

Chinatown in the Ether

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PHOTO: An Te Liu

The following essay reflects upon various realities and conditions that produce the contemporary Chinatown in North America. The idea of “ether,” both in my title and as a more general idea, speaks to a set of conditions that is both palpable and non-substantive; ether is a way of thinking about emptiness or “nothing” in more instrumental terms—as a space we inhabit and move within, and one in which it is possible to establish a sense of place, purpose, and character despite the amorphous and expansive aspects of this space. In many ways, it is within this space—the ether—that the contemporary Chinatown is finding its current habitat, telling a story not only about the evolution (or devolution) of the so-called traditional Chinatown, but also about changing settlement patterns and their effect on how we (not as Asians or even immigrants, but all of us) might come to understand, in alternative terms, an idea of the local.

Before launching into the ether, let me summarize some of my research on what is perhaps the Asian-North American metropolis *par excellence*, Vancouver. Richmond, British Columbia, is just adjacent to Vancouver and to the south. Its population is over 40% ethnic Chinese. In previous research, I became interested in how Richmond was forming a decidedly non-urban or extra-urban counterpart to the traditional Chinatown of downtown Vancouver and contributing in particularly interesting ways (both architecturally and socially) to the increasingly common phenomenon of the suburban satellite Chinatown, or “China-burb.” The most interesting aspects of the Chinese malls in Richmond arose when pre-existing commercial building types—the big box retail outlet, the large scale regional mall, and the strip mall—were being transformed in ways that began to describe a divergent commercial vernacular that was not only more Asian, but also more urban. These Chinese malls formed a counterpart to the characteristics of more typical North American malls, which possess a clearer organizational logic and stricter regulation of zones of operation, are more spatially and programmatically predictable, and are therefore coming to represent much of what the city is *not*. We can witness the emergence of what might be termed the Asian Maxi-mall, whose critical traits can be roughly described in three ways: as *typological hybridity*, as a *return to the bazaar*, and as *programmatic instability*.

Typological hybridity configures many of the Asian malls as curiously expanded versions of the strip mall. The usual shops face the parking lots, but now with vast interiors featuring multilevel, maze-like shopping arcades. It is easy to get completely lost in these spaces. The interiors are roughly based on the regional mall type; however, they have become more dense, intense, and unpredictable. The plan of the Empire Centre in Richmond represents another kind of hybrid strip mall with buildings and parking organized around an inter-block “street.” We can observe an urban commercial edge on both street fronts, and a village of single and multiple storey buildings serviced by surface and rooftop parking.

President Plaza in Richmond is perhaps the most curious and complex hybrid building, a kind of Cadillac of architectural crossbreeding. It begins as the Radisson

business hotel. The Radisson feeds into a high-rise office building and a six-storey-high atrium space with an adjacent multi-level parking structure, which finally terminates the building. The Plaza's interiors describe a spatial and experiential richness, with complex sequences of spaces large and small, formal and intimate. President Plaza cannot decide if it is one building or at least five or six, if it is beautiful or ugly. An architectural mixed bag, it is somewhat like a city dropped into the suburb.

Moving from buildings to their occupants, the character of the bazaar links the interior life of the Asian mall back to the life of the city. Cities are characterized by variety, density, and mutability. Their spaces facilitate genuine social activity. If the environments of transaction in the North American suburb have failed in offering this interaction, the Asian maxi-mall seems to revive it. In the bazaar, the persuasion of the merchant is also revived. They hawk their wares in a space of exchange that is aggressive, messy, and vital, revealing aspects both of consumption and production. Goods spill out of shops and share the space of the lanes, blurring the boundary between the two. Merchants set up informal and temporary stalls, making all available spaces into spaces of transaction. Zones and activities merge and are overlaid as implied boundaries shift. In Yaohan Centre one can find temporary vendors in the foreground and, a little further along, the checkout stalls of a supermarket. Beyond the checkout stalls, two independent stores have been inserted within the space of the supermarket itself. Stalls within malls, little stores inside bigger stores—here space is divided and subdivided in an articulation of space through commerce.

