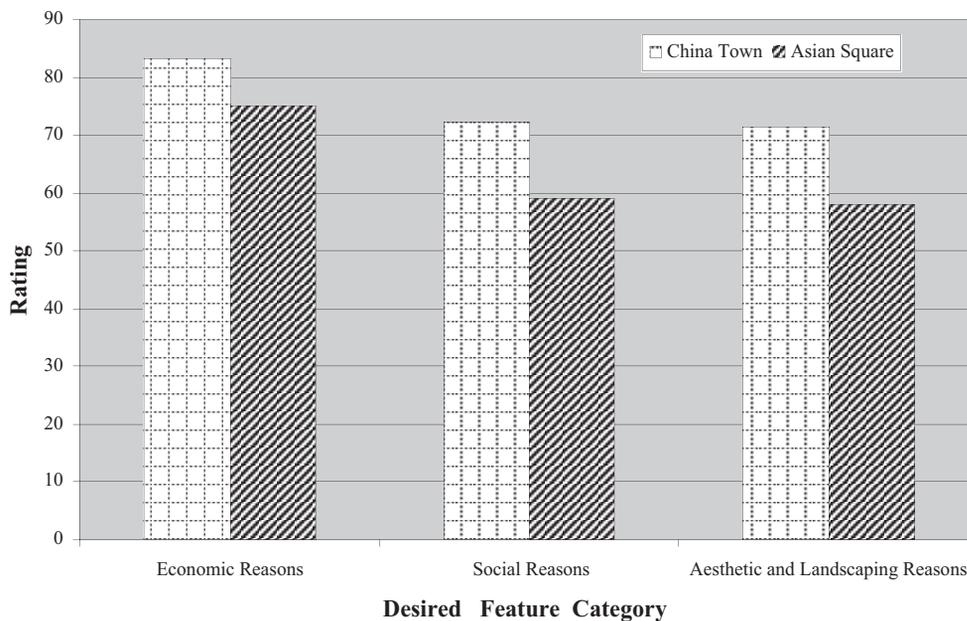


Fig. 4. Mean rating of desired changes/additions to increase respondents' visit of suburban-strip Chinatowns.

that meet identifiable characteristics for cultural landscapes as defined in the literature are worthy of future study. The researcher's observations and the survey data support the finding that provision of educational opportunities is an important component of suburban-strip Chinatowns' role as a cultural landscape.

Based on the findings generated in this research, the following conclusion is evident: the creation of a built landscape that includes cultural motifs, artifacts, and landscaping, and one that provides space and facilities for social interaction and education, enhances the identity and sense of place of a suburban-strip Chinatown, and makes such strip centers analogous to older Chinatowns in their cultural value to their communities.

The results of the study have economic implications to the

green industry in general and the horticulture industry in the state of Florida, in particular. Both can benefit from developing suburban-strip Chinatowns that take into account basic landscape elements such as traditional plant materials and themed landscape hardware in keeping with traditional Chinatowns.

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