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**BERKELEY  
PLANNING  
JOURNAL**

Volume 32

August 2022

**COVID-19:  
Adaptation Under  
Uncertainty**

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Accessed August 2022 via Pexels

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**Berkeley Planning Journal**

University of California  
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228 Wurster Hall  
Berkeley, CA 94720  
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ISSN 1047-5192

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## Volume 32 Editors' Note

*Irene Farah, Liubing Xie, Tyler Pullen*

More than two years since the beginning of the global pandemic,precedented times are both hard to remember and difficult to foresee. COVID-19 changed – and continues to change – our relationship to our built environment, each other, and *ourselves*. In nearly every context and across nearly every scale, we needed to adjust and adapt our behavior and expectations to accommodate ever-evolving public health protocols, social norms, and personal preferences. Inevitably, different places adopted different approaches to mitigate the spread and impact of the pandemic, with varying impacts and degrees of success. <sup>☐☐☐</sup>But what *are* these adaptations? Who implemented them, and under what authority? How might they *permanently* change our relationship to space and to other people? The ongoing transition towards a “post-COVID” world provides ample opportunity to interrogate these questions and learn from the multi-faceted impacts of the pandemic.

<sup>☐☐☐</sup>The research in this volume holds a magnifying glass to some of those changes and sheds light on new and existing dynamics in cities. To start off, we have a series of essays written by students and faculty from UC Berkeley’s Department of City and Regional Planning that highlight the pandemic’s impact on urban social and economic power dynamics and strategies to preserve existing political and social systems. Next, <sup>☐☐☐</sup>one author reflects on how positionality and identity influences research and activism both in and outside of the COVID-19 context, particularly in the Global South. Another paper contrasts the impact of the pandemic on the respective Chinatown neighborhoods in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver (Canada). The authors assess how each local government’s approach to business preservation influenced the response and recovery of the three communities, highlighting new and existing challenges to historic and cultural preservation in urban environments. Lastly, a case study uses mixed methods to analyze outdoor commercial spaces propped up during the pandemic on San Francisco’s Valencia Street, a prominent commercial corridor in the Mission District. The paper looks at patterns in the design and use of these spaces, and their tentative impact on the perception of private and public space and pedestrian behavior.

The pandemic, while tragic and ongoing, offers unique opportunities to learn about ourselves, our cities, and the interactions between the two. We hope this volume inspires critical reflection on the challenges and adaptations to our urban environments beyond the scope of COVID-19, specifically. Some lessons are old, some lessons are new, but they all shed light on our present situation and can critically inform the ongoing recovery efforts. We welcome any and all commentary and feedback on this volume and the research within. Thank you for reading.



## COVID-19 and the Future of Urban Life

*Meiqing Li, Pavan Yedavalli, Liubing Xie, Sai Balakrishnan, Zachary Lamb, Karen Chapple  
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In Summer 2020 amid the global pandemic, the Department of City and Regional Planning at University of California, Berkeley hosted a colloquium series at which faculty and graduate students presented their work related to COVID-19. The discussion spanned a wide range of topics around urban form, economic productivity, design, food justice, housing and displacement, political movement, and social control both in the context of countries in the Global South and the U.S. This *White Paper* contains six essays originated from the colloquium, each bringing a unique vision of how the COVID-19 pandemic is currently shaping and will continue to shape our cities in the future and what lessons we can learn from it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unimaginable adversity, with nations across the globe devising ways to cope with the loss of life, economic productivity, and social fabric. Due to the agnostic nature of the virus, no facet of society, whether in the Global North or South, has been left untouched. As beacons of economic and social agglomeration, the pre-pandemic city, in particular, has seen a rapid transformation, in often unforeseen directions. Local businesses have shuttered, while large technology companies have thrived; offices have closed, while their adjacent streets have been opened for active mobility and social activities; apartment rents have decreased, while single-family home prices have increased; the underprivileged have been adversely affected by both the virus as well as the economic reality of the pandemic, while the affluent have been largely untouched in both health and economy. Responses to COVID-19 in various nations have only exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequities, and, expectedly, not all federal, state, or local responses have been beneficial to all strata of society. This white paper focuses on several core themes that have evolved over the course of the pandemic and have behaved differently across geographies: (1) urban economics and equity (2) social and economic power dynamics, and (3) strategies to preserve urban social and economic systems.

The first two essays, by assistant professor Sai Balakrishnan and doctoral student Liubing Xie, initiate the conversation with two cases in the Global South, India and China, respectively. Balakrishnan's piece brings attention to the issue of global urban inequality revealed by COVID-19 through India's agrarian-urban spatial rift, as well as the undocumented farm workers essential to the food supply chain in the U.S., while Xie's essay illustrates the practice of mobility control and community surveillance in Beijing as a means to contain the virus. In the following essay, Professor Karen Chapple, Chair of City and Regional Planning, examines the potential residential and business displacements and replacements due to COVID-19, arguing that despite the heuristic narrative of inner-city resurgence by knowledge workers, it will likely strengthen the existing trends of urban inequality and displacement. The next essay by Zachary Lamb, assistant professor in DCRP, describes the 'resident-owned communities' (ROC) co-ops' responses to COVID-19 and shows that the social solidarity, communications infrastructure, and institutional capacity built by ROCs, as well as the network assistance provided by ROC-USA, serve as valuable resources for these socially and economically vulnerable communities in the midst of crisis. Meiqing Li, a doctoral student in DCRP, reviews the historical debate on density and public health, suggesting that in a post-pandemic world, cities can learn from one another's

experience in density management. This is echoed by the concluding piece by doctoral candidate Pavan Yedavalli, who proposes a scientific framework for cities to incorporate a time-variant measure of density in order to limit the exposure to particles.

We hope this collective effort shared by the DCRP community can provide insights into the future of our cities at this extraordinary time.

## COVID-19 and Labor-Oriented Economic Geographies

Sai Balakrishnan

COVID-19 has exposed and made visible long-festered forms of global urban inequalities. In this article, I will focus on a key dimension of the COVID-19 crisis in India, that of agrarian-urban inequalities. Though focused on India, I am keen on analyzing these agrarian-urban inequalities through a comparative lens, and I will conclude by bringing these agrarian-urban questions back home to the context of the U.S. and Northern California.<sup>1</sup>

On 24 March, 2020, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announced one of the most severe lockdowns imposed by any country as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. The government sealed district and state boundaries and suspended all public transportation; the restriction to movement across boundaries was violently enforced by the police. Within days of the lockdown, harrowing accounts and visually poignant media reports started pouring in, thanks to intrepid journalists on the ground, on the large-scale human exodus of migrants out of cities and urban regions back to their home villages. The scale of the forced human movement across boundaries was immense, matched by some estimates only by the historic precedent of the violent sorting of Hindus and Muslims during the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition. As urban migrant workers embarked on their treacherous journeys, their routes revealed the spatial fault-lines of uneven development in India: migrants were largely walking home from the cities and urban enclaves in the prosperous western regions of India back to their villages in the eastern regions. In other words, these migrant journeys revealed that India's most vulnerable labor force was migrating almost across the width of the country—from east to west—in search of work.

These long-distance migrant journeys also exposed the exclusionary nature of India's contemporary urbanization. After economic liberalization, which was officially enacted in 1991, urban policy has largely taken the form of logistics infrastructures and urban enclaves, which policy-makers argue are needed to unshackle India from its socialist agrarian past and propel the society into a globally competitive urban future. These logistics and urban enclaves—such as economic corridors, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and container ports—are largely concentrated in the western and southeastern regions of the country. More than 90 percent of the labor employed in these enclaves are unorganized casual workers, hired on flexible contracts without benefits so that their labor resources match the temporal needs of a “just-in-time” and “lean” economy. As they lack urban social welfare protection, these informal workers continue to rely on the marginal plots of land in their home villages in the eastern region of the country as an essential safety net during times of crisis. And it was to these safety nets that they were returning when the emergency lockdown was imposed.

In a recent blog article (Balakrishnan, 2020), I argued that we cannot understand India's spatial rift without bringing into view the longer arc of colonial and postcolonial agricultural modernization. One of the most important insights from mapping contemporary India's spatial rift is the almost neat overlap between contemporary urban enclaves, where work, albeit in the form of urban informal work, is available, and the former Green Revolution regions. The Green

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the participants in the fall 2020 DCRP PhD colloquium who encouraged me to look at how the agrarian-urban question from India travels to other contexts, including the U.S.

Revolution was an agricultural modernization program that coalesced around Cold War geopolitics, when the U.S., via a network of scientists and private foundations, exported scientific expertise and financial aid to Third World countries for modernizing peasants and averting a turn to communism (cf. Cullather, 2010). If we had to draw a broad-brush map of the Green Revolution regions, it would trace an arc from the northwest to the southeast, and it is these regions that saw the emergence of agrarian prosperity and organized agrarian classes. The geography of the Green Revolution itself was shaped by prior colonial-era irrigation canals, but the point I want to underscore here is how an uneven geography of agrarian capitalism became the seedbed for a new geography of urban spatial rifts in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (for a map of these overlapping agrarian-urban geographies, see Balakrishnan 2020).

India's ongoing migrant crisis raises urgent questions on what a labor-oriented economic geography could look like. At its core, the crisis shows us that agrarian distress and urban informal work are two sides of the same coin, and India's most vulnerable labor force of nearly 100 million internal migrants are caught in a spatial rift between agrarian expulsion and urban exclusion. The crisis also brings to the fore not just the inadequacy, but the very exclusions inherent in familiar taken-for-granted categories like city/village and urban/rural. Due to its specific development trajectory, India has made more progress in rural social welfare programs than in urban ones: for instance, the right to employment program<sup>2</sup> that guarantees rural residents 100 days of paid work per year is unique in that no country, not even western social-democratic states, has anything resembling a right-to-work guarantee. But these "rural" safety nets exclude urban informal workers, many of whom are engaged in complex seasonal patterns of migration. How can those who labor on their subsistence plots of land (and also on the lands of larger landowners) during harvest season but then migrate to urban enclaves during the lean agricultural months to work as casual workers be categorized: are they urban or rural workers, are they self-employed or informal workers? India's most vulnerable workers do not fit into neat governmental categories, and to foreground labor in economic geography demands a fundamental rethink of the very categories we use for social welfare and public action.

If the migrant crisis exposed precarious labor arrangements across India's agrarian-urban spatial rift, the COVID-19 crisis also made visible the otherwise invisibilized labor linkages across the agrarian-urban divide in the U.S. During the pandemic, media reports in the U.S. have been struck by two images that exemplify the geographies of food and cities (Page, 2020): on the one hand, farmers in Idaho have been stuck with mammoth mountains of rotting potatoes, and on the other hand, long lines of cars wait outside food banks as the U.S. faces one of its worst employment crises. At a time of unprecedented need, why is there not an easy and straightforward link between farms and food banks? And the answer lies in the U.S. agro-food supply chain, which employs more than 21 million workers and is the nation's largest employment sector (Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, 2016). Most of these workers are not unionized, and are paid some of the lowest wages in the U.S. economy. From farm workers (most of whom are undocumented), pork, meatpacking and other

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<sup>2</sup> The right-to-work act is part of a wider raft of rights-based laws enacted by the United Progressive Alliance, a national coalition of left and left-of-center political parties that governed India from 2004–2014. The right-to-work act is called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA).

food-processing workers, truck drivers for warehouse and food distribution companies, grocery store workers, and restaurant servers, cooks, and dishwashers, the agro-food supply chain is labor-intensive. And it is at a time of crisis, when the logistics infrastructures that connect farms and food banks break down, that these otherwise invisibilized workers are made visible. These geographies of commodified food are of proximate concern for those of us in Berkeley, with one of the two largest industrialized agricultural regions in the U.S. being right here in our backyard of Central Valley, California.

In the varied institutional contexts of India and the U.S., the pandemic crisis has exposed the crucial role of labor (largely exploited labor) in articulating logistics infrastructures that cut across the agrarian-urban divide. It is the invisibilized labor of peasant-migrants in India and undocumented farmworkers in the U.S. that ensure the seamless, frictionless working of these logistics infrastructures. Creative labor organizing recognizes these labor links, and in one of the most effective efforts of labor organizing across the agrarian-urban divide, the United Farm Workers, an agrarian, largely Mexican-American group active in organizing farmworkers in Central Valley, combined forces with the Oakland-based urban, African-African Black Panther Party in 1968 to disrupt the agro-food chain of the largest supermarket corporation on the west coast, Safeway (Araiza, 2009). The pandemic is now revealing these labor linkages in new ways, as labor disruptions threaten to disarticulate these logistics / global supply chains. And the state is responding to these labor threats through exceptional measures that range from coercive to placatory. In India, throughout the lockdown, logistics enclaves (such as container ports) were categorized as essential services and they continued uninterrupted operations. A skeptical view of the lockdown is that the Indian state kept workers “kettled” in during the crisis, thus ensuring minimal labor interruptions to the circulation of commodities and capital. Meanwhile, in the U.S., in a surprising move, the Department of Homeland Security has granted “essential work” letters to undocumented farm workers on the grounds that they are “critical to the food supply chain” (Jordan, 2020).

In our “business as usual” times, labor that underpins these logistics infrastructures is largely invisibilized. I use “invisibilized” as a verb because workers are not invisible, but are rendered invisible through processes in which urban planning and planners are implicated, including the seemingly naturalized categories we use of the urban/rural. To view the urban only as the governmental category of the city brackets out of view essential workers such as peasant migrants in India’s urban enclaves or the undocumented farm workers in U.S. industrial agriculture.<sup>3</sup> These categories abet in the making of an ‘essential but disposable’ labor force, and when planners use these spatial categories of city / suburb / village uncritically, they are complicit in processes that render invisible the unequal connections across these seemingly disparate urban and rural sites. If the pandemic can augur new critical openings for planners, an urgent call-to-action that arises is the following: how can we foreground labor in analyses of economic geography, particularly when labor is trapped in these liminal “desakota”<sup>4</sup> geographies

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<sup>3</sup> On critiques of the category of the city and its conflation with urbanization, see, inter alia, Brenner, 2019. Also see Chhabria, 2019, for a brilliant critique that situates the category of the “city” within longer colonial-capitalist histories.

<sup>4</sup> On desakota, see McGee, Terry (1991); on a critical re-reading of desakota in the context of industrial agriculture and the prison-industrial complex in Central Valley, California, see Gilmore (2008).



that are not-city, not-suburb, not-village? Perhaps one possible way forward is to critically and fundamentally rethink the keywords that form the title of Berkeley's planning department—"urban" and "region"—and to imagine new spatial categories of the "regional" that can center the lives, livelihoods, and life-worlds of invisibilized non-urban labor in the making of urban regions.

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# Surveillance and Control of Mobility during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Beijing

*Liubing Xie*

Although COVID-19 hit the city of Wuhan hard at the very beginning of the global pandemic, the scale of the outbreaks in other cities and regions of China has been limited. China successfully “flattened the curve” in February 2020, only one month after the initial outbreak in Wuhan, and it managed to further limit the community transmission to a negligible amount in March. The speed of China's response is remarkable, albeit the initial concealment of information and the scale and severity of the lockdown was unprecedented. In this article, I address how the state mobilized such a scale of surveillance and control of mobility in a relatively short period of time, delineating the way in which the state achieved its goal of large-scale surveillance of people's everyday life. Taking Beijing as an example, based on some preliminary analysis of press coverage and phone interviews, I suggest that the infrastructure of surveillance and control was formed long before the COVID-19 pandemic through the meticulously designed built forms of *shequ* (社区) or *xiaoqu* (小区), as well as the grid management (网格化管理) *shequ* governance structure.

## ***Monitoring Border-crossing at all Scales***

Before delving into the micro-scale surveillance and control of mobility at the scale of *shequ*, I will first review the multi-scale border control that was developed according to the complex and hierarchical structure of the Chinese bureaucratic system. Many provinces and cities in China deployed strict lockdowns and mandatory 14-day quarantines for people arriving from other regions at the earlier stages of the pandemic. Within cities, *shequ* monitors the mobility of residents within the residential compounds. The degree of surveillance and control is adjusted according to the assessed risk at the subdistrict office (街道) and district levels. When COVID-19 became a pandemic, the state closed the national border and limited the return of overseas Chinese nationals.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since Wuhan's city-wide lockdown, techniques of border control have both scaled up to the national level and scaled down to the district, subdistrict, and *shequ* levels. The swift and flexible adjustment of the severity of border control seems to have effectively contained the spread of the virus. Moreover, I argue that the micro-level border control based on the grid of *shequ* has been central to China's multi-scale management of border-crossing as it effectively regulates the conduct of every individual and directly engages with residents' everyday life.

## ***Shequ at the Front Line of the “People's War” against the Pandemic***

Community building and community self-governance have been central practices that have helped to reconstruct the Chinese urban governance structure when the socialist time work unit system disintegrated and neoliberal techniques of governance were deployed by the post-socialist state (Bray, 2006). *Shequ* or *xiaoqu* in post-socialist China is at once a built form of residential compounds that resemble western gated communities and a basic unit for urban governance and self-governance. At the time of COVID-19 pandemic, this networked structure of urban communities of *shequ* was activated and given new functions and meanings. The state and state-owned media widely used

the rhetoric of war to mobilize people to participate in the common goal of “fighting the pandemic” (抗疫), and *shequ* is viewed as the frontline of the “people’s war” (人民的战争). The vice mayor of Beijing announced:

Beijing pushes a range of human forces to ‘sink down’ (力量下沉), around 1.6 million party members and citizens have dedicated themselves to the work at *shequ* level, launched blanket investigations, strictly controlled *shequ* and villages, and implemented the isolation and observation of 3.65 million people. We could say that we have started a people’s war at the front line of *shequ*.

The disciplinary structure of *shequ* grid networks, which were previously largely invisible, were activated and became the sites where both the state power and grassroots organizations meet under the banner of the people’s war against the pandemic. Many historians (e.g., Strand, 1989; Reed, 2000) have suggested that the boundaries of state and society in China have never been clearly demarcated. *Shequ* and its functioning at the time of the pandemic have exemplified this entanglement of state and society. On the one hand, the state and its discourse infiltrate society and everyday life; on the other hand, the self-governing communities (Rose, 2013), with the assistance of residents, volunteers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), become central in educating, surveilling, and controlling urban residents.

Because of the particular built environment of *shequ* or *xiaoqu*, which is enclosed by gates and walls and is densely populated, a “stay at home” or “shelter in place” order would either not work in China or it would not work the same way as it does in Western countries. Instead, the Chinese government has emphasized the enclosed management of *xiaoqu* (小区封闭式管理). When not able to effectively distance households from each other due to physical proximity, the Chinese government turned to managing the isolation and distance of residents mainly at the level of *shequ*. Furthermore, the built form of enclosed spaces, coupled with a digital gating system and easily patrolled and policed streets, provides a prototypical structure for surveillance and control of mobility. One of the most prominent functions of the *shequ* compound is the strict control of entrance by deploying both a digital gating system and security guards. Only residents who are assigned a special ID card by the resident committees are allowed to enter; the number of times a person is allowed to leave the residential compounds is regulated; when residents enter the compounds, security guards check their body temperature with a forehead thermometer.

A more networked system of grid management has strengthened the capability of *shequ* to conduct blanket surveillance. The grid management system was proposed and implemented nationally to improve the governance of *shequ* in 2013.<sup>2</sup> Each *shequ* is comprised of several “grid” units, each with a grid manager in charge of daily patrol and report. Under the grid manager, resident volunteers, who are each in charge of one building, serve as sources of information and channels for intervention. Each *xiaoqu* then constitutes part of the city-wide grid networks. During the pandemic, the grid management system deployed the surveillance of all households and public space within the *shequ*, detected the residents with recognizable symptoms, registered and enforced the transfer of infected individuals to quarantine centers, educated and informed residents using public notification, digital platforms, or door-to-door investigation, and, in some cases, organized swab tests for all residents.

As the disciplinary infrastructure for surveillance and control, *shequ* has several interconnected aspects, including the physicality of the *shequ* compounds, the smallest unit of urban governance structure (self-) governed by the residents' committee and its grid management system, and the site where the state molds residents into "high-quality (有素质)" and responsible subjects and mobilizes them at the time of the pandemic through the rhetoric of the people's war. Similar to Foucault's (1975) account of panopticon technology, in the pandemic of COVID-19, *shequ* and its grid management system economize the deployment of both personnel and time, and amplify the intensity of China's surveilling and disciplining power.

### ***Digital Platforms for Informing and Surveilling all Citizens***

Micro-level surveillance and control through the governance of the built environment and the social organization of the *shequ* has been perfected by the use of various digital platforms. Multiple digital platforms have been developed and used by the authorities to collect information and inform and educate the public about the pandemic, often at the level of the *shequ* and used by the *shequ*.<sup>3</sup> For example, it is required that people returned to Beijing to use Jingxin Xiangzhu to register to the corresponding *shequ*, register their body temperature twice a day during the 14-day mandatory quarantine, and check the results of swab tests. A Tencent Pandemic Map has been used for contact tracing at the level of the *shequ*, reporting the name of the *shequ* where the infected person lives, his/her workplace, and his/her mobility trajectories. The use of digital platforms for surveillance has surfaced and has become unprecedentedly visible because of the pandemic. It is worth pursuing further inquiries along this line.

### ***Graduated Surveillance across Shequ***

Ong's (2006a, 2006b) work on graduated citizenship has challenged the assumed notions of the universality of welfare provision across a given nation; instead, she depicts a system of variegated rights that are unevenly distributed in various zones. In the context of China, Zhang (2008) has documented the transition from the egalitarian *danwei* system to the stratified living spaces of *xiaoqu* communities. At the time of the pandemic, it has been revealed that different segments of society that are enjoying graduated citizenship are also subjected to different degrees of surveillance, which I call "graduated surveillance". While the upper-scale newly built *shequ* is mostly managed by the property owner's association and hired property management agencies, lower-income or dilapidated *shequ* are subject to the governing and surveillance of the residents' community that has a direct link with the subdistrict government. Based on my preliminary interviews, the lower-income *shequ* often surveil all the residents by door-to-door investigation and encourage mutual surveillance between residents during the pandemic. In these *shequ*, returned migrant tenants are subjected to particularly aggressive surveillance. In contrast, in the higher-scale middle-class *shequ*, the hired property management agencies undertake a much more laid-back approach.

Thus, based on above preliminary investigation, I conclude several hypotheses for further exploration: 1) flexibly monitoring border-crossing at all scales has been an effective measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 in China; 2) the walled and gated built form of *shequ* has provided a physical structure for the residents' committee to monitor all residents; 3) a hybrid use of digital platforms and the operation of residents' committee have perfected the surveillance

of all residents; and 4) the blanket surveillance and control by the state power through residents' committees is more often applied to dilapidated and lower-class *shequ* than the newly-built high-end *shequ*.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of strict lockdown, the entering of foreign nationals are strictly barred, and the Five-one policy that reduces around 90 percent of volumes of flights limits the possibilities of overseas Chinese nationals to return.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the official news website of Chinese Communist Party: <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2015/0214/c117092-26567291.html>

<sup>3</sup> These apps include for example State Council Miniprogram (国务院小程序), Jiangkang Bao (健康宝), Jingxin Xiangzhu (京心相助), Jinagxin Xianghu (京心相护) etc.



## **COVID-19 and Exclusionary Cities: A Speculation on Displacements and Replacements**

*Karen Chapple*

Economic downturns disrupt both real estate and labor markets, accelerating processes of displacement. The 2020 recession has led to widespread speculation on both the demise of cities as teleworkers flee to the suburbs, and the resurgence of cities that repurpose commercial buildings and streets as livable environments for post-pandemic occupancy.<sup>1</sup> In their synthesis, Richard Florida, Michael Storper, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2020) reason that regions will continue on their divergent paths, exacerbating inter-regional inequality, as the dominant agglomerations will continue to innovate and attract talent. Whether these knowledge workers choose to live in cities or suburbs, new economic and cultural opportunities, coupled with reduced real estate costs, could lead to the permanent transformation of metropolitan structure.

The narrative of potential transformation sounds plausible until we consider that the knowledge workers described as driving these patterns constitute only 30% of the workforce (Dobbs et al. 2012). Left out of the story are dislocated workers, not just the 19.4 million whose employers have stopped paying them and the 3.8 million who have (thus far) permanently lost their jobs, but the estimated four million who have involuntarily retired early and the permanently “scarred” new labor market entrants and working mothers, as much as 20% of the workforce.<sup>2</sup> Also largely missing are the impacts of the hundreds of thousands of business closures that are emptying out urban storefronts, suburban malls, and industrial spaces.<sup>3</sup> The latter changes do mean lower land costs and more affordable cities. But the job losses and scarring affect both the low- and high-skilled labor force, adding up to millions of years of lost wages.<sup>4</sup> Unemployment could also push out the most precariously housed, with an estimated 17 million households already unable to pay rent.<sup>5</sup> Overall, downward mobility and new housing challenges will shrink the middle class, exacerbating existing trends of income inequality, and in turn impacting patterns of displacement.