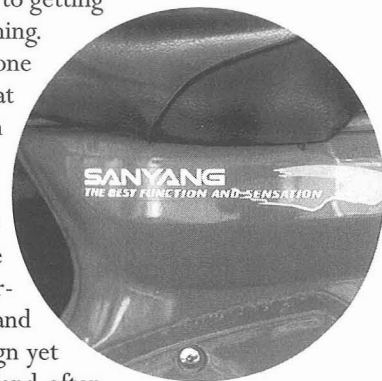
In the bazaar, issues of zoning are dealt with in an *ad hoc* manner. One shop owner may subdivide an already tight lot into two smaller units: one in front with half its products out in the hall, and the other wrapping behind. This *ad hoc* allocation of space creates a kind of *programmatic instability*. Programmatic instability is aided and abetted by two factors: *strata-lot ownership* and *laissez-faire zoning*. Strata-lot designation allows for outright purchase of a retail space within the mall, creating a village of independent storeowners who are free to operate, lease, or sublease their spaces. Because the lots are privately owned and operated, a wide variety of unique goods and services present themselves in an equally unusual range of spatial configurations. Laissez-faire zoning pushes the practice of mixed-use (and mixed sensibilities) space to an extreme, offering diversity and even surprise.

President Plaza, as indicated on the mall directory, is host to a hotel, an array of restaurants, a mall and supermarket, a spa and aesthetic services, offices, and the list goes on. Rising further through the complex, we arrive at a skylit courtyard where professional services such as a chiropractor, a dentist's office, and an educational foundation are interspersed with antique stores and cell phone and import-export companies. Following the light at the top level of the building, one finally arrives at the last tenant. This is, amazingly, the Buddha's Light International Association, complete with a temple and a monastery where monks actually study and reside.

The phrase “best function and sensation” seems logical enough, but in Richmond, the process of translation has offered new possibilities for density and diversity, even as the process restates obvious goals of good buildings and social spaces. In many ways, the malls of Richmond revive the rituals of human transaction in increasingly urbanized environments, which contest the homogeneity and conformity of the suburbs. The malls somehow do allow for the best function *and* sensation, for only in a place like the Asian mall, or maybe in a good city, can you get a bowl of noodles, ride an elevator with a monk on the way to getting your teeth cleaned, and then do karaoke until four in the morning.

There is, then, a very rich world existing in these malls, one that is not well known to many westerners (Canadians), but that is thoroughly assimilated into daily experience, and even taken for granted by Asians. While Richmond is a relatively established Asian enclave, we also know that Asians and Asian malls are popping up in less likely, more unfamiliar and emergent terrains. Let me turn to the phenomenon of the monster home in this regard. This saga revolves around questions of where certain groups of immigrants choose to live, the homes they buy and build, and how ideas and ideals of a new domesticity in a foreign yet familiar land are struggling to find some kind of expression (and often encountering opposition) in architectural terms. This is a story concerning the influx (mainly from pre-reunification Hong Kong) of so-called entrepreneurial class Asian immigrants who preferred to locate themselves in the most traditionally non-ethnic Vancouver neighbourhoods, such as Kerrisdale and Shaunnessey. This settlement is especially ironic, since there had actually been a covenant forbidding Chinese people and Jews from settling in these areas. Earlier in the century, it had also been common for residents to keep servants, referred to as “the Chinaman” in early house plans.

What was and perhaps is still most striking about this episode centres on the issue of visibility. The new Asian arrivals, not so much the people but their habits, began marking the physical fabric of a sensitive area. Huge homes maximized land use and were characterized by double height columns, big windows affording a view of the chandelier hanging in the vestibule, gates and paved front lawns, large expanses of stucco or, alternatively, conspicuous stone veneers. It seemed that the harder these houses tried to emulate the building traditions surrounding them, the stranger and even more visible the results were. Moving forward into the past, it was as if the homes were holding up a slightly distorted mirror to their neighbours, with their funny turrets, gazebos, and other attempts at an anglo-historicist style. The homes mark a curious shift from the post-colonial to the cross-or poly-colonial. Indeed, despite various efforts at compliance, these homes would invariably violate some form of etiquette in the process of translation. This situation raises questions for all of us, which might be posed as such: How do we



choose to locate ourselves? In what style do we build? How might a transplanted ethnicity manifest itself in the physical fabric of a locale?

