

With Pao Arts Center, A Creative Chinatown Finds Space in a Changing Boston

By Max Larkin

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Young ballet dancers practice at the opening of the Pao Arts Center. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

On a rainy Saturday, the drums of a traditional lion dance drowned out the cars headed toward the Expressway. And underneath hundreds of luxury condos, a teacher put a youth ballet troupe through the paces, waving fans.

It's fitting: a brand-new space — several classrooms, a theater, and a gallery — to celebrate and preserve a neighborhood culture right alongside the forces that are driving its change.

The idea for the Pao Arts Center took shape only two years ago, but it feels like longer to Giles Li. Maybe it's because he and others have long dreamed of bringing an arts space to Boston's Chinatown to make up for decades of displacement.

Li raised funds for and oversaw the project as executive director of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), Greater Boston's largest social service provider for Asian families.

At the ribbon cutting, Li reminded the audience that just over 50 years ago, the parcel we were standing on — Parcel 24, now the site of the One Greenway high-rise building — was home to over 200 Chinatown families.

Then came the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. “The people who lived on this very land that we’re standing on were displaced, and their homes destroyed, to make way for the entrance ramp for the highway,” Li said in his remarks.

The ensuing exodus was a reminder that, when it came to questions of transit, zoning and the real-estate market, Chinatown residents could be overruled.



Visitors walk by a portrait by Wen Ti-Tsen at the opening of the Pao Arts Center. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

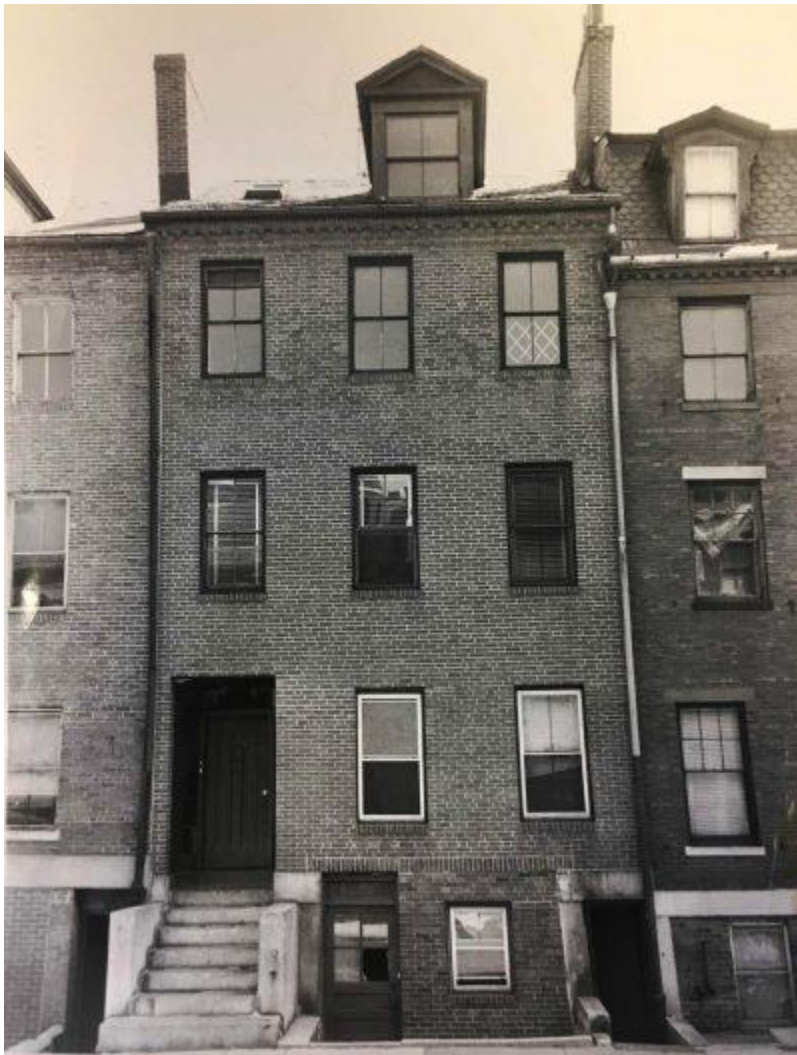
But there’s no lack of creativity in the neighborhood, Li says, in coping with change or in the arts. “Behind closed doors,” he says, there was always dance, opera and martial arts in fraternal organizations and social clubs. “There’s a rich cultural life that exists in Chinatown, but it’s accessible based on who you know,” Li says.