Before embracing a story of either urban demise or resurgence, or even widespread displacement, we should also consider the long-term migration patterns in U.S. metropolitan areas. Despite the continued influx of youth into cities, the core has never reached positive net migration, and after a brief uptick in the early 2010s has lost even more population in recent years (Appendix A, Figure 1). That migration to the urban core remains net negative contradicts the dominant “back to the city” narrative. Clearly youth are occupying urban centers (Moos et al. 2019; Cortright 2020), but other cohorts are not.<sup>6</sup>

Over time, cumulative lost wages are likely to exacerbate both economic and exclusionary displacement, as households can no longer afford to live in the urban core. What will be the impacts of this displacement, and what will the replacement look like? Theories of urban economics offer consistent predictions of what will happen to the businesses, so that is where we start, again considering not the office spaces occupied by the knowledge workers, but those housing the rest of the workforce. Lost and declining wages will reduce consumption of retail goods, food, and personal services, resulting in declining revenues and more closures, particularly in downtown areas. Vacancy rates are already relatively high, due in part to the

growth of online purchasing but also because of the overbuilding of suburban malls and the overzoning for main street ground floor retail (Grant 2014). Given that the pre-pandemic market could not support this much retail space, the post-pandemic future is bleak. Experiments in adaptive reuse have proven that conversion to residential use is viable, and nonprofits might also reutilize some space (Larrain de Andraca 2020), but replacement with job-generating uses is unlikely at a large scale. However, industrial space in many regions has experienced low vacancy rates of late, so the new availability of low-cost industrially zoned land is likely to lead to some job creation, to the extent that buildings are flexibly configured and readily adaptable to new uses (Chapple 2014).

Residential impacts are harder to predict, partly because neighborhood change is slow and also because households are increasingly sticky: the share of population that moves each year has declined steadily for the past 35 years and is now at just 9.8% (Appendix A, Figure 2). Declining mobility occurs due to rising inter-regional and intra-regional inequality: As housing markets heat up, households are reluctant to move, in part because of the exclusion of higher-cost regions or higher-income neighborhoods. Notably, in the 2008 Great Recession, when unemployment rates were even higher than today's, overall household mobility dropped, suggesting that in downturns, household coping strategies compounded by exclusionary rents prevent mass evictions and displacement. The COVID-19 crisis lands amidst these fundamentals, which, like inter-regional inequality, are unlikely to shift. Even though upper-income tenants are already leaving their overpriced urban apartments, landlords are struggling to find replacements, increasing concessions dramatically as a result. If a displacement crisis does occur with the expiration of eviction moratoria, some middle-income tenants may capitalize on lower rents to stay in the urban core, but many of the most vulnerable may choose to double up temporarily rather than seek out new housing (Shrimali & Wang, 2020).

Easier to predict are the impacts of exclusionary displacement. Our research at the Urban Displacement Project shows that the nature of the displacement crisis is widely misunderstood: not only is displacement happening as much or more from exclusive areas as low-income gentrifying neighborhoods, but also few low-income households are able to move into areas where the median income is over 80% of the region's (Chapple & Thomas 2020). In the unequal post-COVID-19 city, these exclusive areas are likely to become even more so. Even as rent levels decrease in overpriced urban markets, wages will as well, so that few new households will be able to move in. Many of the younger labor market entrants who were to constitute the market for newly constructed luxury residential buildings will delay household formation and continue living with their parents (Myers and Park 2019). By and large, core urban neighborhoods will remain out of reach for low- and moderate-income households.

Thus, as inequalities worsen in the post-COVID-19 world – and assuming that an eviction crisis does not increase mobility and displacement rates to 1980s levels – cities are likely to become more segregated, and upward mobility will remain out of reach, as the pandemic-induced delay in education and employment displaces the American Dream for younger generations. An array of anti-displacement policies will be critical to assist the most vulnerable in the short term -- emergency rental assistance, just cause eviction policies, and rent stabilization programs, to name a few. But at the same time, we will need to move towards *pro-replacement policies* in the long term.

Proactive pro-replacement policies will ensure that as space opens up in American cities, whether vacant commercial space, high-end residential towers, or older housing stock, new low- and moderate-income households will be able to move in. In the real estate market, this means public or nonprofit land acquisition funds moving aggressively to procure at-risk buildings (or even entitlements) intended for the high-end market to convert them to permanent affordability for households and businesses. But workers and businesses will still need significant income to afford life in the urban core. We know how to address income inequality already: most notably on the supply side, education (from preschool to college), wage and family supports (such as the earned income tax credit and childcare subsidies), and entrepreneurship assistance, and on the demand side, raising wages and productivity through business supports and tax policy (Pike et al. 2016). What better time to implement these ideas than during a long-term global recession?

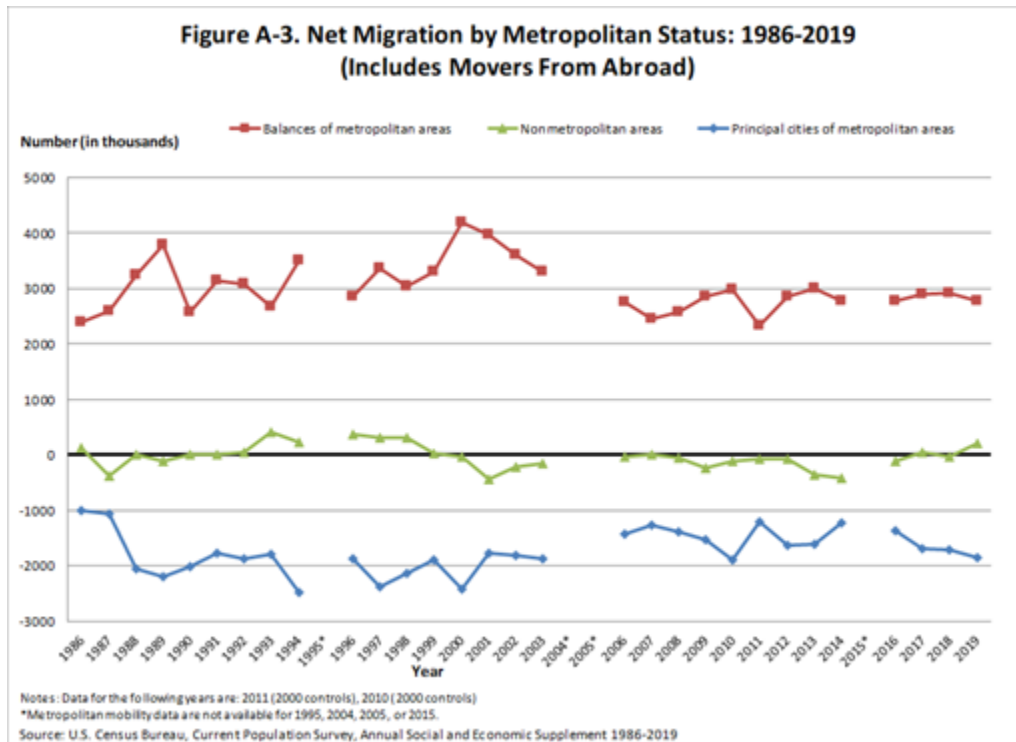
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Appendix A

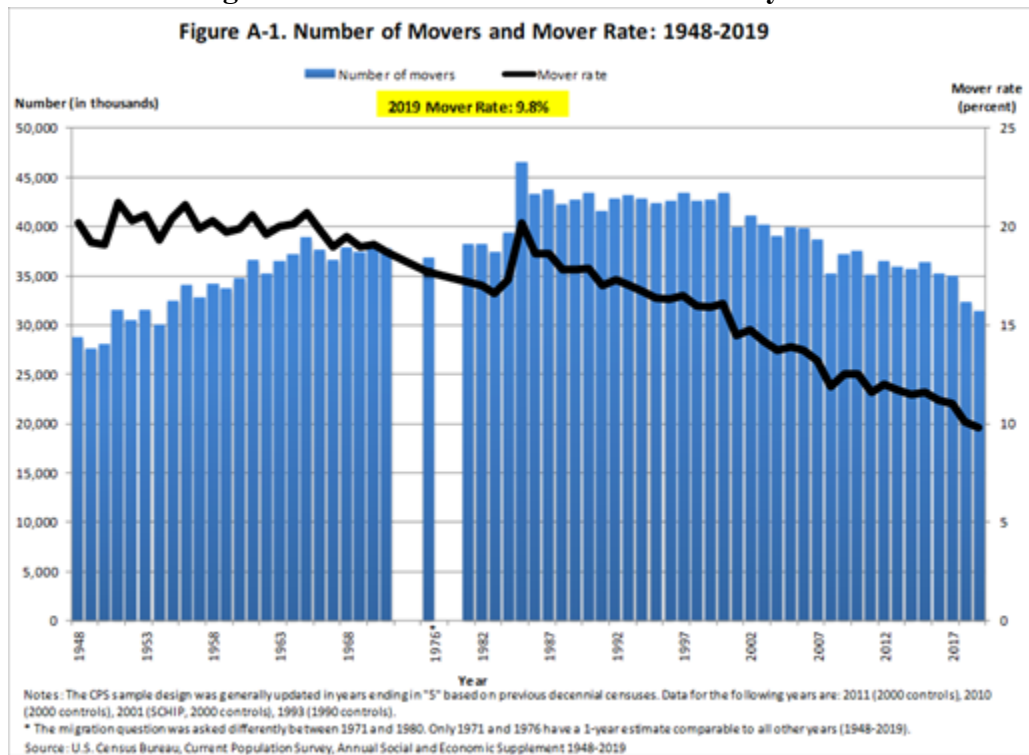
Figure A1. Net Population Migration across Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan Areas



Source:

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/geographic-mobility/figure-a-3.png>



**Figure A2. Number of movers and mobility rate.**

Source: <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/historic.html>

<sup>1</sup> Planetizen provides a convenient [summary of the debate and links to articles](#) on both sides.

<sup>2</sup> Sources: The 3.8 million permanent job losers includes 1.3 million unemployed in February 2020 as well as 2.5 million since; see the Bureau of Labor Statistics at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>. For early retirements, see an analysis by the New School's Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis, <https://www.economicpolicyresearch.org/jobs-report/over-half-of-older-workers-unemployed-at-risk-of-in-voluntary-retirement>. The scarred labor force includes some 20 million labor market entrants currently 18-24 years old, projected to lose 5-10% of the total present value of their first ten years of earnings (von Wachter 2020). In addition some 30% of working mothers (7 million) are experiencing some unemployment which may permanently scar their career earning potential (Stevenson 2020). The U.S. had some 151 million jobs in March 2020; depending on the amount of overlap, these two groups, plus the job losers and retirees, might comprise an estimated 15-23% of the labor force.

<sup>3</sup> There is no systematic census of business closures across the U.S.. Yelp found that almost 164,000 businesses had closed as of August 31, 2020. <https://www.yelpeconomicaverage.com/business-closures-update-sep-2020>

<sup>4</sup> Rothstein (2019) finds that the Great Recession reduced employment rates by over 15 percentage point years, half during the 7 years of high unemployment, and half over the medium and long term ("The lost generation? Scarring after the Great Recession," Goldman School of Public Policy Working Paper, 2019, [https://eml.berkeley.edu/~jrothst/workingpapers/rothstein\\_scarring\\_052019.pdf](https://eml.berkeley.edu/~jrothst/workingpapers/rothstein_scarring_052019.pdf)).

<sup>5</sup> Estimates of residential displacement range from about 30-40% of renter households (roughly 30-40 million households), and suggest that an additional three million homeowners will lose their homes to foreclosure (Benfer et al. 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Cortright's analysis shows that 363,000 25-34 year olds moved into "close-in neighborhoods" in the 52 largest US metros from 2000 to 2016, a number insufficient to change the overall trajectory of

out-migration.

7 Hamza Shaban, “Not even a pandemic can break rich cities’ grip on the U.S. economy,” *Washington Post*, October 15, 2020; Jonathan Lansner, “Coronavirus forces California landlords to double rent discounts,” *San Jose Mercury News*, September 2, 2020.

## **COVID-19, Climate Change, and Cooperative Adaptation**

*Zachary Lamb*

In March of 2020, I was working with colleagues to initiate a new research project examining how cooperative land ownership and governance shapes adaptation to climate change related hazards. We were hiring research assistants and making plans for a summer of fieldwork in several ‘resident-owned communities’ (ROCs), a fast-growing form of cooperatively owned manufactured housing community (MHC) that is gaining momentum in several states across the country, from New Hampshire to Oregon. Those plans changed quickly as the COVID pandemic worsened. We cancelled our fieldwork. Though the immediate threats from COVID made climate change seem remote and abstract, the unfolding of an extremely destructive hurricane season and massive wildfires in the west made clear that understanding and confronting climate change cannot be delayed, even in the midst of a pandemic. We also realized that the pandemic might actually present a rare chance to observe community-driven crisis response in action. While only a small subset of ROCs have been clearly impacted by climate change, the pandemic was impacting them all. We got to work observing online meetings and conducting remote interviews to explore new variants on our pre-existing research questions. Now we were asking: How does cooperative land ownership and governance shape how ROCs are addressing the crises associated with COVID?

The threat to ROCs from the COVID pandemic is distinctly different from geophysical threats like floods, droughts, or wildfires. Though it is clear that built environments shape pandemic exposure through factors like ventilation and indoor crowding, the pandemic, unlike geophysical hazards, does not directly impact the built environment. As long as housing units themselves are not overcrowded, MHCs could be relatively safe during a pandemic because of their physical characteristics. Unlike many other forms of affordable housing, MHCs do not typically have shared ventilation systems or substantial shared indoor spaces in which the virus could be readily transmitted. According to our interviews, many ROCs further reduced the chances of viral spread by closing the shared facilities they did have, including playgrounds and community rooms as the pandemic surged.

While physical conditions matter, decades of research on hazards has made clear that the physical dimension is only one side of determining who and what is vulnerable. With its horrifically uneven impact across differences of race, ethnicity, and income, the COVID pandemic has highlighted many ways in which widening socio-economic inequalities shape health and life chances. Residents of ROCs and other MHCs are disproportionately low-income. While we do not have complete demographic data on ROC residents, MHCs are disproportionately home to elderly, immigrant, and disabled populations, all of which are associated with heightened social vulnerability generally and with elevated risks from COVID. A representative from a ROC in Minnesota estimated that 75% of their households included immigrant employees at a local food processing plant, just the sort of facility in which major COVID outbreaks occurred over the summer of 2020. Another ROC representative reported that undocumented residents were especially impacted by the pandemic, not just because many were required to stay on the job as ‘essential workers,’ but also because they were not eligible for government assistance provided as COVID-driven layoffs and unemployment surged.

Interviews with co-op leaders, technical assistance providers, and national leaders in the ROC movement suggest that they mounted quick responses from various levels to avoid the feared public health and economic damage from the pandemic. At the level of individual communities, interviews indicated a number of ways that ROCs acted to limit physical contact, including shifting the many meetings necessary for co-op self-governance from in-person to video conferencing platforms. While some communities with limited connectivity or limited technical capacity have struggled with the shift to online meetings, most ROCs transitioned to remote meetings without much struggle. One ROC in Vermont developed their own strategy for secret ballot voting for remote meetings. Representatives from some of the groups that provide technical assistance to ROCs reported that the shift to remote meetings has in-turn made their work more efficient as they can support rural communities with less time driving for physical meetings. In a parallel adaptation, ROC-USA transitioned their training programs for co-op board members to an all-online format, enabling peer-to-peer learning between communities to continue in spite of travel restrictions.

Beyond the demands of formal co-op governance, interviewees reported that the pre-established social media groups, phone lists, and mailing strategies that they had established to initiate and manage their cooperatives, gave them tools to coordinate responses to COVID. ROCs reported various forms of mutual aid activity, including mask making and distribution, checking on and running errands for immune compromised neighbors, and organizing regular ‘distanced walks’ to encourage residents to maintain physical activity and social connection in spite of social distancing protocols.

In addition to the public health threats and challenges for community cohesion and governance, COVID has threatened the economic viability of some ROCs. ROCs rely on residents’ monthly lot fee payments to raise operating funds and to pay down the co-ops’ mortgage debts. While age-restricted communities with many retired residents on fixed incomes were partially insulated from the economic threats, many ‘all-ages’ communities saw substantial declines in their lot fee revenues with the onset of widespread unemployment, especially among residents in service and retail jobs. Some communities with adequate reserves opted to temporarily cut rents to reduce the burden on financially stressed households. Early on in the pandemic, ROC-USA set up an emergency fund for households in need, arranged a new line of credit for ROCs under financial strain, and individually contacted all 250 ROC communities to check on their physical and financial health.

Writing in mid-October 2020, it is too early to make definitive pronouncements about the impacts of a pandemic that is still raging. Even so, the COVID responses of the ROC co-op network suggest some emerging insights. First, while the physical environment of ROCs and other MHCs may be well-suited to minimizing virus transmission, these communities are quite socially and economically vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Second, the social solidarity, communications infrastructure, and institutional capacity that ROCs build through their formation and operations, can serve them well in adapting to crises. Finally, while the technical, financial, and institutional capacity of ROC co-ops varies from community-to-community, the technical assistance and network linkages provided by ROC-USA has proven valuable in enabling cross-community learning, facilitating resource sharing, and

providing emergency financial support. These months of conversations with leaders and members in the ROC movement have raised an unlikely question: could it be that these communities, often ignored or stigmatized as ‘trailer parks,’ hold crucial insights for how working and low-income people can build collective strength and resilience in the face of crises, whether the threat comes from climate change, pandemics, and whatever else may come?

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## **Managing Density During a Pandemic: A historical review**

*Meiqing Li*

While it might be too early to predict the impact this COVID-19 pandemic will bring to cities, history offers us clues. Just as many public health crises have led to great social changes, by the time we uncover our faces from the rest of the world, we know it will never be the same. The Black Death pandemic in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe precluded the Renaissance. From John Snow's investigation of cholera in 19<sup>th</sup> century London to the recent SARS outbreak in East Asia, lessons from the past advanced our knowledge that helped prepare for future challenges. In New York City alone, several infectious disease outbreaks since the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries made profound changes to the city's housing policy and public health infrastructure (Nevius, 2020).

Living amid a global pandemic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses unprecedented challenges, but more often we see a cyclical history where the same problems re-emerge. A prevailing one centers around the debate on *density*. As planners strive to envision cities with a sustainable future, issues of the different types of density, its impact on health, as well as means to mitigate the negative impacts are all worth more discussion. I conducted a historical review by revisiting literature and cases to examine how certain types of density on the one hand can generate negative externalities for public health and well-being, while on the other hand have significant implications for cities to take proactive actions on the built environment post-pandemic.

### ***The Cost of Density***

We urbanist planners tend to associate density with countless benefits including productivity, accessibility and smaller environmental footprint, favoring a compact development model. Nevertheless, as COVID-19 reveals, we have so far focused much less on addressing the cost of density, for example housing affordability and congestion -- what some economists called the "demons of density" (Glaeser, 2011; Duranton & Puga, 2020). Granted, most cities in the U.S. are still far from realizing the benefits of density before negative impacts take place. But for many places in the rest of the world, especially some hyper-dense environments in Asia, managing density has long been a central theme in planning practice (Yeh, 2011). If density is the sustainable direction to go, the lessons from elsewhere will not only serve a few global cities, but also a broad spectrum of other cities that have seen a revived discussion on density and health.

Historically there has been a negative perception of urban density, accompanied by an appreciation of the benefits of suburban, low-density living. Despite the myth driving these associations, the negative perception of density persists as a major resistance to urban densification and other compact development strategies. Moreover, research by Hooper (2018) suggests that density perceptions are relatively stable regardless of hygiene primes (subconscious memory factors from a particular stimulus), indicating that planning can do little to change people's perception about density. On the other hand, empirical evidence suggests the real impact of density, particularly that of extremely high density living in some Asian cities like Hong Kong with its low death and disease rates, which significantly diverge from the U.S. perception (Schmitt, 1963). This seems like a revived debate in the planning literature from decades ago, on

two sources of negative impact: one from the public health perspective on the relationship between density and infectious diseases (Corburn, 2007), and another on social impact, or social pathology related to deviant behavior, crime, and suicide (Calhoun 1962). Given other factors like cultural, socioeconomic, education, and individual health conditions, questions around the independent significance of density on both effects remains unsettled.

### ***Density and COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates skepticism towards cities (Brasuell, 2020). Meanwhile, empirical evidence adds to the historical debate, contesting prevalent measures of density in the context of pandemics. One common measure takes population density by county, which consistently shows no significant relationship with the COVID-19 infection rate (Hamidi et al., 2020; New York City Citizen Housing Planning Council, 2020). By relying on the coarse measure of population density defined as population by area, whether we look across the globe, among counties, or between neighborhoods, the pattern of infection diverges significantly from the distribution of population (NYCCHPC, 2020). However, there does seem to be some correlation between overcrowding of internal spaces and the infection rate, specifically households and some institutional settings. Less is known about the public realm where people congregate for group events and activities. Although medical and public health professionals, as well as the general public, have long perceived urban parks and open spaces as mitigation measures to defend against diseases, contagion, and epidemics, how to effectively manage public spaces deserves more attention within the planning community (Crompton, 2013; Honey-Roses, et al., 2020). This is an area where cities can draw lessons and expertise from their peers in other parts of the world.

### ***Lessons for High-Density Living***

The divergent perception and impact of ‘density’ in cities across the globe reflect cultural norms, but more importantly a diversity of short-term and long-term strategies managing density, or more accurately crowdedness. We have been extensively exposed to contingent anti-contagion policies, such as travel bans, quarantine/isolation and social distancing commonly adopted by different countries, during this pandemic (Hsiang et al, 2020). But what might be our steps forward in a post-pandemic era in order to counter the cost of high-density living? The more meaningful lessons from cities recovered from past pandemics are not about contingent measures, but ensuring the built environment and infrastructure are prepared for future risks. For example, in Hong Kong, where space is extremely constrained, the government’s long-term strategies for density management take two forms: (1) density control and environmental design that covers both private and public housing developments, as well as (2) public amenities (Chan, et al., 2002; Yeh, 2011). Unlike those in history, modern-day pandemics introduce much bigger challenges due to higher mobility and connectivity in a global network. The lessons for high-density living should not only be valuable for a few global cities, but also have implications for many dense human settlements in the Global South, regarding both design for public spaces and resilience of public health infrastructure.

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# How Cities will Adapt to COVID-19: Understanding the Role of Time

*Pavan Yedavalli*

Knowledge spillover and agglomeration economies are two of the defining characteristics of booming urban civilization (Buckley, Clarke Annez, & Spence, 2008; Florida, 2012; Greenstone, Hornbeck, & Moretti, 2010). With the clustering of people comes consumption and innovation, whether at workplaces, restaurants, bars, retail, or cultural activities such as museums and theatres (Florida, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected these urban societies in myriad ways, to say nothing of the staggering number of deaths across the world. Mandatory shelters-in-place and subsequent lockdowns have occurred not only at the onset of the pandemic while the dispersion and infection dynamics of CoV-2 were unknown but also in the second wave of colder winter weather and increased holiday travel. These have led to the loss of livelihoods and precipitous declines in economic output. As many leaders, scientists, and physicians have noted, it did not have to be this way in cities (Nouvellet, 2020). This paper attempts to marry the science of the SARS-CoV-2 particle dynamics with the notion of density in cities, proposing a new lens through which planners and policymakers should base future guidelines.

## *CoV-2 Particle Dynamics*

After over one million deaths across the world caused by COVID-19, it is now well-known that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is primarily transmitted either via droplets or aerosols, rather than surface transmissions (Anchordoqui & Chudnovsky, 2020; Bromage, 2020; van Doremalen et al., 2020). The downward terminal speed,  $v_{down}$ , of any particle is a function of its mobility,  $\mu$ , mass, and gravity, as shown in Equation 1.

$$\text{Equation 1}$$

$$v_{down} = \mu mg$$

$$\text{Equation 2}$$

$$\mu = \frac{1}{6\pi\eta r}$$

where  $\eta$  is the viscosity of the air and  $r$  is the radius of the virus particle (Anchordoqui & Chudnovsky, 2020). A droplet is at least 5 to 10 microns in radius and can be transmitted in particles from high velocity and dispersive actions such as sneezing or coughing (Scudellari, 2020). An aerosol, on the other hand, is smaller, and tends to emerge from less emitting actions such as breathing or speaking (Bromage, 2020). Aerosols also follow the patterns of airflow in the surrounding fluid, whether a confined indoor environment or a dispersed outdoor environment (Anchordoqui & Chudnovsky, 2020; Scudellari, 2020). As a result, they frequently stay in the air longer than droplets due to their smaller mass and thus smaller  $v_{down}$  from Equation 1, but they do not contain as much of the virus in one unit.