Can we read the dramatic transformation of the Vancouver city centre, precipitated by the development of countless high-rise condominium towers over the last decade, in terms of such cultural translations? Many of these buildings had been developed and sold within the context of an international property market. Often, units were pre-sold sight-unseen to overseas purchasers seeking to establish assets and a residential base in Canada. As with the monster homes, the towers commonly became the domain (or a kind of international space station) for what is popularly termed “the astronaut”: the sky-bound, trans-Pacific Asian nomad with multiple passports, residences, and dispersed family. This new itinerant population, together with a teeming number of Asian tourists and visiting Asian language students, has transformed areas like the Robson North district, giving it a distinctly trans-Pacific character and producing a delirious sensation of being both here and somewhere else at the same time.

How do all of these accounts force us to think about the complex intersections between the local and the global, the here, there, and anywhere? How do we arrive at a sense of place and make meaningful connections between where we are from and where we might find ourselves? After living for the last ten years in Los Angeles, Paris, and Vancouver, I am back in Toronto living downtown in Chinatown. I knew that Chinatown was changing, receiving new immigrants from South-East Asia and many other places, and that many of these new Asian immigrants to Toronto were locating themselves not in Chinatown, but in Scarborough, Mississauga, Richmond Hill, and Markham. One day, in search of some good Shanghainese dumplings, a friend from Hong Kong recalled that there might be a Ding Tai Fung, a famous chain of Shanghainese restaurants, located somewhere in Toronto. She called up the Chinese 411 service and found the address, which turned out to be in Markham, in something called First Markham Place. Ding Tai Fung is a fairly exclusive chain, with only a handful of locations in Taipei, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, Los Angeles ... and now Markham. Here I began to discover the suburban Chinese malls of the very outer reaches of Toronto.

A map from the 1996 census shows the settlement patterns of the most recent immigrants to Toronto. The patterns indicate that there is no discernible concentration in the city core, where the old Chinatown is located. If there is a pattern, it is a push upward and outward, especially to the north. This is where Richmond Hill and Markham are located. Markham is about 20 miles from Toronto’s downtown core. Formed in 1971 with a population of 36,000, by 2001 the population had reached 267,000, over 30% of which are of ethnic Chinese origin. Its population is expected to grow by another 70% over the next 30 years. Markham represents one of the outer (but certainly not last) frontiers of suburban expansion in the greater Toronto area, with new, single-family housing and retail/commercial developments further encroaching on what was recently

considered the countryside, beyond the fringes of Toronto. Here we find a wide-open landscape of giant thoroughfares lined with large big-box stores, strip malls, plazas, and office complexes. It is difficult to see where and how people live, as most of the residential enclaves are set back from the streets and face inward.

Most of the Chinese malls in the Greater Toronto Area are not as complex or typologically inventive as the Richmond malls, but they do operate, at the level of their interiors, like small cities. Almost all of the stores are independent, offering a very diverse range of goods and services, and flexible opening and closing times. The malls are commercial manifestations of a community taking shape in a new land, among other cultures. They offer a locus for social interaction and cater to the daily needs of an ethnic group at a neighborhood scale, while also providing specialty goods for a population at a regional scale. The malls may be obscure, even undetectable within a seemingly barren landscape, but inside they begin to form a distinct locality of vibrant satellite enclaves seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The malls are places where a culture can express itself, flourish, and take hold. This may seem unlikely in what may be described as a “non-place,” to use Marc Augé’s term, but as Augé maintains, “... the same things apply to the non-place as to the place. It never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it...”¹

The evolution of Chinatown in Toronto and elsewhere is about a steady migration, or wandering-out from the city in many directions, of people finding sites between and among other sites and other cultures. There are over 30 Chinese malls and centres north of Toronto alone, all taking various forms and scales. There are now more Chinese people living outside of China than there are Canadians living in Canada. Fixed and bounded, the old Chinatowns may continue to survive, but they no longer represent the most complete story about Asian immigration, settlement, and commerce. What we witness is something that has a weaker sense of representation, that is harder to identify and locate. The malls represent a mutation, multiplication, and dispersal of Chinatown—they are mobile, adaptable, and sometimes invisible. They have no natural habitat, but they can land and begin to participate in forming meaningful locations and a contingent sense of place that is equally a result of an intrinsic foreign quality. Amidst the ether, these places are simultaneously foreign and domestic, familiar and strange, non-urban and kind-of-urban, somewhere, nowhere, and anywhere.

NOTES

1 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 78.