Li speaks from experience; he himself was a spoken-word artist for years before coming to lead BCNC. At the opening of the Pao, he asked audiences to empathize with immigrants who loved dance or music

overseas and came to Boston to find it wasn't in their neighborhood or in their budget. Or with young children who can't find faces like theirs on the walls of the city's great museums, where much of the Asian art is centuries old.

So physical eviction only represents one kind of dislocation. Li and others are hoping that the Pao Center will begin to make it right.

'It Was Traumatic'



A photograph of 116 Hudson St., the Yees' family home, before it was demolished (Courtesy of Cynthia Yee)

You can still see the kind of rowhouses that used to be on Parcel 24 on Hudson Street, hemmed in by Tufts Medical Center and other more recent development. The proof of the displacement is up the road, where the street curves to accommodate the Expressway overhead.

Cynthia Yee grew up in one of the rowhouses that was seized by eminent domain in 1962. She says the Turnpike Authority left the family with two checks totaling \$11,378.86.

When she describes the Hudson Street of her memory, it was a tight-knit community — a south Chinese village atmosphere recreated in Boston. Yee laughs when she remembers that after a neighbor saw her cross Kneeland Street into Chinatown's commercial section, it was a matter of minutes before her father called home from work. She says he'd be wondering: "Why'd you cross the street?"

By the time Yee was a teenager, having so many "eyes on the street" was more stifling than cozy. Still, "it was traumatic" learning that her family's home had been seized. The Yees ended up moving to the edge of the "Combat Zone" district, where they became accustomed to the presence of sex workers and drugs.

That painful experience became the stuff of art. Yee is a writer, and shared a one-page story about her mother May-Soon, who worked long hours as a seamstress on Hudson Street.

The story ends:

My mother makes fifty cents a shirt and was very proud to hear when she applied for Social Security that she had earned \$10,000 in her lifetime, sewing shirts facing that dirty milk sky and that Expressway, which someday would take our home.

Yee says her mother had an eye for color — red with green, orange with blue — and would have benefited from a place to practice her art. The same thing goes for her father and his brothers: They "did a lot of jamming with classical Chinese instruments," Yee says. But during the day, "they were a waiter, a maitre d', a cook — and that took up a lot of their time."



Writer and teacher Cynthia Yee overlooks Hudson Street, where she grew up, behind where the Pao Arts Center now exists. (Max Larkin/WBUR)

When Yee visits One Greenway's hypermodern lobby in her walks around the neighborhood, she notes the change. In the building that houses the Pao Arts Center, one-bedroom apartments are renting for at least \$3,165 a month (though the complex does feature dozens of affordable units.) "Not a lot of Chinese faces," Yee says.

She stands at the back of the Greenway building overlooking the street that used to be "heaven." She's mostly optimistic about the Pao; she might try to convene a writer's group in one of its classrooms. But she's not sure what role it will play in the future of her old neighborhood: "I don't know how it's going to be used. It depends on what they're going to do with it."

For now, the center's staff are trying to strike a balance. A display of contemporary portraits by Wen-Ti Tsen is offset by the classical paintings of Mei Ching. During the years that the Turnpike Authority was bulldozing Hudson Street, Mei was in China, learning to paint birds and flowers at the prestigious Hubei Institute of Fine Arts.



Mei Ching (right) and his cousin look at his painting, "World of Flowers." (Max Larkin/WBUR)

Today Mei lives in Quincy, producing paintings that are lavish and inventive. But like the Chinatown concerts of yesteryear, they would be almost impossible to find if you didn't know the right people. (The paintings in this show are available for sale.)

Mei says he had some hesitation about producing two large canvases for the opening — one of panda bears in a wood, the other a "World of Flowers." (Mei spoke in Mandarin Chinese, and his daughter interpreted.) It was a lot of work, but he says he was eager to share it — and especially in Chinatown. Mei says he hopes "it will reach a lot more Chinese people," especially young people who might discover the same passion he did.

Giles Li is clear that he wants the center to be a locus for education. A close partnership with Bunker Hill Community College will keep the lights on and the space full of free and affordable classes in a broad range of areas, from culturally-specific art like Mei's to acting, "mass media" and accounting.

So there will be college students working alongside newcomers and neighbors of all generations on Parcel 24, where so many Chinese-Americans came, lived and then were made to leave. Li says new immigrants should have the same access to art classes and experiences as anyone else.

"There's a lot of reasons why arts programs are important, and I could tell you some data," Li says. "But I think we all know intrinsically that art makes for a healthier community, a better life. That's really the whole story."