### *Time-varying Density*

Since CoV-2 particles can be in both quickly-falling droplet form or longer-lasting aerosol form, static measures, such as masking, six-foot social distancing, and shelters-in-place, have been instituted effectively to varying degrees in cities across the world (Flaxman et al., 2020). Chu et al. notes that masking can decrease the radius of particle dispersal around the infected person by up to 80% (Chu et al., 2020), and social distancing of at least 1 meter, as noted by Wells in the seminal 1934 study, can also limit the probability that a person is in the range of the highest density of particles (Chu et al., 2020).

However, despite these static approaches being hitherto successful, it has been under a limited scope of economic activity, as many industries and cities have only recently started reopening in staggered phases (Bartik, Cullen, Glaeser, Luca, & Stanton, 2020). In order to truly return to a lifestyle resembling that of pre-pandemic times, city planners and policymakers must capture a component that, until now, has only been discussed in healthcare outcomes related to CoV-2: time. Skeptics believe that cities of higher density are hotbeds of CoV-2 activity (Porter, 2020). However, many of the densest cities in the world, including Tokyo, Taipei, Singapore, and Seoul, have had low infection rates, and studies have shown that areas with higher densities, in fact, have significantly lower COVID-19 mortality rates than areas with lower densities (Hamidi, Sabouri, & Ewing, 2020). It is not density, a time-invariant measure of people per unit area, that should be the scapegoated metric for infection rates, but instead time-varying density, a measure of people per unit area per unit time. Recognizing the incompleteness of the density metric, researchers from the World Bank showed that crowding, defined as a normalized population by floor area, is more telling, as cities with similar densities, namely Kinshasa, Mumbai, and Cairo, have drastically different crowding metrics, and thus different CoV-2 infection rates (Cities, Crowding, and the Coronavirus: Predicting Contagion Risk Hotspots, 2020). While this study augments the density metric further into crowding, it does not factor in time, a critical component in (1) the dispersal of CoV-2 particles, and (2) the exposure risk.

Limiting the time exposed to potential CoV-2 particles must be realized by enforcing constant turnover of people when going about daily activities. Constant turnover can be particularly beneficial for establishments that require indoor operation. The infectious dose, or the minimum number of virus particles required to make a person sick, has been determined as 1000 CoV-2 particles, but crucially, in order to become infected, all of these 1000 particles must be absorbed by the body in a short enough period of time that the person's innate immune system does not fight off small doses of the virus (Bromage, 2020). This unit of time depends on the person's innate immunity, and thus can vary from person to person, leaving those with pre-existing conditions and weakened immune systems, such as the elderly, more vulnerable to the virus (Zhao et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2020). Assuming a less vulnerable population, if an infected person is asymptomatic and is present in an indoor public environment, then those who may be exposed may save themselves from infection by reducing the amount of time they are potentially exposed.

Consider a boundary case. In a crowded indoor space of radius  $r$  with  $N$  people, 1 of the  $N$  people is an asymptomatic carrier. This person emits approximately 200 CoV-2 aerosol particles per minute by talking. Assuming the carrier is not masked, these particles will disperse across the

room based on the indoor air circulation patterns (Bromage, 2020). For a gathering of 1 hour (60 minutes), there are now 12000 CoV-2 aerosol particles in the room, given the 1.1 hour half-life of CoV-2 particles now known (Nouvellet et al., 2020). If 1000 viral particles are needed to become infected, up to 12 out of the  $N$  people may contract the virus, assuming a uniform spatial distribution of the particles. If each person stayed in that area for 30 minutes instead, 6000 CoV-2 particles are traveling in the air, thereby decreasing the possible number of infected people by half. If the asymptomatic person was masked, then only 40 aerosol particles are emitted per minute. For one hour, this results in 2400 CoV-2 aerosol particles in the room, which means up to 2 people may get infected. If everyone is in the area for 30 minutes instead, 1200 CoV-2 particles are in the air, and up to 1 person may become infected, if concentrated in that person's breathing area. This example illustrates the sensitivity of CoV-2 exposure to time, and the linearity suggests that short, bursty activities, along with air filtration and recirculation every few minutes, can be proposed as a measure to open up activity, particularly indoors, more extensively.

### *The New Normal*

The COVID-19 pandemic has already created short-term shocks to major urban centers, reflected in lower real estate and rental prices as well as less local economic output (Chernick, Copeland, & Reschovsky, 2020). However, if time-based policy for local businesses and services is instituted in cities, economic output will begin to rise, returning the cultural amenities, energy, and vitality of cities, as famous urbanists Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs emphasize, that was responsible for over 70% of the global GDP pre-pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2011). While productivity has seen unexpected heights during the COVID-19 pandemic with the ease of remote work and the advent of powerful online software and collaboration tools, increasing evidence has shown depression and anxiety levels reaching all-time highs, with social isolation and burnout as the main causes (Bartik et al., 2020; VanderWeele, 2020). Cities can do their parts to help their unhappy citizens by creating time-varying health and safety guidelines that optimize for economic and social activity in addition to public health (Scudellari, 2020; Florida, Rodriguez-Pose, & Storper, 2020). These policies, along with social distancing and masking, may provide a more optimal solution in this new normal of living with the virus.

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# **Decolonising Myself: Navigating the Researcher-Activist Identity Before and During COVID in the Urban South Pacific**

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## **Abstract**

This paper charts my path from observer to action researcher – and my *ex post* realisation that a transition had happened in my work. This transition happened on the fly, in the field, without me critically reflecting on it at the time, while I was studying evictions in Port Vila, Vanuatu, South Pacific. My ethics came into direct conflict with my research approach, and I chose to change my approach. I theorise my transformation in the modernity/coloniality literature. I close by offering strategies to students and other researchers who are looking for ways to engage more deeply with, and give something back to, the communities they study, and with some reflections on how the personal transformations I describe helped me to adapt to research during COVID-19.

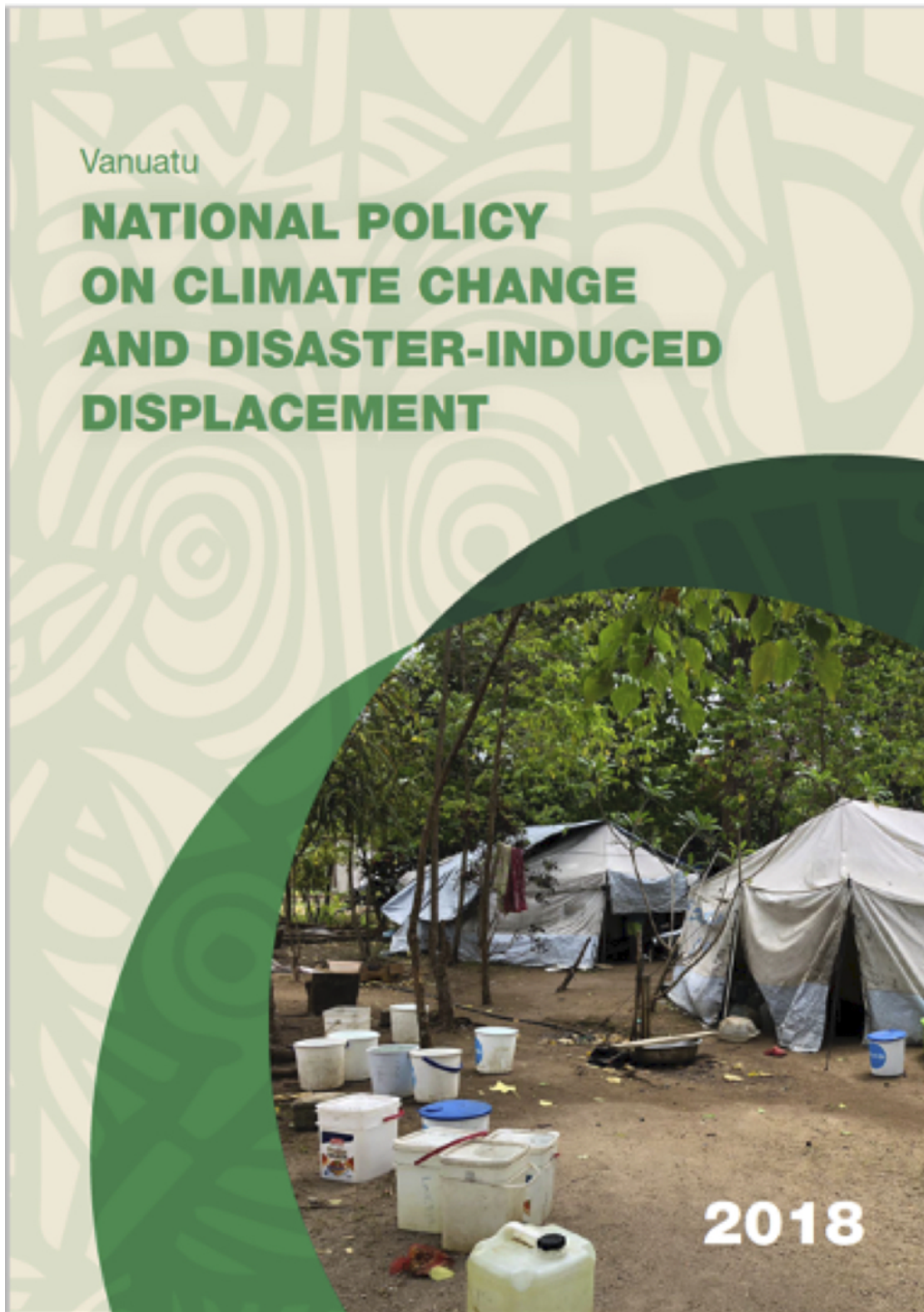
## **Acknowledgments**

The fieldwork for this paper was funded by Melbourne University School of Design and Connected Cities Lab, the National Geographic Society (Documenting Human Migrations grant), and the Regional Studies Association (Research Network grant), and was supported by the School of Law at the University of the South Pacific, Emalus Campus. Thanks to Professor Eric Colvin and Professor Donald Paterson for hosting my sabbatical. Thank you to the evicted Destination community for reflecting on your experiences with me. Thanks to the Elang Etas community for always welcoming me and sharing your stories and your parties. A special thanks goes to the Elang Etas Community Association secretariat, including Mr. John Yasur (founding Chairman), Mr. Sam Tabawa (current Chairman), Mr. Wycliff Tarilenga (Secretary), and Mr. Vuti Titus (Treasurer). Ms. Melisa Hango has been a constant friend and colleague, as has Ms. Anne Pakoa and Mr. Willie Sam Joel. This work would not have been possible without them.

### **Introduction: Dual Academic Identities**

One day in November 2019, in the middle of running a community training in Port Vila on Vanuatu's policy protections from evictions, a thought occurred to me in a flash of uncertainty: Had my activities transgressed into activism, and if so, was I compromising my research? I continued on with the training, working with community members to understand a policy titled the *Vanuatu National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement* (Figure 1). I explained how this policy could actually protect them from rumoured upcoming evictions, despite its title having no indication that evictions are a type of dispossession against which the policy provides protection. All the while, I was troubled by the idea that my participation in the anti-eviction social movements would hamper my capacity to observe them. This was not the first time I had run this training. My first training had three attendees, and we sat together on the floor of an outdoor space (Figure 2). In more-recent trainings, 30 or so people have attended. This was, however, the first time I had explicitly considered whether my participation changed my capacity to generate knowledge about the resistance movement.

**Figure 1. Vanuatu National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement**





**Figure 2. Author and EECA Executive Reading Displacement Policy**

Image: Melisa Hango

That a full-time academic should be concerned with whether helping the communities she observes may be compromising to research outputs, is perhaps a sign of the state of the planning discipline – or perhaps, if the discipline cannot be charged, a sign simply of my own modernist training and biases. Either way, others may find my transformation to be instructive. This essay is about my own process of decolonising my understanding of my role as a researcher, and about the ontological shift that I required to start doing action research. In the process of internal change, I expanded my capacities to contribute to the communities where I work, and I expanded trust and cooperation with my collaborators. It is about how decolonial approaches offered me a path from researcher-observer to researcher-participant in the study of an in-progress social



movement in the urban South Pacific. It is about the incidental learning that the rigorous research process provided to me about myself. It is a critical reflection based on the process of conducting research. My hope is to show the path a little more clearly to students and other researchers who are looking for ways to give something back to the communities they study.

Critical urban scholarship is committed to meaningful inclusion and genuine participation, and to the emancipation of thought and practice from the oppression of a need for universal ways of knowing. Mechanisms of emancipation include acknowledging who is doing the knowing, where knowledge is produced, and how it is passed along – an acknowledgement of the “geographies of knowledge” (Agnew, 2007). My own identity development was influenced by the same postcolonial processes affecting the identities of my research interlocutors. The Pacific is a region where the colonial experience intersects with indigenous ideas about land governance to such a degree that these concepts exist quite literally, together, encoded in the *Mama Loa* (Mother Law; the Constitution). People have dual identities informed by both the colonial experience and indigenous practice. The rights of indigenous people to their ancestral, customary lands are foundational to the national identity and underpinned the independence movement in Vanuatu. At the same time, the city makes no enduring place for rural migrants without local land rights (Day and Bamforth, 2020), and land claims by people whose access was disrupted by colonisation are regularly discounted by the courts (Wilson, 2011). Where people are facing evictions, the rights of the customary landowner sits in direct contradiction to the need to have a place to settle, belong, and feel secure in the Pacific city.

There are few places in the world where postcolonial critique would not be useful for interpreting the mentalities of people. I was trained in Eurocentric traditions that propound universal ways of knowing with origins in the scientific processes of the Enlightenment – processes that have produced great advances in human welfare, such as vaccines for devastating diseases like polio and smallpox (and now, COVID-19), and antibiotics that prevent mass death from the Plague and tuberculosis. As with many advances, these Eurocentric ways of knowing generate new problems – one of them, the application of the thought structures of modernity too widely, to the exclusion of other ways of knowing. Mignolo calls this, “the darker side of the Renaissance” (Mignolo, 2003). I only started to learn about the imperialism embedded and constitutive of research after graduate school. Imperialism is a process of controlling people and territories away from a metropole. Colonialism is a mechanism of imperialism (Said, 1994; Said, 1978), but it is not the only one. Research, Smith (1999) argues, is a contemporary manifestation of the ways in which dominant western notions crowd out indigenous ways of knowing,

Vanuatu’s borders have been closed since early 2020, but the products of colonial thought have not been shut out of the country. *Cot oda* (court orders) continue to be issued and evictions threatened by landowners. Land disputes continue, the products of Western ideas of how land can be owned and transacted. In February 2021, I worked with local collaborators in Port Vila to run a remote field survey in an anthropological style, with a set of open-ended questions designed to explore rather than confirm a hypothesis. The purpose of the survey was to find out how people talk about authority over land: how people negotiate a secure place to live in the city, who has the power to tell people to leave, and how standing customary tenancies are preserved or disrupted. This remote study was possible in part because of my own transformation, which is

still in progress and hopefully will always be. I have been able to think about research in a broader way that includes action and contribution, not just observation. The lessons I describe in the last section of this paper enabled me to mentor others, identify issues of interest to survey-fatigued communities, adapt to changing circumstances, and respond to the generative ideas of my team.

### **Background: Participation and Transformation in Action Research**

Social research is constitutively a discovery process that requires participation by both researchers and research subjects. Action research takes multiple forms, from participant observation to participatory action research (PAR) to ethnography. Ethnography is more the method of anthropologists and sociologists, rather than planners, and they often live in the communities where they work and partner with local researchers (e.g., Jarillo et al., 2020). In the process of research, transformation is a possible outcome of participation. Transformation can occur in states of knowledge, where new knowledge is generated, or existing knowledge is refuted or further supported. Transformation can also occur for the research participants as well as for the researchers, as they encounter difference. The purpose of this section is to describe how participation, decolonisation, and transformation are positioned and theorised in the literature, and to set the theoretical structure for my reflections later in the piece.

#### ***Participation***

In the context of development practice, much of the participatory policy and poverty research refers to the participation of the communities and people about whom policy is being made, rather than participation and transformation of the researcher. For instance, Brock and McGee (2002) reflect on a series of policy processes in which participation was generated from the affected populations in Myanmar (Shaffer, 2012), Uganda (Yates and Okello, 2012), and other development settings. Mitlin and Thompson (1995) describe the policy improvements and improved enfranchisement that arises when affected people are involved in planning and policy development. Experiential knowing and epistemological expansion of policy makers is another focus of some work (e.g., McGee, 2012). Here, the author notes how working directly with poor people can expand their empathy with the populations they serve.

The thoughts and institutions of oppressed people can also be colonised (Freire, 2005; Scott, 1995), via interpellation (Escobar, 2007), so current processes of participation are probably not sufficient to ensure decolonised processes. Many inclusion approaches that leverage action research toward the preservation of power and the *status quo* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The development apparatus has entrenched, Eurocentric models of what counts as knowledge (Escobar, 2007; Agnew, 2007), and what it means to be included in the development of policy and implementation of development projects. Critique of participatory approaches is often framed as a co-optation of participation in entrenching power structures in the development apparatus (Brock and McGee, 2002: 2). An alternative is the *pluriverse*: a rhetorical device acknowledging the decolonial turn away from striving for universal truths and epistemologies, and toward acknowledgement of different ways of knowing (Oslender, 2019).

Likewise, much of the research focusing on the engagement of academics with communities in a

participatory process, focuses on the improvement of the policy outcome due to participation (e.g., Lantz et al., 2001). In urban planning, participation has been included as part of a positivist process (e.g., Burke et al., 2006), where the community is engaged to provide context and feedback. Pain and Francis (2003), for instance, describe their experience working on a participatory diagramming process with homeless and at-risk youths in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the United Kingdom. They use participatory diagramming to identify issues that matter to their target groups. Their project was the product of a short-term engagement with their study population, and their reflection is about how to make such a data-collection productive and have it lead to meaningful and actionable findings that can be implemented by relevant health and housing authorities.

Power in the research process is also a key issue (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) with which academics in action research contend. However, the power of Eurocentric hegemonic thought (Oslender, 2019; Harding, 2018) and the personal path of emancipation from it as part of the research process, has as far as I know not been discussed in an academic article. This process of “decolonising myself,” from the paper’s title, is the main contribution of this piece.

### ***Decolonisation***

Reading the opening vignettes I have written above, the white-savior complex comes to mind. Rather than try to dispel that impression if any other readers also had it come up, this essay is to some degree an attempt to work out who I am in research. On the one hand, I am indeed a product of the imperial system that Said and Smith critique. Educated at an elite institution, at The University of California, Berkeley, I have been an uncritical consumer, and surely a producer, of the kinds of misinformation Smith identifies (p. 82) being circulated about indigenous peoples. “Trading the other” (Smith, 1999, p. 89) includes drawing a livelihood, in the form of an academic salary, from writing about indigenous people.

This essay, then, is about my relationship to imperialism, and my ambition to move toward the *decoloniality* identified by the *modernity/coloniality* movement. I hope to join the ranks of Western scholars capable of thoughtful analysis of cultures which are not their own. Lindstrom’s (2019) recent work on Vanuatu’s cargo cults taught me that I had joined the expatriate misinterpretation of Vanuatu’s cargo cults as a comical artifact of indigenous people’s experience of World War II rather than a set of social movements designed and evolved to reclaim cultural practice lost during a century of missionary and colonial influence. Lindstrom’s work explains an ongoing social resistance, taking his topic beyond a set of travellers’ tales (Smith, 1999, p. 78) typical of anthropology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The *modernity/coloniality* movement (Escobar, 2007) has emerged since the mid-2000s. An outcropping of postcolonial studies, MC thought rejects the claims of universality arising out of Eurocentric thought and its imperialist ambitions. It instead locates the origins of these universal claims not in Enlightenment, as I assert above, in the Introduction – but instead in the colonial conquests by European colonial powers beginning with the Americas in 1492. This conquest was a critical moment when Europeans began to think of themselves in relation to colonised people (Oslender, 2019), and of themselves as the standard against which other societies’ levels of civilisation and development would be judged. This modernist approach to knowing, centred

on a narrow geography – Europe – privileges ways of knowing customary to the European continent. A technique of the MC movement is its stress toward action. Its objective is *decoloniality*: the “redefinition of democracy from the practices, cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern” (Grosfoguel, 2011). Part of the process of decolonising thought is de-privileging the current presumed centre and establishing alternative imaginaries that acknowledge the importance of local experience.

### ***Transformation in Action Research***

Decolonisation is a form of transformation, but it is not prevalent in the literature on who is transformed in action research, and how they are changed. Reason and Torbert (2001) classify different action-research “dimensions”: first-, second-, and third-person approaches. In first-person action research, the focus of the query is on the internal processes and transformation of the researcher. The first-person process does not need to involve interlocutors, as the exploration is internal and auto-reflexive. In second-person action research, the focus is on how the researcher transforms the context and collaborates with others in the research setting. In second-person inquiry, the researcher co-constructs knowledge and inquiry with collaborators, working together as co-researchers and co-subjects in a reflexive process. In third-person action research, knowledge construction is still collaborative and co-produced, but the scale can be larger, with more participants.

This work is also informed by my other work, e.g., (Day and Bamforth, 2020), which engages in the second- and third-person dimensions, seeking to understand the “slow violence” (Pain, 2019) of evictions in the context of the faster processes of climate change and disaster. So, my larger body of work is reflexive in the way that Burawoy (1998) uses the term: in response to positivist processes requiring pre-determination of methods, and to describe processes of changing one’s methods and paradigms as knowledge of processes deepens. First-person action research has been criticised for being too focused on the researcher at the detriment of the context (Marshall and Mead, 2005). This paper is focused on the researcher, but I direct the reader to my other work, which seeks to be transformative of policy and knowledge – not just of myself.

In my review of the planning literature, I have found only a few examples of authors describing their internal points of transformation as participatory researchers. Roy (2003), for instance, reflects on how studying women in Calcutta as both a local and an outsider generated transformation in her thought and in her research methods. However, she does not document a process by which she emerged as an action researcher. There are studies of collective action (Beard and Dasgupta, 2006) and community engagement (Pain, 2019; Murtagh, 1999) where the researchers must have been close to their communities and to have fostered relationships over time. However, the path to that relationship is not described.

Outside of planning, even where first-person development is the focus of the piece, the process is often, like in planning, “opaque” in published research (Marshall, 2004). This is likely because of the difficulty of relating the internal process of change, which I attempt here. There are, however, many examples of self-reflection by researchers using participatory practices. Burgess (2006) describes her reflexive process of confronting and reshaping her own paradigms and beliefs in the process of first-person action research as a nurse. Maguire (1987) reflects on

personal transformations that occurred for her while studying battered women in New Mexico. Judi Marshall has a body of work where she explores various social phenomena including management as a “way of life” (Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2000), describing her work as “self-study” (Marshall, 2004). McGee (2012) reflects on her epistemological expansion in becoming part of the community and seeing people as the same as herself. She does not, however, describe a personal shift from observation to action, and her first-person experience is only a couple of paragraphs in a broader reflection of the self in action research. None of these authors frame their work specifically in MC thought, with a focus on the transition from modernism to something else. McGee’s work does suggest, however, the kind of epistemological expansion that accompanies a transformation out of a Eurocentric mindset.

### **Anti-Eviction Social Movements in Port Vila**

There are currently more than 70 planned evictions in urban Port Vila (personal communication with the Sheriff’s office, December 2019). Starting with the eviction of a community called Destination in 2014, which occurred overnight with the community under significant duress (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019), forceful evictions have been occurring with increasing frequency. 500 to 600 people at a time are evicted under lawful court orders, issued after a legal process that identifies a customary landowner’s claim to particular lands (Pacific Islands Report, 2014; Port Vila Daily Post, 2018; Napwatt, 2018). These claims by customary landowners themselves have colonial roots. Across the Pacific, and in Vanuatu, “ownership” of land is an introduced idea, generated from the introduced Eurocentric governance processes of the colonial period.

Vanuatu is an island archipelago of 82 islands, including the island of Efate, where the capital city, Port Vila, sits. Destination itself was part of a long conversation that dates in its oral histories back to 1451 or 1452. Colonised in 1901 by the British and French jointly, the New Hebrides islands achieved independence in 1980 and named the country, Vanuatu, with the root of the word, *vanua*, a reference to land. The people living at Destination were assembled under a community leader with a precolonial claim to the land where Destination sat (personal communication with the community leader, December 2019). His claim originates in the oral history with the eruption of the volcano at the Kuwae caldera, which displaced the populations of the Kuwae island to the Efate (Wilson, 2011). The eruption of the Kuwae caldera was known by European and American geologists to have occurred somewhere in the world because of the ash record in the sedimentary layers, but they did not know where it had occurred until research into the oral histories of the Shepherds Islands of Vanuatu uncovered the stories in the oral record.

