Historic Preservation in Urban Ethnic Enclaves: Four Chinatown Case Studies

Historic preservation in ethnic enclaves is complex for several reasons. First, ethnic enclaves are categories of space and place based on social histories, but not necessarily architectural styles. The identities of ethnic enclaves are defined socially, not architecturally. Hence the identity and character of an ethnic enclave is subject to change depending on the community that inhabits it despite the constant existence and physical appearance of a structure within the neighborhood. Creating a cohesive historic narrative for a structure within an ethnic enclave or for the entire neighborhood that reflects the diverse communities that gave the neighborhood its character, sense of place and significance is a challenge. Secondly, protecting cultural heritage in urban ethnic enclaves can lead to issues when a community assumes that advocacy for protection will lead to political or economic empowerment. Establishing cultural heritage based on ethnicity necessitates highlighting how an ethnic community’s social customs, values and architectural traditions are distinct from the majority or other ethnic communities’. Continuous emphasis on these differences can reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate societal expectations regarding an ethnic community, regardless of whether or not these stereotypes or expectations are accurate. Although most communities have legitimate claims to political empowerment, arguments that are based on a distinct ethnic identity can have adverse effects. Finally, many preservationists have cautioned that heritage politics can have a divisive effect when the emphasis on specific ethnic or racial experiences masks shared historical experiences that could otherwise unite disparate groups.

In this thesis I use four downtown Chinatowns in the United States as case studies to determine how the character of these ethnic neighborhoods have been defined, whether or not this character can be preserved and how various factors have influenced the outcomes of historic preservation efforts. San Francisco and New York’s Chinatowns have consistently had the largest number of residential Chinese immigrants, and both have symbolic roles for the Chinese American community. In addition, both are known widely as tourist attractions. Seattle and Washington’s Chinatown buildings are protected by historic preservation regulations at various levels, but exhibit divergent preservation histories, goals and results. Chinatowns continue to be the object of actions by historic preservationists, community advocates, urban planners and residents. I hope that the results of this thesis will be a contribution to the discussion on how historic preservationists can play an effective role among these players to protect significant cultural heritage resources in urban ethnic enclaves.