Much of my understanding about the claims of people to the Destination lands comes from my own work with the community and an unpublished report prepared by a member of the community making the claim – a daughter of the movement’s leader and scholar at the University of Hawaii. Dorah L. J. Wilson wrote an account of the Vete Association in her report, *Vete: The Emerging Movement on Efate, Vanuatu Politics and Indigenous Alternatives* (Wilson, 2011). A member of the community and indigenous woman, she describes her position as both an indigenous woman and a foreign-educated researcher, which gave her the capacities for insider comprehension of the movement and outsider-observer in Eurocentric methods, including into content where non-researcher indigenous women may not have been included.



According to the oral history, people living on the island of Kuwae fled the eruption to Efate, where they were granted lands by the chiefs there. Centuries of canoe travel and dual-island location ensued – or rather, continued – wherein people travelled the aquatic highways between the new islands of Efate and Epi and Tongoa, which were created when Kuwae exploded. Without the Eurocentric ideas of land ownership and with no capital city to relate the islands to the international system of capital and accumulation, these dual-island identities were not contested (Wilson, 2011).

Then, arrived the missionaries, the colonial period, and World War II. The missionaries convinced newly-converted indigenous people that sedentism was preferable to migration, the colonial masters declared Ni Vanuatu people to be unwelcome as residents of the city, and the war made it unsafe to travel between the islands. People with an ancestral claim to Efate dating back five hundred years found themselves limited to Tongoa and Epi, and their claims were never acknowledged by the colonisers (Wilson, 2011). The self-described chief who assembled the community at Destination by recruiting people to come and live on the land, was part of a social movement resisting the declaration of Port Vila, the national capital, to be the lands of a smaller group of owners acknowledged by the colonial governments and exclusive of the people of the Shepherd Islands. Shortly after independence, the land holding Port Vila was declared by the Government of Vanuatu to be the historical land of five indigenous villages, and compensation was paid to the declared landowners for the alienation of their ancestral lands. The Vete Association has repeatedly lost court cases over land claims.

Historical land claims are not the only mechanism by which people come to live in the capital city – but most land claims in Port Vila relate back to those five villages whose claims were legitimised at independence, and to the “customary landowner.” Land ownership in Pacific societies is itself an introduced idea. Precolonial ideas about land custodianship were more collective, never unlinking people from place (Bonnemaison, 1985). The power of the customary landowner compared with the customary tenant is an issue I take up in a recent paper (Day, 2020). In quick summary, customary tenancies are a long-established practice in Vanuatu, whereby customary landowners grant permission for a migrant or neighbour to set up a homestead on his land (it’s usually a “him”). Sometimes, the tenant pays in the form of food items or paying respects; usually, there is a fixed cash amount paid incrementally over time until the agreed amount is fulfilled (as opposed to a rent that is paid in perpetuity). Rarely are the arrangements written down or vetted with lawyers. The problem in recent years is that urbanisation in the capital city has meant that tens of thousands of people are now living under these customary arrangements, and land values in the city are changing. What seemed like a good deal to a customary landowner ten years ago may now seem like a low payment, as a hotelier or resort investor may want to lease his land. Under current precedence in the courts, when a landowner changes his mind, he can appeal to the state to evict the customary tenants. Very frequently, the courts uphold his appeal, and whole communities are evicted. Other times, the customary landowner evicts because too many migrants have arrived, and he feels that the tenants have violated the original terms of the agreement, which may be decades or generations old (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019).

Even though international law protects people from forced evictions and Vanuatu’s own national



policy strongly recommends against them (Day et al., 2020), evictions continue. I and my interlocutors argue (Day, 2020; Day et al., 2020) that urban evictions violate these customary tenancies, but this idea is certainly not mine only. Member of Parliament Ralph Regenvanu, in a foreword he wrote for a book on urban governance in Melanesia, declares most of these arrangements to be not-informal (McDonnell et al., 2017).

A number of community associations have organised in response to eviction threats. Concerned initially with tenure security, organisations like the Elang Etas Community Association (EECA) seek to generate collective identities (Polletta and Jasper, 2001) under new forms of leadership that are adapted to the urban setting (Day, 2021). Leadership in social movements takes varied forms (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004) and is concerned with framing the movement for resource mobilisation and collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). I have been working with the EECA and other community associations since 2017, when I tracked down dozens of people who had survived the eviction at Destination, seeking to understand how the eviction had changed their lives. Many people from Destination moved to Elang Etas, which is how I came to know the Elang Etas community. These associations, including Vete and EECA, resemble other Pacific social movements in their assembly of resources, collective identities, and declared causes, e.g., (Klepp and Herbeck, 2016).

### **The Modernist Planner**

For the average anthropology student or researcher, what I write here may be straightforward and a normal part of their training. But for an urban planning academic like me, these ideas took time to understand. I think this has something to do with the bifurcated nature of our profession and academic discipline. I was primarily trained in the positivist branches of planning, although I did have the opportunity to learn critical methods from excellent thinkers such as Ananya Roy and Judith Innes. My doctoral dissertation was an econometric analysis of welfare shifts after forced displacement in Shanghai, e.g., (Day and Cervero, 2010). Helping people to avoid being displaced is my passion, though how I imagine and conduct my research has changed over the years. As a doctoral student, I hoped that demonstrating the monetary (Day and Cervero, 2010) and subjective (Day, 2013) welfare losses people suffered due to involuntary displacement would be convincing to policymakers to change displacement policy and practice. My approach was modernist in the way that Berman (1983) describes the concept in reference to cities, in his book, *All that is Solid, Melts into Air*. One might also call that approach, *instrumentalist* or *rationalist*. Essentially, I believed that demonstrating welfare impacts in positivist terms would unlock an underlying truth of harm and disadvantage that could not be denied once it was exposed.

In that training, I learned a modernist approach in which the researcher must avoid changing the system she is researching. China did eventually begin to change its relocation policies, and I have not abandoned my modernist origins. I have, however, realised that truth is slippery and contextual, and there is not necessarily one there, or a single one there, to be discovered (Kemmis et al., 2013: 28). For instance, claims to land and the right to the city (Harvey, 2003) are not simple concepts whose study is easy to enumerate in financial terms. In Vanuatu, customary land ownership is a foundational right that drove the country's independence movement, is enshrined in the 1980 Constitution, and whose value is shared by indigenous *Ni Vanuatu* person – from average citizen to Member of Parliament – with whom I have talked

about the matter. Article 74 of the *Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu* declares that, “[t]he rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land in the Republic of Vanuatu.” Despite custom being declared in principle to form the basis of land management, in practice, it is the landowner whose interests have been upheld by the courts, as at Destination.

Ironically, displacement is an inherent part of Eurocentric modernity (Escobar, 2003), along with the ideas about private property that underpin any claims to own land. The Pacific relationship with movement and private property is different than Eurocentric models (Wilson, 2011), even though the systems introduced by the colonising powers persist alongside customary systems to form a “bird that flies with two wings” (Forsyth, 2009): a legal system that acknowledges and empowers both customary practice and introduced governance.

Planning in the tradition of modernism – unreflective of its role in reproducing coloniality and inequality – persists in planning departments and the academy. I know because I have been part of that apparatus, and I have also critiqued it (Day, 2020; Day, 2021; forthcoming). At the University of Melbourne, where I teach, our student society, the Melbourne Urban Planning Student Society (MUPSS) ran a survey in 2018 and concluded that 70 percent of students are uncomfortable writing in the first person (personal communication with MUPSS leadership). The anonymous credibility of the unacknowledged, omnipotent observer (who according to MC thought probably has European origins) still has broad appeal in urban planning.

This is not to say that planning does not have a transformative (Healey, 2007) or even insurgent mission (Huq, 2020). Planning scholarship has been enhanced by a focus on indigenous practice (Lane and Hibbard, 2005) and community development (Kennedy, 2009) that has made decisive moves to incorporate transformation. A latecomer to planning via prior academic training in engineering, I must take most of the responsibility for failing to engage with these ideas while I was a graduate student. However, my own story illustrates that a planner can complete a prestigious education without confronting many of these ideas, and in Australia, where I teach, mainstreaming indigenous knowledge across the program is just now become part of our work. My own academic faculty at the University of Melbourne is currently joining in this attempt at self-transformation, having recently established an initiative to decolonise the urban planning curriculum. This comes at broader efforts in Australia to engage with “*decolonising settler cities*” (Porter et al., 2018) in Australia and other settler-colonial societies.

### **My Transformation**

This section describes how I made the methodological transition to more-decolonised action research, and the ethical necessity for doing so. Some customary tenancies are some combination of fraud and customary migration, as I found in 2017, when I was on sabbatical in Port Vila, working on a project about the welfare impacts of forced displacement. I was specifically studying the eviction of Destination, a community of roughly 500 people that had been evicted overnight on a Sunday night, and whose homes were bulldozed at 6 am the next day (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019). As part of that work, I heard many stories of resilience and recovery, and many more of trauma and lasting despair. People told me that I was the only person who had ever asked about how they are. I also found out that the community had never been allowed by the landowners to settle on those lands, but that a central man recruited

residents based on an ancestral claim to the land and a false agreement with the landowners. Hundreds of people moved onto the land and spent their life savings on houses, trusting that his claim to the land was legitimate and their presence allowed by the landowner. McDonnell calls men like this, *masters of modernity* (McDonnell, 2017), because they have figured out how to use the uncertainty of change, like urbanisation, to their own ends.

I only found out the end of this explanation – about the master of modernity – after transitioning to action research. In late 2019, I was finally able to interview the master of modernity, a man who now lives, in some ways shunned, in a community where many people from Destination relocated after their eviction. His claims, part of the Vete Association’s body of work, began to enter the “public” transcript of activism during Vete’s active years (Wilson, 2011), but then quieted to a “hidden” transcript (Oslender, 2007) that includes local knowing but without a unified, external face that can be known to outsiders. The process of finding out about this hidden transcript began to occur for me via action research. Elang Etas, home of the EECA, is itself facing another eviction, this time again for a complex host of reasons. Primarily, the problem is that a corrupt intermediary apparently did not make their land payments to the landowner, and died before he could be held accountable for these millions of Vatu (hundreds of thousands of US dollars).

My 2017 research was the necessary beginning of my process of transformation. Interviewing Destination survivors, I was still simply a researcher-observer. I did not have enduring relationships with my research subjects. My writing from that period suggests as much (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019). I was not invested in them as individuals, and I did not have their trust. They told me the part of the story that mattered for them to tell: that their livelihoods were still fragile, that they had never recovered, and that children were not in school. They did not tell me about the underlying politics or share with me their angers at the master of modernity that had brought about their financial ruin.

When I attended the opening of the EECA in October 2018 (Figure 3), I was still a researcher-observer. I attended upon the invitation of some of my Destination interlocutors, who were beginning to trust that I had their interests in mind. This trust was partly built because I shared with them the writing I had been doing about them, asking for their opinions about whether I had gotten the story right. In particular, I had returned to visit many of my interlocutors and told them about the report I was writing about them for the *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019* (GRID2019). Through these repeated interactions, they began to see that I was genuine and planned to develop a lasting relationship with members of the community.

**Figure 3. EECA Launch Parade**

So, until I became an action researcher, I was not given the full story of how the community at Destination was deceived by a master of modernity. Perhaps I still do not have the full story. Time will tell, or maybe it won't. Either way, I can share what happened to me between 2017 and 2019, that led me to the privilege of knowing more about the community than I was allowed to know before.

Thinking back, there was a moment of decision one day in my field research on communities facing eviction, when my ethics came into conflict with my approach. In that moment, I changed my approach. In 2017, about halfway through my interviews with survivors of Destination, I became aware that there was a newly-released draft national policy on displacement, at that time called the *Draft National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement: Towards a Durable Solution for People Affected by Displacement in Vanuatu*. I read the policy and worried that there was going to be a missed opportunity for protecting urban people facing evictions. The policy was, and still is, largely geared toward the other prevalent types of displacement in Vanuatu and the Pacific: displacement related to climate change and disaster.

It is fitting that GoV would be concerned with these types of displacement. Vanuatu's population is among the most at-risk in the world for environmental hazards, and other Pacific countries comprise much of the top ten ranking countries at risk of catastrophic events. The majority of Vanuatu's population lives in buildings that cannot survive cyclonic winds from large storms like Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015 and Tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020, both of which destroyed the vast majority of urban and rural housing in the affected areas (Ahmed, 2020).

However, I argued then and have continued to argue more recently that urban evictions comprise a third, important, prevalent type of displacement that deserves attention in national policy and by international actors in displacement. In November 2017, as my first move into action research, I circulated a memorandum via the International Organisation for Migration (IOM),



which was assisting the government in finalising the national displacement policy, arguing for protections for urban people. Ultimately, my memoranda were instrumental in getting more urban protections added to the final policy (Personal communication, IOM, November 2018).

In the meantime, I began training local people about their protections under the draft policy, and I encouraged them to advocate for more protections for urban people in a final policy. This was my shift to advocacy. As a researcher who understood the devastating effects of evictions on urban people, I was in a position to speak with community support on this issue. As a researcher, my inclination was to watch quietly and observe what would happen. However, as a friend and colleague of people affected by displacement, my moral compass directed me to action.

It was my body of work and the support of my community interlocutors that gave me the courage to write that first series of memoranda asking for better protections for urban people. My work in Port Vila after cyclone Pam in 2015 (Day and Bamforth, 2020) helped me to understand the intertwined effects of climate and disaster displacement with urban migration. People, I found, may migrate fleeing disaster, but then find themselves in a cycle of evictions in the city. This happened to my friend, Mary, who was evicted from Destination and again in March 2019, her house bulldozed with two hours' notice. It turns out, in her case, the Sheriff's office made a mistake and bulldozed the wrong house.

I shared that first series of memoranda with my interlocutors in Elang Etas and other communities, and gave them the chance to comment before I submitted it. That was the moment, I think, when people began to trust that I was going to be a persistent presence and that I was genuinely seeking to help them. From there, we have gone on to work together on a number of projects. Notably, we have invited the then-Regional Representative for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Fiji to visit Elang Etas during her short visit to Vanuatu (Figure 4). She followed up her visit by sending a deputy to run a training on human rights in the community. From there, the community has mobilised around its defence of human rights, organising its own Census (Figure 5), and inviting a New Caledonia-based NGO, Urbasophy, to train them on future data collections. I have helped to organise, and have participated in, many other events in the community, which is mobilising toward its own development in addition to resisting an eviction.

### **Concurrent Research Paths**

I have not stopped being a researcher, even as my community engagement and advocacy work has increased. Rather, my research has grown and expanded as a product of my advocacy work with the community. My current research actually now has two origins. I still ask hypothesis-driven questions, such as a recent National Geographic-funded project about how women at Destination did not know that the eviction was coming up until the day of the eviction (Figure 6). However, I also now have a broad question about how communities successfully mobilise to resist eviction, which I research as an active participant and action researcher.

My incidental work in the community has resulted in lessons like the one I outlined above, being able to complete the story about the master of modernity that was behind the eviction of Destination. My hypothesis-driven work, then, is now enhanced by my community

engagements. Being an action researcher has also changed the kinds of research that I can do. For example, during a conversation with the EECA executive in July 2019, I changed the system by recommending that the executive draft a mission statement. The discussion we were having revealed that they were worried about new community members joining the Association. I recommended a mission statement to help with explaining the Association to new members. Figure 7 shows that mission statement as pulled from the EECA Facebook page, in the *lingua franca*, Bislama. Because of some translation difficulties (Day, 2020), that mission statement is not available in English.

Acting as an influence in the development of a mission statement, changes my relationship with the question of how communities resist forced eviction. I can no longer comment on whether these modes of organising are, for instance, an organic, community-driven process. My presence disrupts that observation, but it also added a reflexive (Burawoy, 1998) possibility to my work that would not have been possible without participation. I will, for example, be able to study the future effects of the mission statement on community mobilisation. I have also written on the power dynamics exposed by words that appeared in the original drafts of that mission statement, which are rejected in the community but are common in the documents produced by the development industry (Day, 2020). Similarly, with the EECA Census, in any future work that describes this effort, I will need to acknowledge my role in this process (I did not design the instrument, but I did produce the analysis on behalf of the EECA; Figure 5).



Figure 4. Chitra Massey Visits Elang Etas



Friday, 21 June, Elang Etas Stage  
9am-noon (lunch to follow)

A  
conversation with  
**Dr. Chitra Massey,**  
UN Office of the High  
Commissioner for Human Rights



The Elang Etas Community Association invites Dr. Chitra Massey to the Elang Etas community for a discussion about urbanisation and human rights in Port Vila, Vanuatu.



**The Elang Etas Community Association**  
is a community-driven initiative  
whose mission is to achieve tenure security  
and a share of urban prosperity  
for the residents of Elang Etas,  
a peri-urban neighbourhood of Port Vila

This session will achieve:

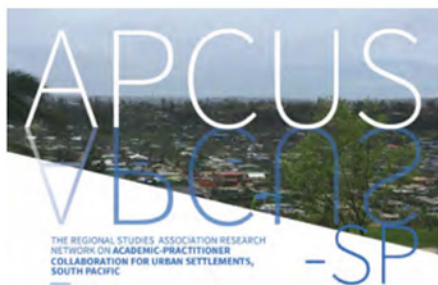
- Discussion of EECA's vision, mission, and activities
- Information sharing about human rights in the Pacific
- Planning a way to work together in the future.

**Contact**

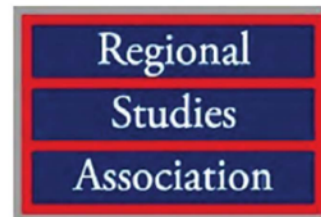
Us

Chairman Sam Tabawa: [stabawa@vanuatu.gov.vu](mailto:stabawa@vanuatu.gov.vu); 5368495  
 Vice Chairman Wycliffe Tarilenga: [tarilengawycliff@gmail.com](mailto:tarilengawycliff@gmail.com); 5992874  
 Youth Committee President Brian Merah: 5737983

Partner



**Also Supported By**



**Figure 5. EECA Census**



**DRAFT**

**Wan Gudfala Komuniti:  
Elang Etas Community Profile, 2018**

22 December 2019

Prepared by: .

Prepared for: The Elang Etas Community Association

Chairman: Sam Tabawa

Vice-Chairman: Wycliff Tarilenga



**EECA Chairman Sam Tabawa explains a concept to community participants during a training on data collection. Photo: .**

**Figure 6. Current Hypothesis-Driven Work**



**ANNOUNCING**  
a research project

**Gendered Migration:  
Women, Evictions, and Power in Port Vila**

Mary's home was bulldozed after an overnight eviction in a peri-urban area of Port Vila. She reports that she did not know about the eviction until the Vanuatu Mobile Force arrived on a Sunday evening to execute the eviction order.

This research project takes Mary's experience – with dozens of other women in her community – as a starting point for unpacking the power dynamics around forced evictions in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in the South Pacific. Mary's is a story of migration around the fringe spaces of a growing capital city where escalating land prices pose increasingly-pressing social challenges. This work documents the experiences of women facing forced migration in their city, placing these experiences in the broader legal and policy contexts. We seek to describe the information flows that limited Mary's understanding of her eviction, toward the aim of contributing to gender-inclusive planning, legal process, and customary land management.

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A survivor of **development-induced displacement (DID)**,  
Mary and her community were not displaced because of a cyclone, an earthquake, or climate change.

---



We seek to understand the power dynamics and information flows that produced Mary's situation.

Decoding these dynamics and flows could help Ni-Vanuatu people to ensure that this never again happens to women and their communities.

This research will document the experience of women facing urban forced displacement in one of the world's fastest-growing cities. Since Mary's eviction, Vanuatu has adopted a new *National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement*, which also provides protection from eviction. This work will enable recommendations for future operationalisation of the policy. Mary's story and many others are published here:

**Research Team Contact and Funder Information**



This project is funded by the National Geographic Society and supported by the University of Melbourne and the University of the South Pacific.



Figure 7. EECA Mission Statement, from the EECA Facebook Page



**STAMBA TINGTING**  
Port Vila, Vanuatu  
19 June 2019

**Elang Etas Community Association**  
**hemi wan niu wantok organaes grup blo pipol**  
**we i hang andanet long wan stamba tingting**  
**we i aotlaenem gud seftiness blong ol pipol longsaed blong graon**  
**mo fearshering lo komuniti developmen projek towards rod blo sukses**  
**blong ol pipol we i stap insaed long komuniti blong Elang Etas,**  
**wan sista komuniti blo Port Vila long Efate, Vanuatu.**

Elang Etas hemi wan sista komuniti blong Port Vila Municipal we ol pipol i nedim wan gud sefti ples blong stap.

**Ol goal blong yumi:**

**Protektem** graon we yumi liv long hem  
**Liftemap** komuniti awarenes mo felim gud togeta  
**Faenemaot stret** mo **kam part** blo wok togeta from komuniti nids  
**Liftemap** awareness baot ol issues we i stap affectem komuniti  
**Providem** komuniti wetem ol kavman services  
**Supportem** bisnis blong economic wetem development.

**Bae yumi kasem ol goals ia olsem:**

**Activatem** ol risorses blo yumi towards ol goal blong yumi  
**Invest** insaed long komuniti blong yumi  
**Buildem** patnasip wetem kavman, NGOs, mo ol narafala komunitis  
**Includem** evriwan, includem ol yut, mama, mo ol disabilitis blo evri wok plan mo operasen decisen blong yumi  
**Jensis** long fasin blong wok insaed lo komuniti asoseasen i mekem big jens long growing blong komuniti.

Chairman Sam Tabawa: [stabawa@vanuatu.gov.vu](mailto:stabawa@vanuatu.gov.vu); 5368495  
 Vice Chairman Wycliffe Tarilenga: [tarilengawycliff@gmail.com](mailto:tarilengawycliff@gmail.com); 5992874  
 Advisory Committee Chairman Jack Ulas: 5418601  
 Youth Committee President Brian Merah: 5737983

Partner .

### **Adding Value as an Action Researcher**

I do not live in Elang Etas or Tagabe Bridge, though prior to COVID-19, I did spend up to four months per year doing fieldwork in Vanuatu. PAR is sometimes articulated as a method that requires intentional participatory research design by practitioners and professionals like teachers working in the sites they study (Kemmis et al., 2013). In contrast, all of my action has been incidental, a product of my work and engagement in communities rather than a part of the original research design, and I am not a development practitioner working on projects in the areas I am studying. Participant observation, then, is perhaps where I fit most closely.

Action research is appropriate when the researcher is already part of the community she is researching, like Wilson (2011), and also when she is called to action by circumstance or ethics. My experience in Elang Etas has been more aligned with the latter of those circumstances. It is from this position that I can offer some insights about when action research is appropriate, and how to transition one's work from hypothesis-driven work that does not involve participation, to being driven by parallel processes of hypothesis-led and participation-generated research.

I am under no pretense that the strategies I offer here are new, ground-breaking, or universally applicable. My contribution is that I offer them specifically contextualised, and from the positionality of a non-indigenous researcher undertaking a genuine project of personal transformation that is informed by indigenous people and indigenous scholarship on imperialism and modernity/coloniality. My recommendations are offered from this perspective, for anyone who may be on the same journey that I am on: trying to decolonise myself.

#### ***Revisit fears of exploiting***

As a less-experienced researcher, I often felt that taking people's stories for my gain (in the form of publications) was exploitative and self-centered. This introduced fear and uncertainty into my fieldwork that I have processed over time. More recently, I have come to believe that, under the right conditions, hearing people's stories can be emancipatory on the part of the participants and generous on the part of the researcher. I found this out while I was researching Destination's survivors in 2017. My interlocutors were grateful to have someone – anyone, even a stranger – come around to see how they were doing. It turned out that nobody from government had ever come to check on them, and they continue to feel abandoned and forgotten by the structures of power. In this way, caring about people was an act of generosity, and people felt heard and validated to be able to tell their stories. Indeed, my writing about their stories (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019) helped them to feel heard on an international scale. In the 2021 training for the enumerators, in an interim debrief after the first week of enumeration, we talked about how it can feel exploitative to take people's stories. The enumerators agreed that they had similar fears. I was able to share my insights about how people at Destination felt heard, and the enumerators came back from the field the next week reporting a transformed experience: that they felt like this work was helping people. Just talking about my fears of exploitation helped them to understand theirs.

***Seek to add value***

The “right conditions” that I describe above include an intention to add value, to contribute by helping people. If the researcher’s first intention is to contribute, and a second is to publish, then action research is a possibility. Indeed, it may be unavoidable if the researcher finds herself in a situation where inaction would be unethical. Reflecting on Smith, I have strived to always ask myself whether I am engaged in extractive research that is more about building my career than being engaged with the communities. Certainly, I am building a career, but my work is not about origin stories or indigenous practice, which Smith (1999, p. 25) argues has been a center of extractive work. Rather, it is aligned more with social movements, and about how people resist eviction. My work sees people not as living in fixed worldviews that are there to be discovered, as Said (1978) describes, but rather as evolving social phenomena that resist late capitalism, and as Smith (1999, p. 24) describes, late modernism and late colonialism. That is how I position my work. My work sees indigenous people as remaking and adapting governance (Day, 2021) and resisting labels of informality (Day, 2020) and disaster (Day et al., 2020), rather than seeing indigenous people as people who had never created institutions (Smith, 1999, p. 25) and seeking to explain contemporary indigenous existence, which has not been recognised under modernism (p. 38).

For my interlocutors at Destination, I demonstrated value by returning to show them the first publication in which their story was told (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019). I have added value at Elang Etas and Tagabe Bridge by helping people to understand new policies, organising outsiders to visit, and conveying their messages where they cannot go, such as to international conferences. From the 2021 field study, the enumerators also insisted that we return to the communities for more than just a research debrief. They also wanted to know how we can help these communities. The result is an emerging partnership with some local NGOs to run community trainings on the national displacement policy.

***Assert academic thought***

I have learned that my interlocutors are interested in thinking in academic ways. One example where I have been able to add value with my academic knowledge was in the EECA’s recent deliberations over whether to publish its internal 2018 Census report. When the report was ready, the EECA Executive committee called a meeting to discuss disseminating the report. The initial discussion centered around how the estimated community population could help to direct government attention and resources to Elang Etas, e.g., paving the roads, providing policing and street lights, *etc.* Because of my academic background, I was able to point out another possibility: that the report would cause the government or the disputing landowners to “see” (Scott, 1998) the community in a way that made evicting the settlement, unavoidable. This use of James C. Scott’s concept that the state has certain ways of seeing that may not be aligned with the best interests of the community, resonated with my interlocutors. I am not an expert in what is likely to happen in this context in this situation, but expressing this possibility caused the Executive to pause, and ultimately to decide not to publish the report.



***Teach while learning***

Working closely with communities on issues requiring trust and familiarity, also presents significant opportunities to teach people and build their capacities – which takes time and energy. My research assistant on the Destination project leveraged her work with me to be hired as the community-engagement officer for the Chinese construction company doing aid-based infrastructure projects on the island. She had completed Year 7 (seventh grade) in school, but we had many conversations inspired by academic debates; for instance, about tokenistic versus meaningful community participation. She discussed these concepts in her job interview and got the job.

***Be reflexive***

Good action research adapts in response to findings. I didn't know about the Elang Etas Community Association or other local social movements in Port Vila until a year into a study of evictions. Once I knew about the Association, my research questions grew to incorporate the EECA. In our 2021 remote field study, the local enumeration team drove the research, politely demanding that we expand our research scope to many more communities, taking home voice recorders on the weekends so that their friends and families could be interviewed, and insisting that certain chiefs also needed to be interviewed to complete the study. Ni Vanuatu people are not generally a demanding set, so I immediately recognised that we should follow their suggestions and adapt the study.

***Remember core competencies***

When I first started doing action research at Elang Etas, I felt helpless and fearful. I felt helpless because I did not have the skills to help with community organising, and I felt fearful that I would hit the limit of my capacities to help, and at that point, there would still be need. Both of these have turned out to be true: I am not an adept community organiser, and I am usually not able to resolve people's problems – especially their biggest problem, which is the longstanding land dispute and impending eviction. Luckily, my interlocutors are expert community organisers and are working on the land dispute themselves. Along the way, they have reminded me of what I am good at: keeping up with national policy, writing papers and mission statements, analysing community Census data, presenting at conferences and making videos, and making connections with the international community. Now, I understand that I should contribute in ways that are aligned with my role as a researcher. I am not an activist; I am not an organiser. I have been able to add value in ways that are aligned with my own capacities as a researcher.

***Involve interlocutors in publishing and writing***

The most satisfying academic outputs are those that give back to the community, and those that I co-produce with my interlocutors. Co-producing written outputs is one way that I try to avoid essentialising what I see because my modernist mind cannot comprehend that urbanisation in Vanuatu is complicated, internally diverse, and at times, contradictory. Complexity, diversity, and contradiction can coexist in indigenous epistemologies (Smith, 1999, p. 74). As an outsider writing about indigenous people, how do I avoid committing essentialism to the page myself?

Smith (1999, Introduction) admonishes researchers to speak to their research interlocutors about the complex ideas raised in and by the research. They will understand and help the researcher to form the ideas. One way that I have attempted this kind of involvement was when I and my interlocutors at Elang Etas co-produced a video for presentation at the World Urban Forum, in an attempt to convince intergovernmental organisations such as the Red Cross and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center that urban evictions should be considered and funded alongside climate change and disaster as a major form of internal displacement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5yZ5CLDzI0&t=17s>. These contributions have resulted in my interlocutors asking me to be more deeply involved in community affairs and to write more about different parts of their experiences. Action research, then, is generative of opportunity, even if the initial investment of time is considerable.

### ***Plan to keep travelling***

There is a large temptation now, from within the pandemic, to imagine remote work and online conferences becoming the new normal. Certainly, participating remotely is a great way to include more people and stay connected while travel is limited. When the pandemic ends, however, I will be seeking to get back to the field.

### ***Start where you are***

Some students might be in a hurry to do action research. Because I never imagined myself as an action researcher, my struggle was in understanding when I had actually become one. About this, I would advise newcomers to start with a hypothesis-driven process, and if the situation allows, develop relationships that create opportunities for adding value and developing friendships over time.

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# How to Save Chinatown: Preserving Affordability and Community Service Through Ethnic Retail

*Authors: Collyn Chan and Amy Zhou*

## Introduction

Small businesses are vital to the economic health and development of our economies, creating local jobs, contributing to local economies, and anchoring communities. It is also undeniable that COVID-19 has impacted small businesses across the US and Canada. In a September 2020 report, Yelp showed almost 100,000 businesses had permanently closed due to pandemic closures (Yelp 2020). A report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in late 2020 also revealed that the largest drop in active business owners was higher among Black, Latinx, and Asian business owners compared to their white counterparts (Mills, n.d.).

Chinatowns in North America have been especially hit hard by COVID-19, with declining business patronage even before major shutdowns in early 2020 during Lunar New Year, typically the busiest time of the year (Bliss 2020; Derworiz 2020; Kang 2020). In the months that have followed, recovery for Asian American and Chinese businesses has been impacted also by xenophobic fears, spurred on by political figures and media conflating the origins of the coronavirus with Asian American communities. In December 2020, CityLab reported data showing that in six major US cities, a greater decline in consumer interests in Chinatown was observed when compared to their surrounding metro areas, in some areas up to 40%.

The disappearance of businesses in ethnic enclaves and Chinatowns have been of major concern in cities across the US and Canada in recent years. As tourism and economic development have adapted in planning policy, ethnic enclaves have become a brand of diversity that modern cities utilize, set on a pedestal to attract tourists and investors alike to a slick, international city (Santos, Belhassen, and Caton 2008). These enclaves are represented as a hub of exotic food, theatrical architecture, or an adventurous foreign experience. The preservation and protection of these cultural hubs has been limited, often focused on traditional historic preservation measures that focus on tangible assets such as urban design, physical structures, or symbolic designations.

Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves alike, however, are often borne from discriminatory housing, zoning, and labor practices (Hom 2020a; Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019; Xie and Batunova 2019). These communities that represent safety and acceptance, supported through enterprises that provide goods, services, and activities. Chinatowns, therefore, represent deep histories of both segregation and cultural belonging, intangible assets that are also deserving of preservation and protection. The value of ethnic business and entrepreneurship within these cultural hubs, therefore, extend beyond marketing potential and attraction potential for economic development.

The desire to preserve and protect the cultural, intangible value of these neighborhoods is a difficult endeavor. Traditionally, historic preservation has been the main mechanism for city governments to protect the character and culture of neighborhoods. However, in the case of ethnic enclaves, decades of structural disinvestment and dismantling of affordable housing, the allowance for retail gentrification, and the gap for small business support have also impacted the

ability for these communities to be preserved. In short – physical design and symbolic designations have not been able to preserve the confluence of factors that enable these enclaves. Years of multi-sectoral disinvestment influence how Chinatowns are surviving, and how they may recover from the pandemic. Recently, some cities have developed initiatives targeted at preserving this value created through enterprises in cultural enclaves. In 2015, the City of San Francisco initiated the Legacy Business Registry and Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund through their Office of Small Business in response to an elevated number of commercial evictions and commercial rents. Additionally, the City seeks to recognize and protect “intangible cultural heritage” through a Cultural Heritage Districts program. Similar initiatives have been explored in Los Angeles and Vancouver, but the programs are either in their early stages or have not been completed. However, the findings from assessment remain as artefacts for analysis.

This study investigates the difference in retail change in Chinatowns in Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles – areas of concentrated ethnic businesses where retail change has been a huge concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrently, this study also examines the impact of retaining a legacy business program on retail landscapes, especially amidst the pandemic. Investigating questions include: What is the value of ethnic retail within urban cores? How have legacy businesses supported the retention of ethnic retail before and during the pandemic? What meanings does disappearing ethnic retail convey and what is needed? The selection of these three cities focuses on major west coast cities with large Chinese populations. The focus on Chinatowns from three cities also enables a comparison between cities that have enacted legacy business and small business protection programs, those that have seriously considered enacting one, and ones that have not enacted any programs. Semi-structured interviews, analysis of public documents, and policy analysis were conducted. The results reveal the cross-cultural value of ethnic retail and implications for affordability within urban centers, a structural deficit in planning for the survivability of affordable community enterprises, and an invaluable loss in cultural heritage through ethnic retail. The findings contribute to understanding the value of enabling affordable retail, protecting ethnic entrepreneurship, and developing policy and planning that can inform municipalities on the future of cultural preservation that can provide material impacts for ethnic enclaves.

## **Background and Literature Review**

### ***Urbanism of ethnic entrepreneurship***

Ethnic enclaves like Chinatown grew as segregated neighborhoods within larger metropolitan areas congregated in a single neighborhood due to racism and explicitly racist policies preventing them from living elsewhere in the city. However, this congregation in a space also allowed residents to build community, identity, and place for culturally appropriate goods, services, and activities (Liu and Geron 2008). Rather than being seen solely as a method of self-preservation, other scholars have argued that ethnic enclaves like Chinatown are a valuable source of community assets: Chinatown provides immigrant Chinese with opportunities and resources without enabling the loss of their cultural identities (Zhou 2006), and they are an important source of community institutions and assets (like family associations)(Shieh and Chen 2018).

Ethnic-owned businesses are critical for these communities. Min Zhou (2006) introduces the concept of “enclave entrepreneurs”, which are entrepreneurs bound by shared ethnic backgrounds, social structures, and location, and can extend beyond commercial activities, and at a consumer market. These enclave economies can encourage residents of a specific enclave and others from the same ethnic background from outside of the enclave to meet and create social networks between each other that otherwise may have been disrupted by immigration (Zhou 2006). Many of these relationships extend beyond monetary relationships, and on reciprocal relationships that are more flexible and inclusive; as an example, in Los Angeles Chinatown, hours can be more flexible and employers can be more tolerant of children because workers may also be wives and mothers (Zhou 2006). These businesses may also provide employment benefits, hiring those from the community, and providing other benefits in the development of these communities. Ethnic, immigrant and minority businesses, for example, can act as economic, social and cultural centers for their community (Schuch and Wang, 2015; Liu, Miller and Wang, 2013).

However, many of these immigrant and community-oriented businesses are located in neighborhoods facing distinct challenges. Many of these businesses are in neighborhoods threatened by neighborhood change driven by development (Zukin, 2009), like Chinatown in Los Angeles (Lin, 2008). Many may also experience lower cash flows and are smaller than non-ethnic entrepreneurs (Chaganti and Greene, 2002; Perricone, Earle and Taplin, 2001), and many, which are family-owned businesses, may face potential sources of failure in the unwillingness of family members to continue the business down family lines, or may simply be unable to adapt to changing markets (Perricone, Earle, and Taplin, 2001). The loss of these businesses are therefore felt beyond the loss of a typical business. Also found was that businesses located in ethnic communities are more likely to have longevity when they have greater access to capital; however, capital for many of these entrepreneurs can be difficult to access due to many of existing socioeconomic conditions of the owners, a distrust from entrepreneurs to accessing banks, and existing discriminatory barriers to capital (Bates and Robb 2013).

With the positive impacts that these businesses have on their co-ethnic community as a whole, there have been recent attempts to build out support systems to allow these businesses to sustain themselves. With many of these small ethnic businesses being integral to the institutional completeness of a community (Zhou 2006), and with how the disappearance of these businesses signaling gentrification and changing the face of the neighborhood within which they reside (Zukin 2009), it is notable that many of them struggle to survive long (Bates and Robb 2013), though there have been recent efforts to support those that have survived and become important parts of the communities they serve.

### ***Preserving ethnic retail***

The literature shows that there has been some analysis on policy support for small businesses in Europe (Dhaliwal 2006; Ram and Smallbone 2003), but less has been written on policy support for ethnic small businesses in the United States. Taking the lead from European cities, the City of San Francisco has studied and pioneered two programs to support the maintenance of legacy businesses and preserve cultural heritage. These programs attempt to move beyond traditional historic preservation strategies that looked to preserve physical and tangible assets (like a

building facade) over the intangible cultural assets located within (Buckley and Graves 2016). The dispute within historic preservation between tangible and intangible assets has been a tension that has existed for decades, particularly in communities with a significant number of ethnic residents. One study looking at this issue in San Francisco Chinatown showed that members in the business community disagreed with policies determined to “iconize” Chinatown by maintaining restrictions on the physical structure by not allowing building alteration plans that did not conform to “traditional” Chinese design, not allowing the businesses to improve the quality of the buildings or renovate (Chuo 2011). This conflict continues to this day through balance between the material supports that may be provided to help a business survive, offsetting supports that are more symbolic in nature (such as a historic preservation register, or marketing).

Many cities in the United States have begun to grapple with the necessity of preserving ethnic retail and culturally invaluable businesses. As this topic falls jointly between economic development and historic preservation, there has been little academic study and few practical programs.

A handful of cities have begun to employ strategies ranging from those more focused on preserving the tangible assets mentioned above to improving the prospects of the businesses located *in* the tangible assets. In all, understanding these differences, one can identify that strategies can broadly fit into two categories: those that provide *material support*, (where resources actively affect the longevity and survival of a business), or *symbolic supports* (where resources don't impact the survivability of a business, instead impacting the physical elements like the facade). Table 1 below describes these supports in greater detail.



**Table 1. Summary of municipal preservation mechanisms**

	<b>Type of Support</b>	<b>Example</b>
Material Support	Funding or Grant	San Francisco’s Legacy Business program provided a rent stabilization grant and a business assistance (though the latter was unable during the pandemic) (City of San Francisco)
	Ordinances	Sonoma City has specific Use Permit requirements related to diversity, balance, and community character, and restricts larger chain businesses (like large-scale formula restaurants with more than 250 outlets, from settling in the Sonoma Plaza area) (Sonoma City)
	Technical Assistance	The City of Seattle’s pilot Legacy Business program offers 2 hours of free legal consultation and 8 hours of free Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) consultation.
	Marketing Support	Similar to the City of Seattle’s pilot Legacy Business program having technical assistance, they also have a social media marketing toolkit.
Symbolic Protections	Written reports	Some jurisdictions like the City of Los Angeles have written reports specific to ethnic-cultural contexts like the Chinese American in Los Angeles, 1850-1980
	Registries	The City of San Francisco created a Legacy Business Program Registry that allows any business that has been operating for 30 years or more, or if it has contributed to the neighborhood’s history and/or identity of a particular neighborhood or community (City of San Francisco).

While the literature gives an overview of how ethnic businesses have experienced numerous threats, and how many cities have begun to attempt to turn the tide on the loss of these businesses, there is little literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected these community-facing businesses, and even less on how these community-facing businesses have been affected in ethnic communities like Chinatown. Even without the looming shadow of COVID-19, there are knowledge gaps on the processes of preservation for legacy, ethnic businesses. This study attempts to contribute to the literature by contextualizing the presence of these legacy and heritage-oriented small business programs under the umbrella of the COVID-19 pandemic by considering how these programs may have influenced the continued survival of the businesses they are supposed to serve.

## Methodology

The methodology for study involves the case studies of three specific cities: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver. Due to the relative youth of legacy business programs (San Francisco, the most predominant one, has only been operating since 2015), there has not been as much opportunity for exploration into the implementation of these programs, let alone the effectiveness. With Zhuang (2015) noting that exploratory case studies can be useful in achieving generalized understanding, the paper also employs case studies to go in greater depth on the individual contexts of these cities while also drawing out generalizations that may be applicable elsewhere. In this specific case, there has been little exploration done on legacy business programs because these programs are relatively new and sufficient quantitative information isn't particularly available.

To explore each of these cities, background research was conducted on programs provided by cities during and prior to the pandemic that may have assisted ethnic entrepreneurs in Chinatown. Thirteen interviews were conducted across the three cities, falling broadly into two categories: city staff, and non-city staff who were community organizers, members of the community, or employees of community organizations with knowledge of either historic preservation or Chinatowns. The affiliations of the interviewees range across the following organizations:

- Former and Current City of Vancouver Staff
- LA Conservancy
- Youth Collaborative for Chinatown
- Yarrow Intergenerational Society
- Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC)
- Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED)
- City of Los Angeles
- City of San Francisco

After they were identified, interviewees were asked about their impression of the state of ethnic entrepreneurship prior to and after the pandemic's start, how they perceived the city's legacy business program or other city aid programs, their definition for a legacy business, their assessment of how businesses and the community as a whole were faring and potential challenges they may be facing, the nature of historic preservation in their specific areas, and what types of supports would be offered or preferred. Responses were collected and coded to identify common themes.

In addition to interviews, each case study (of San Francisco, Vancouver, and Los Angeles) includes analysis of existing programs, past reports, council briefs, and other official documents related to legacy businesses and cultural preservation.

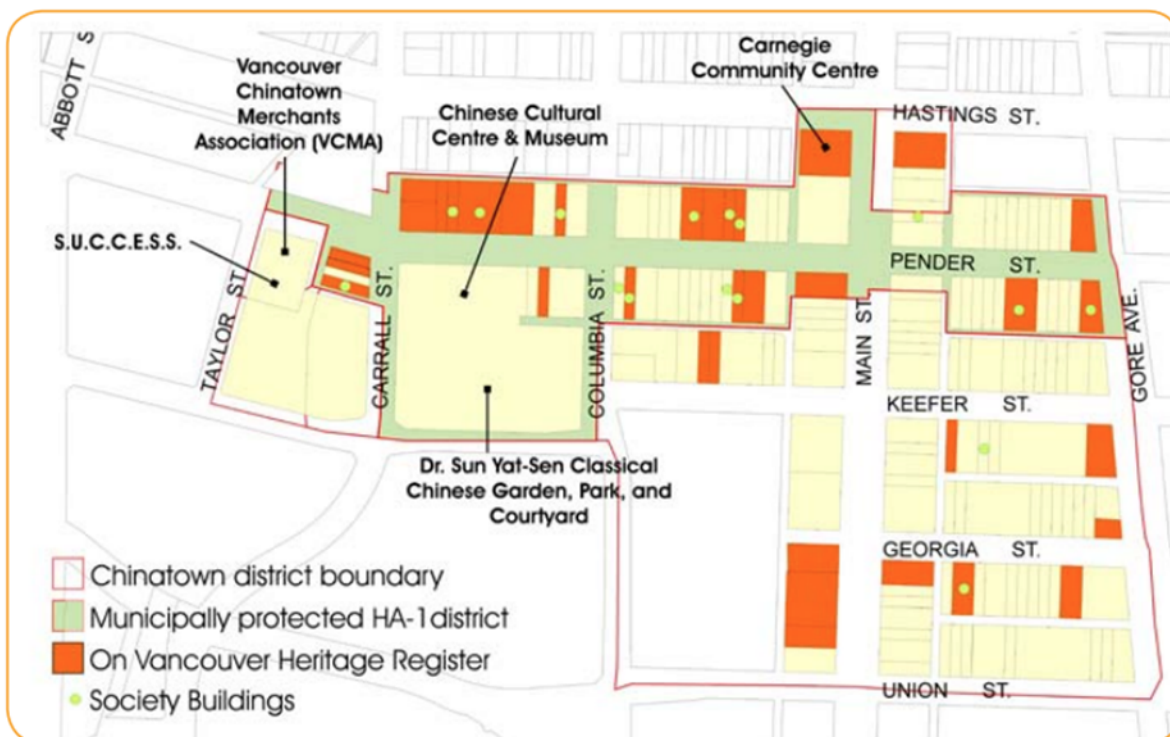
### Brief History of three neighborhoods

Chinatowns are one of the sole surviving ethnic enclaves that continue to persevere and survive in urban, downtown cores across North America. Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles

retain some of the largest and significant Chinatowns across the West Coast of Canada and the United States. The shared histories of these Chinatowns is distinct, with strong connections to the history of urban segregation, discrimination, racism and regulatory disenfranchisement seen throughout planning history (Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019; Xie and Batunova 2019; Zuk and Chapple 2015). All three Chinatowns have histories of trade labor that encourage Asian men to seek work within gold mines, but facing white hostility, were ultimately the labor behind major railroads in the region. These Chinatowns are all peripheral to the downtowns of their cities and were targets for slum clearance and urban renewal at some point in their histories.

*At the height of anti-Chinese antipathy in America, visitors to Chinatowns "delineated the utter foreignness, exoticism, and evil of the place." Notably, they marveled at the "visual and olfactory sensations "the neighborhood offered. The sights, sounds, and smells of Chinatown no longer inspire racial animus, but descriptions of Chinatown still emphasize it as "a sensory experience." Moreover, outsiders continue to market the neighborhood by gesturing at its vestigial traces of danger, along with assurances of safety. Tour guides in 1914 San Francisco, for example, called it's Chinatown "the most fascinating city of America," and made sure to tell patrons that "nowhere is the White visitor more secure in property or person." Generations later, "[r]eal estate brokers appeal to the exoticism of Chinatown's culture [and] reference the safety and style of neighboring SoHo and Tribeca." The relationship between gentrification and racial capitalism has thus been fueled, in part, by the media and real estate industries, which advance the idea of Chinatown "as an exotic yet chic neighborhood on the cusp of a major transformation." - (Naram 2017)*

**Figure 1. City of Vancouver's Chinatown Neighborhood Plan, 2012**



Vancouver Chinatown is located just east of the downtown and financial districts, and adjacent to other historic and existing enclaves (Black, Japanese, Eastern European, and First Nations). Established at the same time as the City of Vancouver in the late 19th century, Chinatown was the only neighborhood where Chinese migrants could be housed without hostility. Patterns of immigration and historic urban segregation clustered ethnic enclaves, low-income, and marginalized groups together in the area. Therefore, Chinese are the largest visible minority in the neighborhood followed by Black and Indigenous folks. Urban “decline” and calls for the protection of cultural heritage in Vancouver’s Chinatown can be traced back as early as the 1960s, when “slum clearance” and “urban renewal” was enacted by the city on Chinatown and Strathcona neighborhoods ([David Lam Centre 2017](#); [Madokoro 2011](#)). The business and retail landscape in Chinatown in the past mainly served its residents, providing food, groceries, and personal services. This retail landscape has changed dramatically, with pricier restaurants, chain businesses, and other non-Chinese businesses taking root ([Lee 2018](#); [W. Li 2019](#); [Regan 2017](#)).

**Figure 2. City of San Francisco's Chinatown**

*Image shows boundaries as described in [Montejo, 2015](#). Montejo identifies that the boundaries for Chinatown have expanded beyond the city's "official" boundaries, and these boundaries show Chinatown's influence in the surrounding neighborhoods.*

San Francisco is home to North America's oldest Chinatown, located just north of downtown and west of the financial district. Similarly, racial discrimination drove many Chinese immigrants to San Francisco's Chinatown. In the late 1800s, anti-Chinese sentiment manifested in exclusionary labor practices, racialized zoning ordinances, mob violence, and arson which further drove Chinese migrants to seek housing and contain businesses to Chinatown ([Moore, Montejo, and Mauri 2019](#); [Zuk and Chapple 2015](#)). The 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, and fires that broke out destroyed Chinatown – the subsequent rebuilding utilized urban design and architecture to "iconize", demarcate, and protect Chinatown from displacement ([Li 2019](#); [Zuk and Chapple 2015](#)). The retail landscape also reflects this desire to be seen as a gateway to Chinese culture, with souvenir shops and tourism-oriented businesses present today. In recent years, San Francisco's Chinatown has retained many community and cultural businesses, with grocery



stores, restaurants, large banquet halls, temples, and other Chinese-owned businesses. The neighborhood is considered the densest in the City of San Francisco, with a population of 14,820. The demographic make-up is 81% Asian, and a median income of \$21,219 (ACS 2012-2016 5-Year Estimates; [San Francisco Planning Department 2018](#)).

**Figure 3. Map of Old and New Chinatown and Union Station Area, Los Angeles, CA (Metro Rail 1991)**



Today's Chinatown in Los Angeles is located just north of Downtown, and is 38.9% Asian American, followed by 28.9% Latinx, 15.6% White and 13.1% Black (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Originally, Chinatown was located within the boundaries of modern-day downtown in what was known as "Calle de los Negros". Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1800s experienced the same racial discrimination as their San Franciscan counterparts as anti-Chinese sentiment grew, leading to the Chinese Massacre of 1871 when 19 Chinese immigrants were lynched and businesses were looted. In the early 1900s, arson attempts combined with "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" policies led to the decline of Old Chinatown, which was demolished for the construction of Union Station ([Hom 2020a](#); [Lin 2006](#)). New Chinatown was built north of the old, with "preservation movement" aesthetics incorporated in its physical design. Chinese merchants and families banded together to provide community serving amenities including retail shops and restaurants, as well as theatre, temple, and gardens. Concerns over the gentrification of Chinatown began in the 90s, with rapid increase in market-rate units in the area and chain retail replacing independent businesses. In 2000, a Business Improvement District was established, "considered a force of gentrification from within the neighborhood as the marketing and events primarily cater to young professionals and support the new upscale retail." ([Hom 2020a](#)) The current retail landscape in Los Angeles is a mix of restaurants, souvenir shops,

bakeries, and others, with the three most common types of businesses per 2-digit NAICS code distribution in the zip code (90012) as Real Estate and Retail Leasing (which includes mom and pop landlords), Retail Trade (which includes jewelry stores, home furnishing stores, family clothing stores, and various fish and seafood and grocery markets) and Wholesale Trade (City of Los Angeles 2020).

**Table 2. Summary of demographics**

	Vancouver	San Francisco	Los Angeles
Population	1800	14,820	33,800
% Asian	30%	63%	36.96%
Median income vs Metropolitan income	23,000 vs 73,000	21,219 vs 112,000	45,003 vs 69,138

(ACS 5-year estimates 2012-2017; [City of Vancouver 2020](#); [San Francisco Planning Department 2018](#))

### **Findings about recent challenges before *COVID-19***

When examining the potential impact of ethnic retail preservation on COVID-19 recovery and historic preservation, these three cities have shared histories and unique urban challenges. All three Chinatowns have faced varying degrees of discriminatory zoning, attempts of slum clearance, urban renewal, met with organizing efforts from the community. The success of historic planning policies have lasting impacts which inform the survivability of Chinatowns prior to and after the pandemic. In this section, we'll discuss some of the unifying and differing forces experienced in each city.

#### ***Housing Gentrification and Retail Change***

Vancouver, SF, and LA are cities known for the lack of affordability of their housing markets. All three cities have seen rapid population increases due to job growth coupled with low densification rates. This rise in demand for housing places pressures in areas of the city that have the lowest land and rental values. As Chinatowns in these cities are adjacent to downtown cores, the affordability in housing ensures that they are in prime locations for gentrification and displacement as landlords are incentivized to sell to higher bidders. As housing prices, job growth, and urban attraction draws wealthier demographics into the city, retail change has been a significant challenge in all three Chinatowns as well. While traditional Chinese businesses emphasize affordability for their patrons, new retail arriving in the neighborhoods often charge higher price points than their traditional counterparts. Even if these stores specialize in Chinese cuisine or fusion, the marketing and intention of the business caters to a wealthier demographic. Examples include Bao Bei, a high-end “modern Chinese” restaurant serving \$20 main courses in Vancouver; Eight Tables in San Francisco, with a \$225 tasting menu; and Majordomo, a restaurant from celebrity chef David Chang set in an “industrial-chic space.” In combination, changing urban demographics and real estate forces have contributed to rapid changes in both the retail and housing landscape.

*Vancouver*

In Vancouver, Japanese incarceration during World War II combined with the slum clearance and urban renewal of Chinatown's supporting neighborhoods in the 1960s propelled the decline of a robust Asian population to support the businesses of Chinatown. The predominantly Chinese and low-income neighborhood of Strathcona was targeted for renewal, and many of the homes were seized through eminent domain for values much lower than median housing prices in the area (Anderson 1988; Bruce 2005; Madokoro 2011). In short, the ability for the Chinese community to live within the City of Vancouver was once again being limited and redrawn to serve discriminatory purposes. As the housing boom in Vancouver continued, the Strathcona neighborhood, once a Chinese enclave with predominantly low-income households, has changed rapidly with less than a quarter of the population living in low-income housing (Anderson 1988; Bruce 2005; Madokoro 2011). Further, the housing within Chinatown's boundaries, predominantly SROs – a critical portion for sheltering the extremely low-income – have fallen into disrepair and need substantial funding to replace (City of Vancouver 2017; Denis 2020). These dueling forces have placed pressure on seniors, the majority of which are low-income – 73% according to the Government of British Columbia 2015 – who live in the area. Since the 1970's, many residents of Chinese descent have moved to find more affordable housing options in the other ethnoburbs in the Metro Vancouver region.

In Vancouver, interviewees noted that a city-level or regional government resource for small business support is missing. Specific to Chinatown, long standing businesses have faced rapid demographic changes in the neighborhood, competing with more new, modern businesses for foot traffic. In a 2018 report, the hua foundation found that patrons of traditional Chinatown businesses tended to patronize only traditional businesses and patrons of newer businesses only patronized newer businesses (Lee 2018). Respondents also noted that many business owners in the area struggle to adapt to major changes, such as adopting digital food platforms during COVID-19. Other factors have also contributed to pressures on retail exit, such as the retirement of aging business owners, businesses without succession plans, or onerous bureaucratic processes to access support and resources. Notably, a recurrent comment from community members is the inability of government resources to service streets and the public realm in the neighborhood to maintain cleanliness and safety. Some have also noted that there is a lack of public space for communal gathering central to the retail.

*San Francisco*

San Francisco's Chinatown is the city's densest neighborhood, created out of necessity from historic segregation and discriminatory planning policies. However, this community also has a long history of community organizing and advocacy, bolstered by strong community institutions such as Chinatown Community Development Center, that have mitigated some of the housing impacts created by the tech booms in the region. This advocacy has enabled the successful protection of subsidized units, and reduced conversion of housing to commercial land use (Moore, Montojo, and Mauri 2019). The Chinatown area is predominantly rental housing, at rates that are affordable in comparison with the rest of the city. However, this affordability creates a growing disparity between the neighborhood and potential market rate prices which enables mounting pressure to rents in the area. Some residents fear that new developments in the

area, such as the potential impact of the new subway station that is opening in 2022, will exacerbate these pressures on rent. The history of Chinatown's segregation, community building, and organizing activity has enabled strong social connections within the Chinese diaspora. Reports and anecdotal evidence has shown that land ownership remains within community hands, even when it is transferred and sold as they are sold to other community members.

For the small businesses in San Francisco's Chinatown, they faced numerous challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic: many businesses did not have the capacity or knowledge to bring their businesses online, and moreover, faced much competition with online retailers who were able to provide the same wares. However, for community-serving businesses, the expensive commercial rents were never far from the minds of the retailers renting space in the community, particularly with its proximity to the transportation stations near the community.

### *Los Angeles*

Multiple histories of displacement in Los Angeles' Chinatown have been highlighted above, but one of the most significant iterations of this displacement has been taking place since the 1990s. Pressures from global investment capital buying land for development and subsequent pressures the growth of the art gallery scene, and transit-oriented development have prompted much of the displacement of working-class and immigrant communities in the Chinatown (Lin 2008). There are reports of rent increasing 200% in buildings currently facing eviction (interview with Janis, 2021).

Not only are residents being displaced, but so too are the retailers important to the social fabric of the community: the construction of the Gold Line Chinatown station in 2003 is correlated with the decline in the community's small business growth – a point of concern because of how many of these retail businesses are community-facing and community-serving. Organizations like the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID), which have the purported task of “improving business” in Chinatown, may contribute to gentrification by increasing marketing to young professionals and those outside of the community, prompting influxes of market-rate housing developments and retailers which may displace the working class community currently in the neighborhood (Hom 2020b).

### ***Historic and Retail Preservation Measures***

#### *Vancouver*

Prior to the pandemic, Vancouver's Chinatown faced a number of hardships with many long-standing businesses closing shop due to rising rents, reaching retirement age, or declining business. In 2017, a Legacy Business study was conducted to develop a strategy to preserve legacy businesses that have a connection to the “community's history, contribute to neighborhood character, and play an integral role in the community's way of life” (City of Vancouver, 2017). No program was enacted, and small business support was limited to funding from Chinatown and Strathcona Business Improvement Associations, and local funders such as Vancity Credit Union and Vancouver Chinatown Foundation. Vancouver's Chinatown is designated a National Historic Site, and the City of Vancouver is actively seeking UNESCO

Heritage Site status for the neighborhood. At the city level, parts of the neighborhood are zoned HA-1 and HA-1A, Historic Areas that regulate and preserve the land uses, urban form, and design of buildings (especially older properties).

In January 2021, the Downtown East Side Special Enterprise Pilot Program was released tailored to supporting community-focused enterprises. The funds would support businesses with technical assistance for marketing and real estate transactions, in addition to providing funds for capital building improvements. It is important to note that the City of Vancouver is the only amongst the three cities that are unable to support businesses directly with financial reimbursement due to the city's charter.

### *San Francisco*

Following a 2014 report from the City of San Francisco's Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office, a two-phased Legacy Business program was proposed. Phase 1 created the Legacy Business Registry: eligible businesses would be 30 years or older, would be nominated by the Board of Supervisors of Mayor, and prove at a Small Business Commission hearing that they have made a significant impact on the neighborhood's culture or history. Phase 2 created the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund, where lease extensions would be facilitated between Legacy business tenants and property owners (this passed under Proposition J in 2015).

### *Los Angeles*

There is currently no legacy business program in Los Angeles, though a motion was filed by City Councilmember Curren D. Price Jr. in 2019 to instruct the Economic and Workforce Development Department to report to the Economic Development Committee with an analysis of the San Francisco Legacy Business Program and other programs along with recommendations to implement a similar program in Los Angeles. There is a local organization (LA Conservancy) which runs a legacy business program focused on spotlighting legacy businesses through a map and written content (L.A. Conservancy 2021). In addition, there is a series of Ethnic-Cultural Contexts produced by SurveyLA in October 2018 and funded by the Historic Preservation Fund that outline the history of five ethnic communities in Los Angeles: Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, and Thai Americans (Los Angeles City Planning 2019).



**Table 3: Summary of Historic and Retail Preservation Programs from City Governments\***

	<b>Vancouver</b>	<b>San Francisco</b>	<b>Los Angeles</b>
Financial Assistance	No direct financial assistance provided	Yes - there has been a rent stabilization grant and a business assistance grant.	No
Protections and Covenants	Zoned Historic Areas (facade and land use protections), some funding for renovating these buildings	While there is a program that specifically designates “cultural heritage districts”, there are no associated regulatory controls.	No
Promotion Activities	New Enterprise program (2021)	Anticipated to begin soon, this component of the program is not yet up and running, though a website is currently being constructed.	No
Technical Assistance	New Enterprise program (2021)	Yes, there is some technical assistance offered by the SF Department of Small Business, including assistance with permits and licenses.	No

*As of December 2021*

### **Findings about Available Resources During the COVID-19 pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic and various shut-down orders, the Chinatowns in each of the individual cities had varying levels of access to resources. Small businesses in San Francisco and LA Chinatown had the ability to apply for the United States Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL). Vancouver (in Canada) had access to various Government of Canada programs like the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA), and the BC Small and Medium Sized Business Recovery Grant.

However, when distilled down to the local level, it was clear that there were the differences in what was offered as resources in each city at a local level.

In San Francisco, community organizations like Chinatown Community Development Center

(CCDC) have supported the creation of various programs that support both the restaurants and businesses within the neighborhood but also the residents within the SROs. Feed and Fuel Chinatown is a program that provides 122,000 meals to Chinatown SRO residents, sourced through 34 Chinatown based restaurants, with current fundraising efforts going to support a second version of this program (Chinatown Community Development Center, n.d.). In addition, San Francisco's Shared Spaces program allowed Grant Street (a part of San Francisco Chinatown) to completely close to cars and allow restaurants (which often had limited spaces) to expand their dining spaces onto the streets (Batey 2020). The City of San Francisco also provided a variety of COVID-19 relief programs such as SF Resiliency Fund, SF HELP, Neighborhood Mini-Grants, African American Small Business Revolving Loan Fund in addition to the State of California's Small Business COVID-19 Relief Grant Program. Respondents also noted that it was difficult for shop owners to access many of these funds in the case, and when they did, may not have understood the requirement. There have been accounts of some owners using funds provided for business rent and may be in a position where they are required to pay it back. Other accounts noted that these grants are not guaranteed, and competition made it difficult to receive financial aid even after applying to multiple funds.

In Vancouver, there was a broad consensus that there was not enough direct assistance available for local residents and retail organizations. The federal and provincial funds available were dependent on applications and contributions from landlords in order to access funds. Further, some interviewees noted that there were language barriers, and lack of capacity from small business owners to complete the necessary documentation for the funds. At the community scale, grassroots organizations formed the Chinatown Cares program to deliver groceries and hot meals to isolated seniors in the neighborhood (Cheng 2020; hua foundation 2020).

In Los Angeles, there was little support from the city. Organizations on the ground like Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) were doing outreach and supporting small businesses while they were being evicted, and also created a coupon book for the small businesses that raised over \$10,000 for the businesses participating.

While there were community organizing efforts and available funds across all three cities, interviewees noted that above all else, direct assistance was needed to pay for commercial rent. None of the respondents we spoke with noted any adequate programs or resources that significantly mitigated retail pressures. Overall, program requirements and restrictions from financial assistance during the pandemic were unclear or onerous processes that didn't fully meet the needs of the community.

### **Overall Findings and Key Takeaways**

From the interviews, historic analysis, and policy analysis conducted, it is clear that there are both distinct and similar themes regarding the preservation of ethnic retail in Chinatowns across all three cities. Further, under city measures provided for small business support and historic preservation, these findings apply to both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Historic Preservation and Small Business Support programs did not provide enough assistance for Chinatowns even before the pandemic*

Interviewees were clear that Chinatowns had been facing struggles long before COVID-19. Across all three cities, Chinatowns were facing rapidly changing demographics, rising commercial rents, and pressures from skyrocketing real estate prices.

Some issues identified are the decline in business patronage due to a combination of changing demographics, marketing, and “an inability to keep up with changes”. In Vancouver, some also attributed falling patronage due to lack of management in the public realm (i.e. street cleaning, garbage pickup), the opioid epidemic, and “feeling unsafe in the area”. Retirement and succession have also been issues across all Chinatowns, as aging owners reach retirement age and do not have the capacity, interest, or option to pass the business on. Aging building stock is also an issue, where business owners or landlords may not have the capital to improve stock, furthering storefront vacancy and affecting the ability to keep building ownership with the Chinese community. Relatedly, slow and onerous permitting processes were cited as a possible barrier to capital and public realm improvements to revitalize the neighborhood’s atmosphere. Large infrastructure projects affected business decisions as well: in San Francisco, the planned construction of a new transit line is seen as a threat to the commercial and housing rental prices in the neighborhood.

Juxtaposing the needs, gaps, and stressors most commonly expressed by interviewees with the available government programs showcases gaps in ethnic retail preservation. Programs made available through historic and cultural preservation programs, small business support programs, and pandemic relief programs did not fulfill the needs of the community and fill in these gaps. Interviewees across all three cities noted that traditional preservation programs, such as the protection of building facades did not protect the longevity and survivability of businesses and affordable housing units. Direct commercial rent control and support was emphasized as critical for business survivability.

As part of the interviews, participants were asked on their effectiveness and whether they believed these programs were impactful in supporting Chinatown businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the board, interviewees expressed that COVID-19 exacerbated the existing stressors on Chinatowns and that there was not enough direct financial assistance to mitigate business impacts. The interviewees did not believe that existing programs prior to COVID-19 reduced impacts. In Vancouver, the benefits made available during the pandemic were difficult for business owners to access due to capacity, cultural expectations, or onerous reporting. For example, one business closed down because commercial rent relief required participation from the building’s landlord, and they did not enter the program. In another instance, business owners did not apply to relief programs because they felt that the requirements for documentation entitled the government to too much personal information. Lastly, one interviewee noted that some business owners simply don’t have the accounting or assistance needed to fill out the relief funding forms as they only have time to keep their business accounting afloat.

In San Francisco, Chinatown shop owners were eligible for the federal Paycheck Protection Program, but as with all businesses, it was not guaranteed. For those who did, they may not have understood what was allowable through the program. For example, there was one account of an

owner using funds for commercial rent and they may now be in a position where they are required to pay the funds back. Direct assistance was provided to Chinatown's businesses through SF's Resiliency Fund where grants were provided up to \$10,000. While there was the existing Legacy Business Registry and Legacy Business Preservation Fund, they did not add any new supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Los Angeles, there were certain programs made available to the businesses to support them on CARES Act applications (which included applications to the PPP). There were also small business loan programs available to Los Angeles businesses, including the LA County Small Business Stabilization Loan Program, and grant programs, including the LA Regional COVID Fund (which provides both loans and grants). However, while these programs were available, many of them did not offer in-language support, which made it difficult for many businesses in Los Angeles' Chinatown to apply.

*Direct Assistance for commercial rent was biggest gap before – but especially during – the pandemic*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviewees noted that direct assistance - specifically funds that were available to pay for commercial rent - was the biggest gap in programs provided. Although some programs in these cities provided some direct financial aid that could be paid towards rent, it remains an issue even now. Commercial rent was also cited as an ongoing issue, even prior to the pandemic. Some businesses, like those in Los Angeles' Chinatown, can pay upwards of \$25,000 a month, and there is more incentive for landlords to keep rents high due to Chinatown's proximity to urban cores. Across the three Chinatowns, some businesses received a level of empathy from landlords during the COVID-19 pandemic, with rent deferral or reduced rents given. In Los Angeles, some business owners organized to ask landlords to lower rent over the course of the pandemic. However, despite these efforts, it was noted that commercial rent and a lack of commercial rent control leaves much of the affordability and survivability of businesses to the hands of benevolent landlords. In San Francisco, one interviewee noted that state laws hinder the ability to enact policies that control commercial rent. The same interviewee noted that high ownership rates of buildings that stayed within the Chinese community was very important for the neighborhood, as the owners were invested in the survivability of their commercial tenants and were more willing to ease on rent and other measures.

*Preserving ethnic retail is the act of preserving community services, as opposed to cultural or economic value*

Through our interviews with members from all three cities, part of the difficulty in establishing a program that preserves ethnic retail (such as a legacy business program), was the unclear definitions for businesses that should be protected or supported. These definitions varied, particularly between those in the community and city staff.

In San Francisco (which was the only city with a formalized legacy business program out of the three cities), the program defines a legacy business as one that is older than 30 years, and "contributes to the history and/or identity of a specific neighborhood." Similarly, when speaking with city staff from LA working in historic preservation, the same qualities of longevity, permanence and characteristics of whether they contributed to community or cultural identity arose. In contrast, Vancouver's legacy business study emphasized a fluidity to the definition –

allowing the community to define what the parameters were for retail businesses that should be supported. Further, Vancouver's 2021 Special Enterprise Pilot Program draws a distinction between "legacy business" (something transmitted by, or received, from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past) and use the term "heritage business" (based on values and their attributes, and often more complex and nuanced than legacy) to address the living heritage, culture and identity of Chinatown" ([City of Vancouver 2021](#)). These distinctions in definitions are important, as the adoption of legacy business programs often require strict guidelines (i.e. number of years, etc.) in order for retail entities to qualify for support.

Community members from all three Chinatowns saw legacy businesses as community assets and institutions, providing a sense of place and identity, and essential goods and services for the neighborhoods, in addition to being a driver for the local economy. Some community members defined the legacy business as one that was specifically attached to the community and that their patrons were long-term residents of an area. Others asserted that legacy businesses in Chinatowns were those that provided community service – working hard to ensure that culturally appropriate goods and services were provided for community members at an affordable price point. Another interviewee emphasized that legacy businesses are those that go beyond simple economic units of the economy, noting that while beloved businesses in Chinatown may not be adapting to new food trends, there is still value in their service to the community.

Given these sentiments, it seems that there is still a gap in existing programs to address that is truly valued by community members - the survivability of businesses that provide for the populations that live there. The technical supports currently provided (a legacy business registry, employee subsidy, and technical support for marketing and rent negotiation) do not seem to be mitigating the drivers of business closure like the lack of commercial rent control, onerous and culturally inappropriate processes for grant funding, lengthy zoning and permit processes.

*Preserving ethnic retail also requires the preservation of housing and affordability*

As cities continue to look to address retail gentrification and the protection of legacy businesses, the findings from this research show that the desire to retain cultural, historic, and community defining retail may be separate from the idea of legacy. Many of our interviewees noted that enterprises that should be part of support programs are those that provide a community service by meeting community necessities like social services, food kitchens, shelter, and more. Specific to Chinatowns and adjacent enclaves, interviewees noted that this meant low prices and culturally appropriate goods and services. This is supported by business owners who have acknowledged their intentionally cheaper pricing to meet the needs of patrons. Other information that supports this is related to the context given by our interviewees, where some noted that business owners don't invest in modernizing changes to adapt to the trends of today such as newer aesthetic appeal that would drive a corresponding increase in prices.

The idea of protecting legacy businesses extends beyond the idea of protecting old enterprises. As demographics, housing prices, and retail enterprises in our neighborhoods rapidly change, these communities have noticed that beloved businesses find it harder to adapt. A challenge identified by some interviewees is that ethnic entrepreneurs in Chinatown are unable to adapt to changes in demand and are not meeting economic competition. These entrepreneurs do not



engage in utilizing digital delivery services, marketing through mapping and other business review applications, or keeping up with food trends such as emphasizing food aesthetics. Existing businesses form the backdrop against which new businesses enter the community: some see these new businesses in Chinatown as revitalizing “blighted” neighborhoods, while critics of these new modern businesses say that they don’t serve the neighborhood, instead importing wealthier demographics from other areas of the city.

Given that Chinatowns are home to the low- and very-low-income, immigrants, non-native English speakers, and pan-Asian folks who need affordable housing, affordable and culturally appropriate goods and services – ethnic retail fills a gap beyond mere units of the economy. Small businesses in these neighborhoods often charge relatively little and do not prioritize investment into the aesthetic appearances that are trending in today’s retail landscape. The preservation of these ethnic retail units and, by hopeful extension, the culture of the neighborhood, is also a narrative about the value of affordability within the urban core. The survivability of Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves must be about the preservation of affordable commercial rent, affordable housing, and prices for goods and services for those who live there.

This idea is supported by the differences between San Francisco’s Chinatown and those of Vancouver and Los Angeles. Even prior to the pandemic, interviewee concerns around the survivability of San Francisco’s Chinatown seems less severe in comparison to the other two cities. While there were obvious worries regarding the city’s affordable housing prices and the new Chinatown station to be built, community members noted that Chinatown was doing well. Interviews and other studies credit the positive landscape of SF’s Chinatown to its history of organizing and political activism that have retained many of the residential buildings within the Chinese community and have intentionally kept rents affordable. In short, the ownership of buildings by community members have allowed the survivability of affordable housing units and relatively more affordable commercial rent. Organizers were also more successful in halting urban renewal and discriminatory housing practices in decades past, allowing a significant population to continue to inhabit Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods. In stark contrast, Vancouver and Los Angeles both suffered significant decline in Chinese populations as a result of slum clearance, eminent domain, and planned disinvestment in neighborhoods as outlined in the history. To this day, descriptors by media outlets as well as current and former Chinese patrons in both neighborhoods are reminiscent of those from over a century ago. In Vancouver, many see Chinatown as dangerous, dirty, and unkept; this is attributed to storefront vacancy, declining business, lack of street cleaning and community public spaces. In Los Angeles, this is attributed to rising rents, gentrifying businesses, and even the work of ill-meaning landlords who have disinvested in their buildings in hopes of evicting tenants and redeveloping the buildings. This dynamic can make it difficult to determine truth from perception, but it is nonetheless clear that these two Chinatowns were losing businesses and residents long before the pandemic.

### **Discussion**

This study explored how ethnic retail has been changing in the Chinatowns of Vancouver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, and how a legacy business program and other support systems have impacted these businesses before and during COVID-19. Legacy business programs in practice and the preservation of ethnic retail in general fall between historic preservation and small

business development, and there is yet to be intensive studies on the impact and effectiveness of legacy business programs on this subset of retail. Existing studies have focused on the value of ethnic businesses within their communities, existing challenges to operating a business within urban cores, and physical historic preservation policies. As a first step, our current study has examined the impact of these programs to understand how business preservation programs have fared amidst the pandemic across three cities. Findings reveal how residents value ethnic businesses within their communities, the effectiveness of city programs to meet needs of ethnic businesses during and before the pandemic, and how the perception of disappearing retail from varying Chinatowns influence policy decisions. This data seeks to fill a gap in research about how ethnic retail should be preserved through historic preservation and small business support in planning and policy.

The three case studies revealed and affirmed that ethnic enterprises are beloved for their community functions far greater than merely for their goods and services within Chinatowns. For many, these community functions are as familial gathering spaces, representatives of rich historical contributions, or are spaces where residents can find affordable and culturally appropriate meals and supplies. These ideals extend beyond the definitions of legacy businesses as understood through existing preservation programs and studies which identify an amount of time within the neighborhood. The emphasis on community contribution draws attention to how we can protect these businesses, not as economic assets, but rather as a part of a fabric of the neighborhood as affordable retail and community spaces integrated into Chinatowns and ethnic enclaves alike.

Preservation programs have focused on providing physical building protections through zoning, relief grants, marketing support, and succession planning support. However, the largest perceived gap in need prior to and during the pandemic was direct rental relief, commercial rent control, and creating more culturally appropriate processes for bureaucratic programs.

Further, our comparison between these three case studies have shown that affordability and survivability of ethnic retail in Chinatowns is also dependent on how the community has been able to survive past discriminatory planning practices that have tried to rid these neighborhoods of public realm improvements and housing ownership. The importance of community-based ownership of buildings has provided protection to Chinatown from those who may seek to raise rents for housing and commercial businesses beyond what is survivable from Chinese tenants.

This research contributes to an ongoing and evolving discussion on how to preserve intangible cultural assets, identified as ethnic retail in our three case studies. Across all three cities, it appears that programs need to preserve the community service of affordable, and culturally appropriate goods and services; protect or provide direct assistance in the form of rent control or rent relief; and lastly programs should protect affordable housing stock and promote community ownership of residential and commercial buildings in these communities.

We acknowledge, however, that there is a gap between San Francisco and Vancouver and Los Angeles. San Francisco's Chinatown is struggling, but still retains a large neighborhood of Chinese residents and owners. The solution for a neighborhood that still retains many assets and strengths is to focus on preservation and protection. This would include avenues to retain

community ownership and reduce commercial rent burden to weather the pandemic and other shocks. This includes avenues to preserve affordability and enable continued ownership from the Chinese residents and business owners that remain – potentially through alternative ownership methods like the community land trusts and community co-ownership.

For Chinatowns and enclaves in greater decline and that have lost significant community populations, municipalities may wish to create pathways for community ownership, but also look to re-envisioning the community on the basis of affordability. Often, planners look to declining neighborhoods as projects for revitalization, attempting to create “mixed-income” neighborhoods by developing housing stock that may import wealthier demographics from outside the community. These initiatives may not be well received well by existing community members, further exacerbating sentiments in ethnic enclaves as these policies tend to ignore that the decline of their neighborhoods also stem from past planning decisions. Potential solutions may be to aim to create mixed-income neighborhoods through social support services and pathways for existing residents to reach higher income levels. This is a topic for further research.

Due to the timing of this research, quantifying the impacts of COVID-19 on ethnic businesses in Chinatowns may have to wait for after the decline of the pandemic. The data collected since may better identify the factors for closure both during and prior to the pandemic, and to evaluate the impact of legacy business and other preservation programs in these neighborhoods. In addition, while some research has been formulated on the importance of small businesses to the social infrastructure of ethnic enclaves, there should be more qualitative research conducted on 1) the institutional completeness provided by ethnic retail; and 2) how historic and legacy businesses programs can better protect the completeness provided by ethnic retail.

### **Conclusion**

Historic preservation and economic development programs from cities are currently developing programs and policies to preserve ethnic retail and retain cultural neighborhoods. Thus far, these programs have focused on preserving legacy, and have not met the needs of their constituents. Chinatowns have been on the decline even prior to the pandemic, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated the factors that have forced closures. Through our research, we have found that programs that preserve ethnic retail should understand that these policies should focus on the preservation of community services within the neighborhood, as opposed to the preservation of physical buildings or economic contributions. We have also found that the preservation of ethnic retail may require commercial rent control and direct assistance for rental relief during COVID-19 and beyond. Lastly, retaining cultural neighborhoods such as Chinatowns, likely requires the prioritization of housing affordability and pathways towards community ownership in order to sustain the cultural institutions, spaces, and assets created for years to come.

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# Learning to Share: Outdoor Commercial Spaces on San Francisco's Valencia Street

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## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of San Francisco sanctioned the use of public space on sidewalks and parking spaces for commercial purposes as part of their Shared Spaces initiative. Combined with streamlined permitting processes and an iterative rollout of design guidelines and inspections, the program facilitated a rapid and large-scale shift in the city's streetscape. Using the Valencia Street commercial corridor in San Francisco's Mission District as a case study area, we present a preliminary typology of "outdoor commercial spaces" (OCS) based on the degree of enclosure as a potential signifier of different patterns in use and perception of public space. We interviewed city residents and other stakeholders to explore emergent themes in the perception of OCS, complemented by pedestrian path tracing along different sections of Valencia Street. Our findings indicate that differences in the degree of enclosure in OCS on Valencia Street partially reflect their diversity in use and business type. The interview feedback also suggests that individuals across several stakeholder groups generally believe OCS represent an improvement to public space even when more enclosed OCS may imply the privatization of public space. Additionally, pedestrian behavior while the street was closed to vehicular traffic implies that the street closure is an important complement to OCS that maximizes the potential benefits of an activated streetscape while mitigating the negative effects and perceptions of privatization. However, these changes may amplify existing patterns of inclusion and exclusion in public spaces on Valencia Street. Especially as many OCS become permanent fixtures of San Francisco's streets, their design and purpose have important implications for street-level accessibility and city-wide equity for small businesses. These dynamics – and the OCS themselves – are likely to continue evolving during the transition to long-term guidelines and implementation.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the many generous folks that gave their time and thoughts to our research, without which this paper would not exist. In addition to those we interviewed formally and informally for the project's substance, we thank Professor Zachary Lamb for his guidance and suggestions throughout the project, and our fellow students in UC Berkeley's Research Methods in Environmental Design class. We also thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments dramatically improved the paper and our own understanding of the project.

### **Introduction: Why Study Streets?**

There are many different ways to study cities. Mirroring the rise of data science methods, contemporary urban research often leverages massive datasets to infer general trends across cities or neighborhoods. At the same time, more culturally motivated research may find its focus in deep ethnographic analysis of singular communities or social groups. Geographic information systems have revolutionized the application of spatial data, and policy researchers have volumes of public documents and briefs to inform their work. While the variety of methods at the disposal of urban research may expand by the day, there are ultimately two main ways to explore the urban space: from an all-encompassing perspective, or from the streets.

French philosopher, Michel de Certeau (1984), discussed these perspectives as the two primary ways to know a city. To him, knowing a city from an all-encompassing perspective is informative and useful, but learning about a city from the perspective of the streets imparts a special kind of understanding that one cannot get in any other way. He wrote about streets as a place of “Pedestrian Speech Acts”, where knowledge about the city and urban life is shared and passed on not only through the form of streets and their arrangement, but through the act of walking as well. He wrote, “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered (de Certeau, 1984, 97)”. The way people walk through and interact with the street tells the stories of the city. Exploring people’s paths and creating paths of your own informs research unlike any other activity. It can uncover overlooked social dynamics, highlight injustices and inequities, or simply shine a light on restaurants and other establishments that are simultaneously hidden gems and neighborhood institutions. To study streets is to study the city in a fundamental way.

Contemporary debates concerning urban streets relate to this present study in two main ways:

(1) a growing recognition of the street as an appropriate place for a mix of uses and activities, and (2) unresolved concerns over streets as a nexus where public and private domains unite.

Historically, streets in the United States had multiple purposes, but the popularity of the automobile converted streets to places dedicated to mobility. Historian Kenneth Jackson (1985) pointed out how streets used to fulfill a different social function than they do today. They were places of recreation, where children might play, and where the automobile was seen as a nuisance. But by the 1920’s, municipal governments were repaving streets specifically for automobiles. Streets became places solely meant for travel. He wrote, “No longer a marketplace or the scene of informal social interaction, the street was becoming a place where movement was paramount and the motorcar was King (Jackson, 1985, 168).” City streets held on to their various purposes more than suburban or rural roads, but nearly all American thoroughfares prioritized automobiles.

Within the last 30 years, some U.S. cities have returned to treating streets as though they have multiple purposes. Concepts such as transit-oriented development, complete streets, active mobility, and New Urbanism have become popular among the general public and many municipal administrations (Gregg & Hess, 2019; Garde, 2020; Mehaffy & Haas, 2020). As such, streets in many cities across the country have been restructured to facilitate multiple forms of mobility including bicycling and transit. Streets have had lanes taken away from cars to expand

open areas for pedestrians and other citizens on foot, and more recently, an increasing number of cities have begun to allow urban businesses to utilize public areas along their frontages for the installation of structures such as outdoor dining areas or commercial displays. San Francisco's main downtown corridor, Market Street, is an example as it permanently closed to privately-owned vehicles in 2020, prioritizing public transit and bicycle travel instead. All these transformations give the street renewed purpose as they become places for human activity once again. They remake streets into what they had been for most of history, truly public space.

Many planners see these transformations as highly beneficial for cities, residents, and even the global climate. On the scale of the city itself, these changes are often seen as a restored source of urban vitality. To Annette Kim, one of the best qualities a street could possess is the flexibility to allow for multiple purposes. Writing about mixed-use sidewalks, she stated, “[A sidewalk] is where different classes of people are more likely to mix. It is a place that could potentially support the livelihood of large numbers of people in a way that provides benefits to society. Mixed-use sidewalks, as much as mixed-use land parcels, are part of what makes a city vibrant and contributes to civic life (Kim, 2012, 235)” To her, having a variety of outdoor uses along the street gives people from different backgrounds places to interact. It spurs economic activity and creates the prospect for people to support themselves. In short, it contributes to the city as a place of life and opportunity and encourages residents to take ownership of their city.

But these activities bring a private element into the public realm, and there are serious reasons to worry about encouraging private uses in public space. In the famous passage where she introduces the concept of “Eyes on the Street”, Jane Jacobs (1961) highlighted the importance of, “...[A] clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space (35).” For Jacobs, the delineation between the public and private signal to all residents the areas in which they are jointly responsible for. Another concern comes from neoclassical economics which calls for clearly defined property rights or else the improper use of public areas will accrue externalities and create other inefficiencies. Moreover, at the level of the street, areas that feature both public and private qualities, such as privately owned public spaces, often see private actors misuse or skirt public regulations for their benefit (Kayden, 2000). While there may be issues that arise from the meeting of public and private dimensions, a growing number of cities are willing to make it more acceptable for streets to be places where the public and private intersect.

Ultimately, it is crucial to recognize the potential for streets to be sites of contestation and exclusion. As a form of public space, streets are claimed by different groups for different purposes which regularly conflict. Such conflicts often enter broader awareness as commercial interests strive for control over public space. Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009) detail how these interests, namely *business improvement districts*, have normalized the privatization of sidewalks and affected the regulation of public space with exclusionary results. They also discuss how municipal desires for pedestrian scale commercial streets can lead to gentrification, and limit participation to populations and activities that businesses or politicians believe support the street's commercial character. In time, these public streets seemingly become more private as controlling forces restrict an increasing number of uses and users. Simply put, commercial interests have gained greater control of public streets over the last few decades, and the number of public activities that are allowed to occur in these spaces has dwindled.



U.S. cities continue to evolve in the wake of pandemic-related changes and uses, and planners and researchers should assess how it may permanently alter our relationship with public spaces in general, and streets in particular (Honey-Roses et al., 2020). The street, much like the city, has special potentials, vulnerabilities, and purposes. As streets change, cities change, and San Francisco expanding street uses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to study streets and their purposes in this moment of transition.

### **A Brief History of Streetscape Conversions in San Francisco**

The idea and practice of converting the public streetscape in San Francisco is not new. One of the first and most impacting examples was in 2005, when an urban design studio, Rebar, converted a parking space in San Francisco's commercial downtown. They did so through informal means, paying the parking meter for the day and laying out temporary features like artificial grass, a planter, and a bench. Despite this informality, they found that numerous people used the space throughout the day, and gained enough publicity and popularity that other organizations in other cities sought to create similar installations in an annual event named "PARK(ing) Day", the general intent being to explore more creative and engaging uses of public spaces dedicated to street parking (Schneider et al., 2017).

The City of San Francisco sought to formalize a process for installing similar conversions as part of the SF Better Streets programming in 2010. The program was designed for a broad range of improvements to the streetscape that prioritize pedestrian mobility and activity while also improving stormwater management and other streetscape elements. The parking space conversions – termed "public parklets" – allowed for a project sponsor (often a retail space with ground floor street frontage) to construct a permanent structure in the parking space(s) in front of their business. The project sponsor would pay for the installation and maintenance of the explicitly public space, with small concessions such as the allowance of a degree of "branding" the space (with design features that match the primary structure, like in color or theme). But use of the space for any commercial purpose (e.g., serving customers sitting in the parklet) was not allowed. The design guidelines were relatively flexible and procedural components such as community engagement were strongly encouraged but not required. Before the pandemic, San Francisco had more than sixty of these public parklets, with four on Valencia Street between 14<sup>th</sup> Street and 24<sup>th</sup> Street.

### **The Shared Spaces Program**

In the summer of 2020, the Shared Spaces program began, allowing and encouraging the expanded use of public spaces for commercial purposes. The intent was to aid businesses – especially dining establishments dependent on in-person and indoor, mask-less interaction – that struggled to operate through the stay-at-home measures. This marked a fundamentally different purpose and use than the existing parklet program. As such, the initial guidelines for design and use of these conversions were loose: minimum requirements for open air ventilation, sufficient space for socially distant gathering within the structures, and the preservation of at least six feet of pedestrian thoroughway on the sidewalk. In addition, the City of San Francisco committed to a three-day review for new permit applications and retroactive inspection so that as many businesses as possible could take advantage of Shared Spaces, as quickly as possible.

Simultaneously, the program allowed for the partial and temporary closure of streets to vehicular traffic, especially during times of peak pedestrian activity on weekends. This was meant to further encourage the expansive use of public street space in a safely socially distant manner. Street closures for Shared Spaces – distinct from the simultaneously active “Slow Streets” program, which applied only to residential streets – required project sponsors as well, with the level of organization often varying by the scale of the closure. Sponsorship entailed installation of the temporary barriers and respective staffing requirements as well as enforcement of the public compliance with the adjusted rights of way. Some – often those for minor alleyways – were sponsored by individual businesses, while others were organized by larger merchant associations and applied to more major corridors.

In its short time, the Shared Spaces program (and Shared Spaces themselves) has been defined by iteration, improvisation, and uncertainty both externally and internally. Externally, following state and city guidelines tracking the rises and falls in COVID-19 cases and recurrent stay-at-home orders, the program and spaces themselves paused and restarted multiple times. Internally, as more city agencies such as Public Works and the Fire Department became more actively engaged with review and inspection of Shared Spaces, iterative updates were made to the design requirements. One example is the added requirements on behalf of emergency services access, setting a minimum three feet of open access to the building frontage for every 20 feet of “Shared Spaces”, as well as visibility of the building address from the street. Despite these changes and the resulting uncertainty, over 1,900 permits were issued for Shared Spaces applications. And beyond the changes in regulation, the businesses themselves made iterative improvements and additions to their outdoor spaces over time as well.

In March of 2021, the Mayor of San Francisco announced legislation to make elements of the Shared Spaces program – particularly, the outdoor commercial spaces – allowable for permanent inclusion in the streetscape. The legislation went into effect in 2022 and standardizes many of the guidelines established earlier in the pandemic. This includes a commitment to a 30-day review period for city staff and some additional design limitations to ensure visibility, airflow, safe fire department access, and structural stability. Compliance to the new standards had to be met by July of 2022, with a new permit fee structure to begin in April of 2023. The city expects its regulations and procedures to continuously evolve based on feedback and still-emerging lessons from implementation.

### **Research Questions and Design**

First, a note on definitions: we introduce the term *Outdoor Commercial Spaces*, or OCS, to refer to the conversion of public street space for exclusively commercial uses during the pandemic. This is distinct from existing *parklet* conversions, in which the space remained officially public at all hours, and did not allow any commercial use. OCS is also distinct from the “Shared Spaces” terminology, which can refer to a broader range of potential interventions, including street closures, and “commercial parklets” (introduced by the City of San Francisco), which is complicated by their sanctioned commercial exclusivity (i.e. non-public use).

The guiding question behind this project was: *How has the conversion of outdoor space during the COVID-19 pandemic transformed public, municipal, and commercial use and perceptions of*

*public space?* To supplement our primary research question, we also explored the extent to which Shared Space conversions (including street closures) established and authorized the expansive use of public space for private purposes and how differences in the design of OCS obscured or contributed to this tension.

### ***Case Study Area: Valencia Street in the Mission District***

We chose Valencia Street in the Mission District of San Francisco as a case study area. Valencia Street – principally, the segment between 14th Street and 24th Street – is a prominent mixed-use commercial corridor. It features a high concentration of businesses, including cafes, restaurants, bars, and other retail shops and services. Fittingly, there was a large number and diversity of OCS across the study area – more than 70 directly on the segment studied – allowing for comparison between the perceptions and uses of different designs and functions. Furthermore, the Valencia Corridor Merchants’ Association received permits for street closures along three blocks of Valencia Street during certain hours on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday: 16th to 17th Street, 18th to 19th Street, and 20th to 21st Street. The block-by-block variation expanded the comparative features, adding richness to our observations and findings. Valencia Street simultaneously serves as a physical and symbolic boundary in the ongoing, complex changes to the Mission District more broadly, whose historically immigrant and working-class residents continue to face multifaceted social and economic pressures (Graf, 2021; Hom, 2021; Garfoli & Said, 2015). It serves as a dividing line between census tracts within the neighborhood (as defined by the City), as Mission census tracts west of Valencia have a lower proportion of Hispanic-identifying residents, residents with higher median incomes and average educational attainment, and lower rates of renters (see appendix for tract-by-tract variation across Valencia Street). In many ways, these features make Valencia Street an exceptional case and limit the generalizability of our study. However, because of that very same exceptionality, and the complexity of features that comes from the unique context, the case study choice lends exceptional insight as well.

### **Methodology**

The primary method of research was systematic observation of the case study area: of the OCS structures and designs, of pedestrian activity, and of general uses along Valencia Street, both public and private. Over the course of the study, over 100 hours of field observation were recorded. For observations on the OCS themselves, we assessed differences in design (such as materials used or the height of the walls) as well as ancillary features such as the installation of lighting or planters. Observations were recorded during varying days and times, both when street closures were active and inactive. The list of variables observed evolved over the course of the study, adding and excluding extraneous features as necessary based on the perceived relevance from observations and interviews. Many variables were included in order to assess trends involving the influence of specific features on the use and perception of OCS by different stakeholders. Lastly, we procured supplementary data from secondary sources, including permitting information from the City of San Francisco Planning Department as well as publicly available information on the businesses themselves (often from their websites).

### *Interviews (and Interveys)*

To complement the general observations, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders on and around Valencia Street. This included 20 walking interviews of San Francisco residents along Valencia Street between 16th Street and 24th Street, stopping to highlight exceptional OCS, behaviors, and uses along the way. We sourced interviewees through two rounds of snowball sampling from friends and colleagues outside the urban planning profession. We did not collect personal information from respondents to protect anonymity and avoid treating their demographic information as a data point. Nonetheless, we know that respondents ranged from approximately age 18 to 50, from roughly 40 percent to 200 percent of San Francisco's area median income, and with a roughly equal number of men and women. The majority of them had less than five years of residence time in San Francisco, but roughly one third of them have lived in San Francisco for at least 10 years, and all but one of them lived within three miles of the study site at the time of interviewing. The intent of these interviews was not to collect a fully representative sample of residents, business owners, or any other stakeholder groups. Instead, the purpose of the walking interviews was to explore and unpack prominent and emerging dynamics in the perception and use of OCS and street closures on Valencia Street. As such, **we refrain from summarizing respondent insight quantitatively in this paper.**

One dozen additional interviews were conducted with business owners along Valencia Street, city officials with knowledge of the Shared Spaces program, and a number of staff from neighborhood organizations in and around the Mission District. Lastly, we conducted roughly two dozen "interveys": a self-styled hybrid method with the anonymity and brevity of a survey but the open-ended and in-person nature of an interview. These (unscheduled) interveys of patrons and pedestrians along the Valencia Street corridor provided validation and supplemental information to the other interview data.

All observations and interviews took place between March and June of 2021.

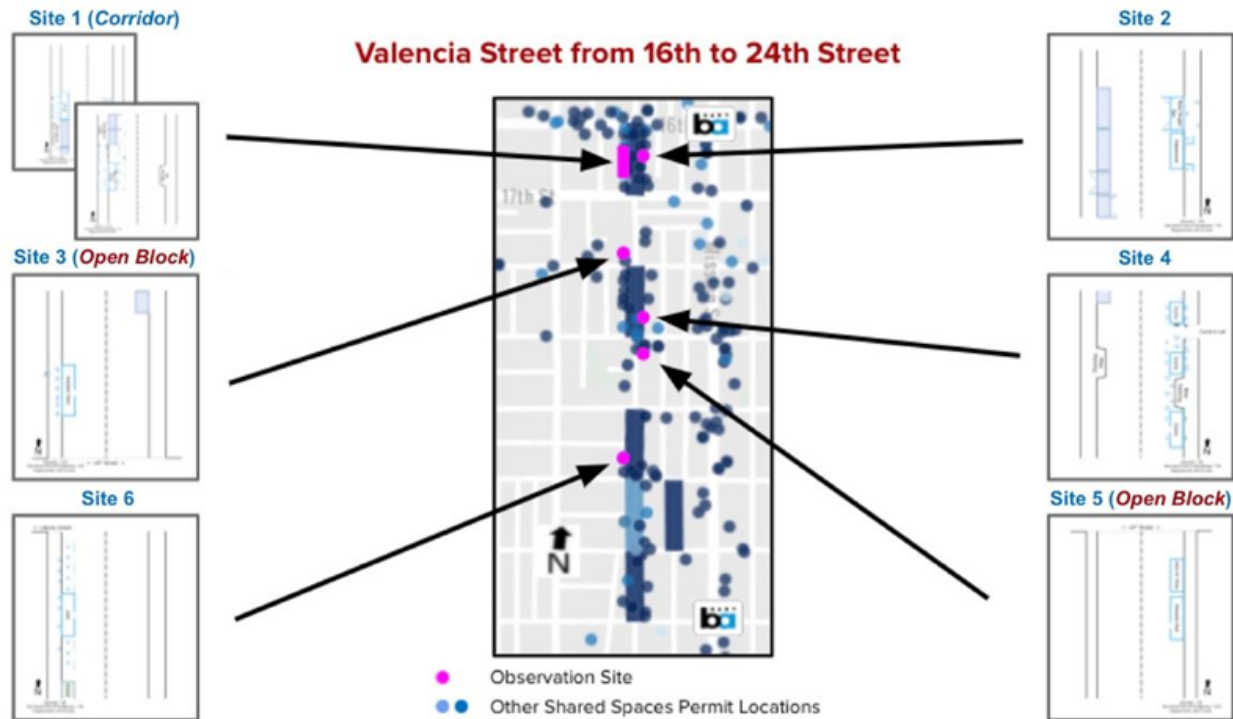
### *Path Observations*

We observed pedestrian pathing to assess how pedestrians passively engage with OCS and their surroundings. Inspired, in part, by a study completed by Jan Gehl (1968) in which he observed and documented by sketching the paths taken by pedestrians crossing Blågårds Square in Copenhagen, we designed a method in which we observed and recorded the paths taken by pedestrians as they approached selected OCS on Valencia Street. We performed all the observations during scheduled weekly street closures and approximated the paths of pedestrian groups (two or more pedestrians walking together) by hand on diagrammatic representations of each site. The diagrams also record the relative locations of related site furniture and the layout of cordoned off areas.

We selected six specific observation sites for observations (see Figure 1). Each observation site was made up of one or more OCS structures, and each one was selected with three goals in mind: (1) We wanted to include locations on both blocks open and closed to motor vehicle traffic during the regularly occurring street closures. (2) We wanted to include sites made up of different

OCS types (such as simple OCS without much decoration, or OCS whose physical structure expands during street closures). And (3) we wanted to include sites made up of different types of OCS groupings such as longer series of multiple OCS, or standalone OCS.

**Figure 1. Path Observation Sites on Valencia Street**



*Map base layer from the City and County of San Francisco (2021d)*

We collected the path observations four times at each site (24 observation periods in total). Each observation period was ten minutes long. Two of the observation periods at each site were performed during Sunday lunchtime street closures (observations occurred between 12:00 and 14:00), while the other two were performed during Saturday evening street closures (observations occurred between 18:00 and 21:00). For each pair, one observation period tracked northbound pedestrians, while the other tracked southbound pedestrians. Only pedestrians who entered the observation area traveling in the specified direction were recorded. Furthermore, pedestrians traveling on the sidewalk opposite of the OCS specified for each site were excluded as well.

In total, we performed 663 individual observations representing 1153 pedestrians (See Table 1). The largest group of pedestrians was made up of nine people, and the mean group size was 1.74 people. The number of path observations at any site ranges from 66 observations (at Site 5) to 150 observations (at Site 4).



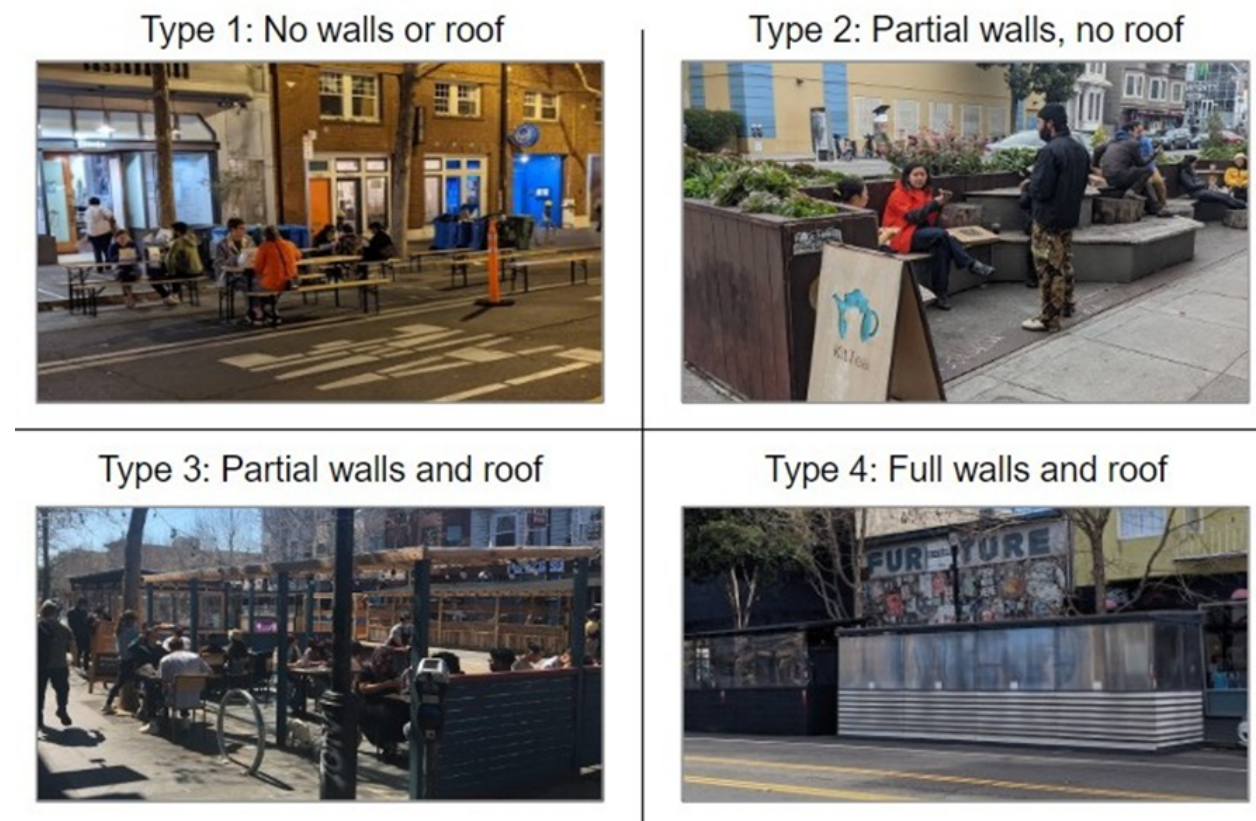
**Table 1. Path Observations Summary Data**

Block Type	Open	Closed	All
Observation Sites	2	4	6
Observations	179	484	663

**Findings**

The OCS installations along Valencia Street have many diverse design features that we used to develop a list of potentially meaningful variables affecting their perception and use. For example, we noted the presence of tables and/or chairs, lighting fixtures, and heating sources; the types of materials used; visible commercial branding. Over the course of early walking interviews and observations, however, we found the most substantive and easily categorical differences between OCS was the degree of enclosure. Reflecting explicit comments from early interviewees about the presence and degree of enclosure that marked their change in perceived use, we arrived at a basic typology to capture the different enclosure types on Valencia Street OCS (see Figure 2 below). The typology is an ordinal scale with four steps of increasing degrees of enclosure.

**Figure 2. OCS Typology**

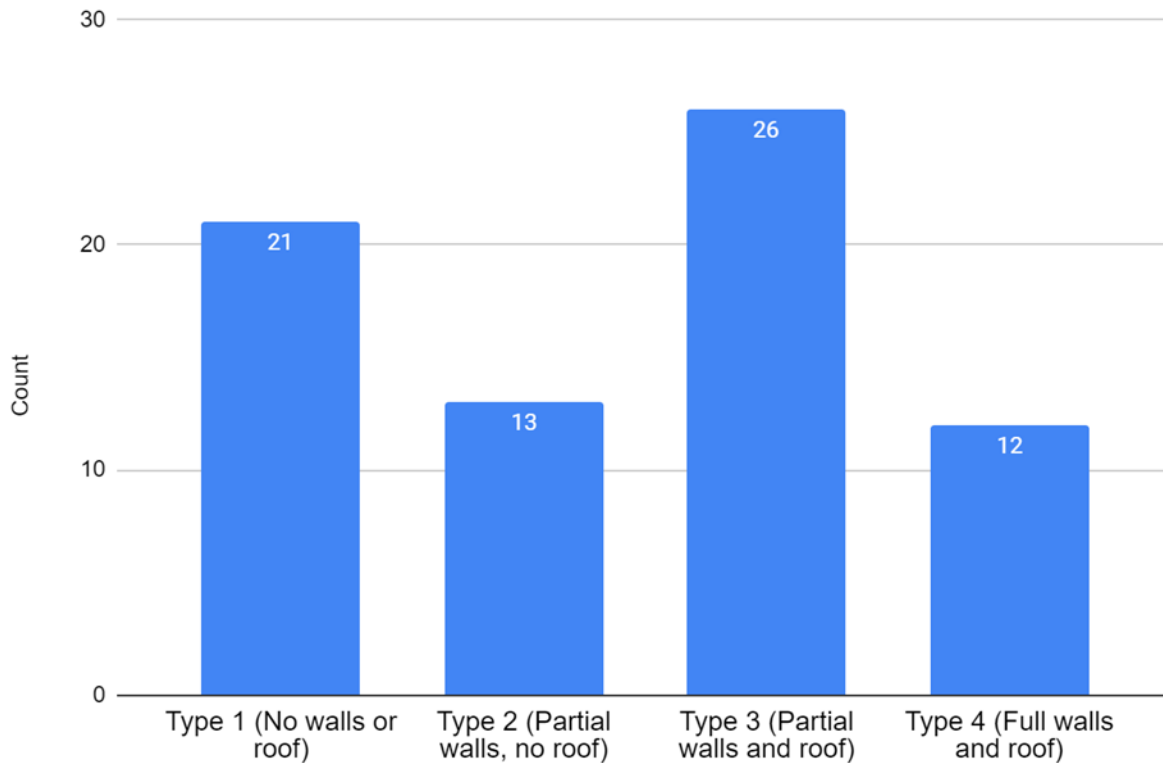


*Images are of Valencia Street OCS and taken by research team*

As with most typologies, there are exceptions to and hybrids of the above categories. A common example is a business with a Type 3 or 4 (built and enclosed) structure that expands its footprint with additional tables on the sidewalk or excess street space, particularly while the street is closed to vehicular traffic. The typology is thus presented as a useful analytic emerging from observation and interview comments rather than as an all-inclusive boundary for the still-evolving diversity in design approaches for OCS. In particular, these categories served as a strong correlate with perceptions of privatization or exclusionary design which is helpful for exploring the themes of this project.

The typology was also helpful because of the spread of OCS types on Valencia Street, specifically. Within the study area – Valencia Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Street – we observed 72 OCS from businesses along the corridor, with Figure 3 below showing the count of OCS in each typology category. A manual count of the commercial frontage numbered 180 businesses, implying roughly two out of every five businesses in that section of Valencia Street took advantage of the ability to expand into the street space by the spring of 2021. Note that not all OCS observed (which included instances of chairs and tables temporarily extended into the sidewalk and street space) were necessarily permitted under Shared Spaces programming.

**Figure 3. Count of OCS Types on Valencia Street**



*Type assignments from observation according to categories in Figure 2*

The variety in OCS types allowed for similar variety in the observations and feedback from

respondents. Combining the observational and interview data across this spectrum of OCS types revealed five primary findings explained below.

***Finding #1: OCS form follows OCS function***

In observation and through walking interview comments, it became apparent that OCS tend to replicate the experience offered by normal (pre-pandemic) business operations that would typically be conducted in interior spaces. In other words, the form follows the function for many OCS on Valencia. For bars and restaurants, which tend to serve customers for extended periods of time well into the night hours, OCS tended towards built-up and enclosed structures that provided more privacy and protection from traffic and the elements. As a reflection of this, 8 of the 10 bars and 27 of the 38 restaurants along the corridor host type 3 or 4 OCS. Businesses with shorter customer interactions such as cafes or non-dining retail, meanwhile, favored more modest OCS with less permanent structures, with 21 of 24 businesses in these categories using type 1 or 2 OCS. The business owners we talked to confirmed function-focused design intent reflected by this trend. In this way, OCS on Valencia tend to extend the existing commercial profile into public space – or “lend a vibe to the street” as one interviewee described – rather than default to maximally enclosed and privatized spaces.

***Finding #2: Many respondents believe that OCS broadly improve the public streetscape***

This research does not attempt to collect or imply a representative sample of interviewees across social and economic demographics, but a large number of our respondents believed OCS to be an overall improvement to Valencia’s streetscape. A large number of interview and interview respondents across stakeholder groups (in our limited sample pool) commented in open-ended questions that the OCS on both open- and closed-street blocks made the entire corridor feel “lively” and “vibrant”, and that they “give the street a sense of community” (with a majority using at least one of those phrases, explicitly). Similarly, many noted a positive sense of community and social activity made visible by the extension of patrons into the sidewalk and street space. To the extent that they could imagine the world “after” COVID-19, many respondents believed these changes to be improvements even after the pandemic.

Regarding the variety across our OCS typology, several walking interviewees reported that a higher degree of enclosure increased the perception of the privatization of public space. Comments to this effect implied that many would feel more comfortable sitting at type 1 and 2 OCS despite not purchasing anything, while they would not feel equally comfortable doing so in type 3 or 4 OCS. However, many of the same respondents described type 3 and 4 OCS in a positive light as an expansion of visibly social space, and appreciated the intuitive alignment between the design and function. For example, one business owner with a type 2 OCS supported their neighbor’s adjacent type 3 space, saying “that’s their vibe, that’s what works for them, and it definitely adds to the sense of place for the whole area.” Very few described the larger, more built-up OCS as jarring or evident of exclusionary commercial encroachment into public space.

Another element of the positive perception of OCS was that the variety in and of itself was valuable. While some respondents expressed preferences for certain design trends over others, many *more* said that the variety of OCS types added architectural articulation and a visual

diversity of uses that made the entire corridor “more engaging”, “active”, and “interesting” (quotes shared across several interviewees). Several celebrated the benefits to people watching across different OCS types, with one respondent summarizing the sentiment well: “They’re all complementary.”

It is important to note that many individual preferences of varying specificity were evident. Some thought type 4 OCS offered more personal safety from pedestrians and vehicles, as well as insulation from noise, wind, and rain. Others thought the openness of type 1 and 2 OCS were safer because of their improved lighting and open sight lines, reminiscent of Jane Jacobs’ “Eyes on the Street” concept. As for aesthetics, some respondents praised highly “manicured” OCS, such as those with materials and finishes (e.g. colors and design flares) that matched the primary business, adding legibility and “fitting in” with the existing streetscape. A similar number of others pointed to the same examples as evidence of commercial overreach into the public realm, and instead preferred OCS that were “store-agnostic”. There are many other conflicting opinions, even internal to the same interviewee in many cases. Such idiosyncratic preferences imply that, despite their perhaps-general appeal, the iterative and adaptive nature of OCS in the improvisational pandemic context may be an important element of their long-term popularity.

### ***Finding #3: The importance of street closures***

At the outset of this research, our primary focus was on the OCS themselves. But one of our key findings relates to another component of the Shared Spaces program: the closures of the street to vehicular traffic. We found that without the street closures during peak hours, many of the public benefits of OCS would be dampened and the concerns they generate would be intensified.

The importance of the street closures for OCS can be seen in three main ways: (A) the street closures allowed for greater flexibility and mixed-use of the street. (B) The street closures facilitated or encouraged OCS permitting and operations. And (C) the street closures mitigated some of the effects that OCS may have had on the privatization of the public sidewalk.

#### ***A) Street closures allow for greater flexibility and mixed-use of the street.***

##### *Mobility vs. Commerce*

On one level, there is tension between the mobility uses of the street (including the sidewalk) and commercial uses, but street closures allow for both mobility and OCS-related commerce. Sidewalk-facing OCS of types 2, 3, and 4 (which take up one or more parking spaces) require sidewalk pedestrians to enter what many walking interviewees described as a commercialized space, characterized by minor but noticeable inconveniences like avoiding wait staff from restaurants and having to walk single-file if in a group. But the street closures allowed pedestrians to avoid the commercialized sidewalk by walking in the roadway. The results of this study highlight this in two tangible ways.

First, a much larger share of pedestrians continued on the sidewalk between OCS and their respective building frontage – OCS *corridors*, arguably a commercialized space – on blocks open to vehicular traffic compared to blocks closed to traffic. On blocks open to traffic, 89.39%

of pedestrian groups continued through an OCS corridor, while only 40.91% did so on blocks closed to traffic. Likewise, on open blocks, 85.47% of pedestrian groups kept exclusively to the sidewalks even when congested by OCS activity (avoiding any diversion into the roadway), while just 37.19% of groups did so on closed blocks (see Table 2).

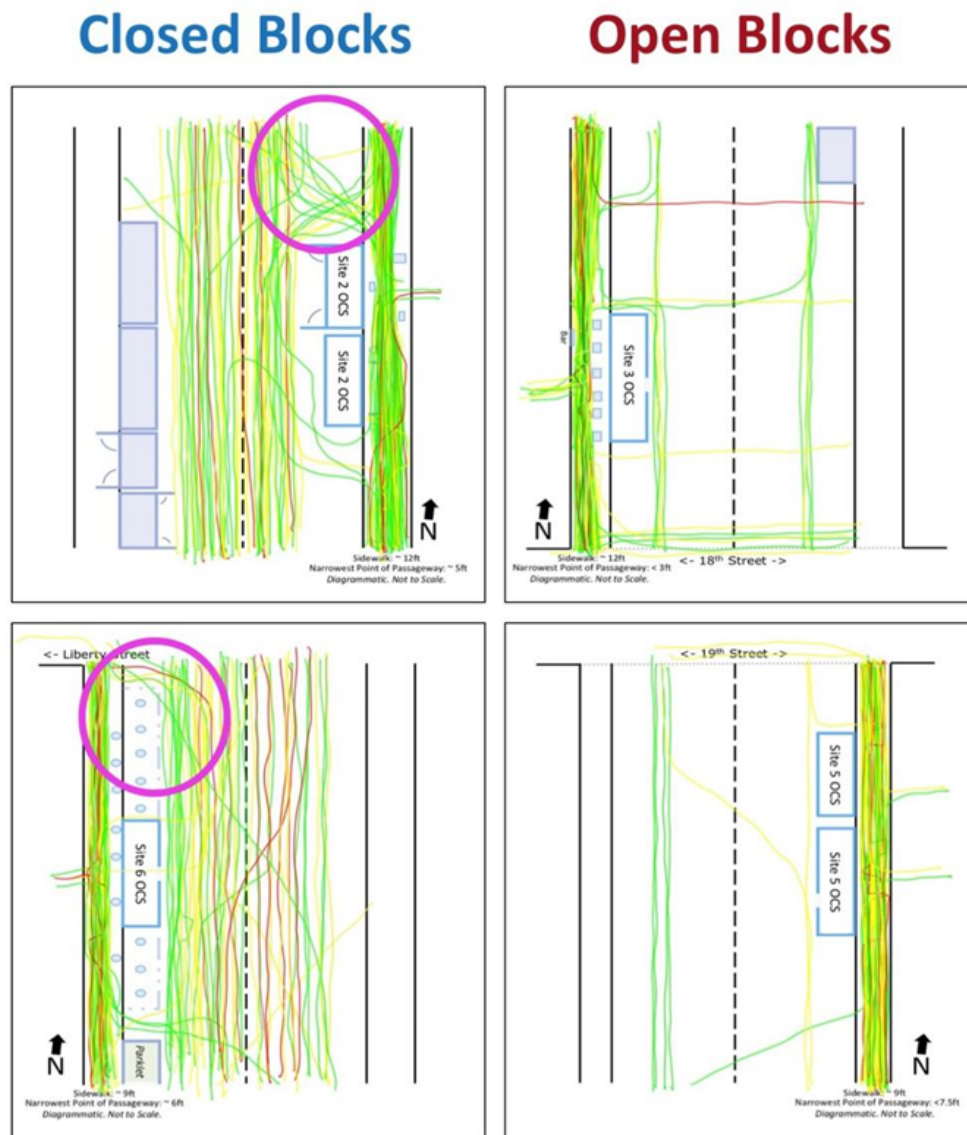
**Table 2. Proportion of Pedestrian Behaviors by Block Type (n=663)**

Block Type	Open	Closed	All
Pedestrian groups walking through OCS corridor	<b>89.39%</b>	40.91%	54%
Pedestrian groups using sidewalk only	<b>85.47%</b>	37.19%	50.23%
Pedestrian groups diverting from sidewalk to roadway	<b>2.5%</b>	9.26%	7.43%

The second way the results highlight pedestrians' ability to avoid commercialized sidewalks during street closures is through the clusters of transitions that occurred as pedestrians approached OCS. The results show that a greater share of pedestrian groups diverted from the sidewalk to the roadway on streets closed to vehicular traffic (Table 2), and they tended to transfer as they got close to the initial OCS in the observation area. As exemplified in Figure 4 (below), pedestrian groups that transitioned from walking along the sidewalk to walking within the roadway typically did so as they neared OCS on blocks closed to traffic. This pattern (or cluster of transitions) is not present in the path observations from OCS located on blocks open to traffic as transitions on these blocks more often occurred further away from the entrance into an OCS corridor at locations where a gap between parked cars or other obstacles allowed for it. On these blocks, the people who did transfer off the sidewalk generally crossed the entire street or kept to the bike lanes skirting parked cars instead of freely using the roadway. The difference between these two patterns of pedestrian behavior suggests that the observed pedestrians made choices on whether to walk through OCS corridors as they closely approached them; they might do so to "window shop" or to better assess where they want to eat or drink. On blocks closed to traffic, pedestrian groups could readily avoid the OCS corridor if desired, walking in the roadway instead. But on blocks open to traffic, pedestrians had limited ability to avoid OCS corridors because of the auto traffic using the roadway.



**Figure 4. Clusters of Path Transitions on Closed Blocks Compare to Open Blocks**



**Legend**

OCS of Interest



Other OCS/Parklets



Additional Site Furniture



Cordon Areas



*Approximate Paths by Group Size*

- 1 Pedestrian
- 2 Pedestrians
- 3+ Pedestrians

Clusters of Transitions Between the Sidewalk and Roadway



*Sites Shown Above, Clockwise from Top Left: Site 2, Site 3, Site 5, Site 6*

Another way the results show how street closures alleviated the tension between mobility and commerce purposes is the considerably lower pedestrian “conflict” rate on blocks closed to traffic (i.e. when at least one pedestrian needs to pause or divert their path to avoid running into another). Both the structures and operations of OCS narrowed sidewalk passageways, increasing the chance of pedestrian conflicts, and effectively limiting mobility. This happened regardless of OCS type. However, the observation data suggests that closing the block to vehicular traffic allowed for pedestrians to avoid most conflicts by walking in the road (See Table 3). In simplest terms, we observed over five times the rate of pedestrian conflicts on blocks open to vehicular traffic compared to those closed to vehicles. By freeing up the street’s roadway for pedestrians, OCS’s negative impact on pedestrian mobility was reduced. This was corroborated by many walking interviewees, one of which claimed to walk in the street “whenever possible... to stay out of the way” of the eclectic sidewalk activity.

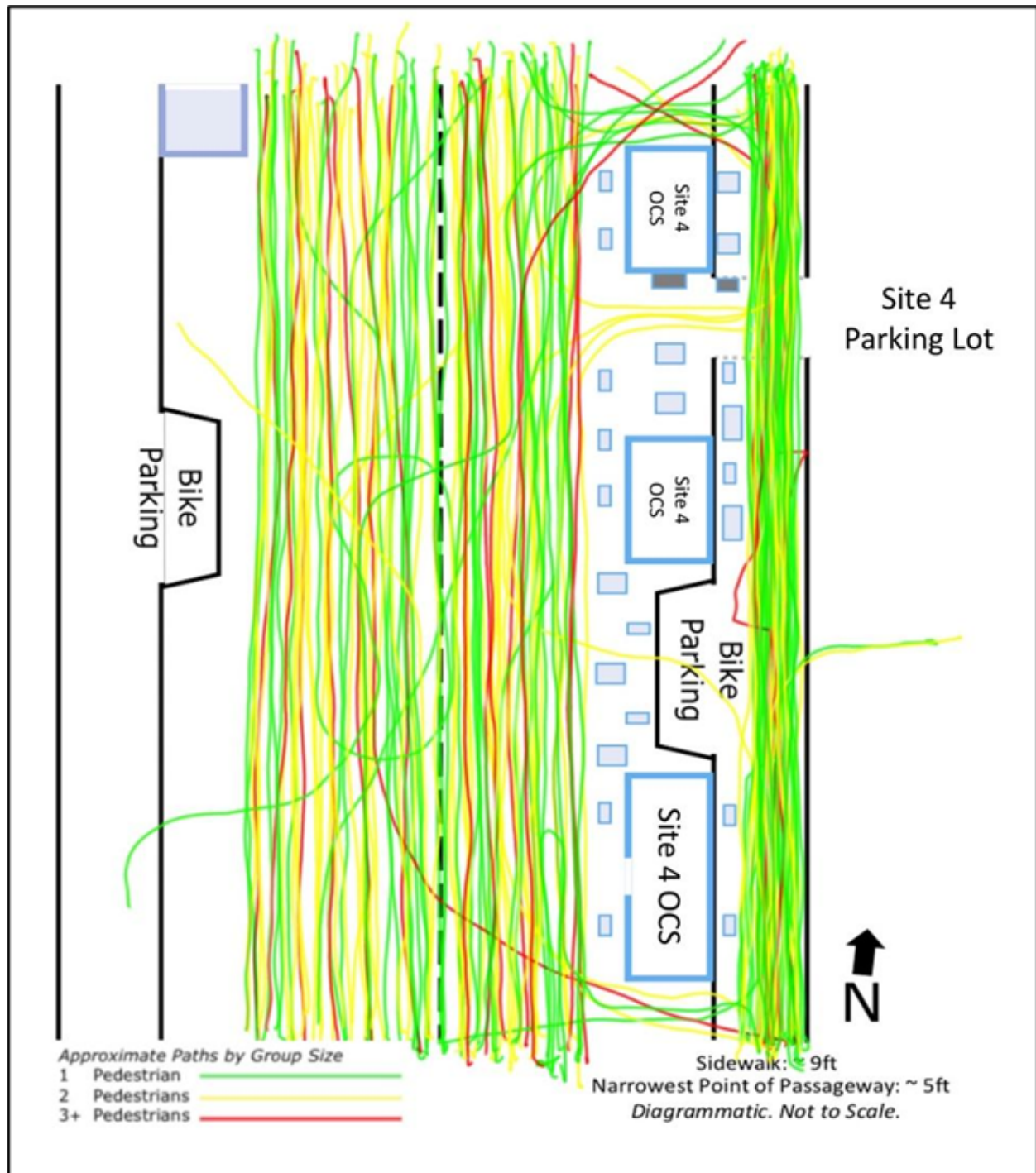
**Table 3. Observation per Conflict Rate by Block Type (n=663)**

Block Type	Open	Closed	All
Observations per Conflict Rate	<b>4.16</b>	21.04	10.05
Observed Likelihood of Conflict per Pedestrian Group	<b>24.02%</b>	4.75%	9.95%

### *Mobility vs Street Activation*

The street closures also relieve the tension between mobility demands and street “activation”. The existing commercial and lively nature of Valencia Street (as described by many city residents we interviewed) attract various forms of street activity both on the sidewalk and in the road. These activities, such as musical performances, dancing, playing tag, or working out often take up considerable space, but street closures enable these active uses while preserving a high level of mobility for pedestrians, those with mobility constraints, bicyclists, and micromobility users. The mix of uses enabled by street closures can be seen in the heterogeneity of paths taken by pedestrians at sites on blocks closed to vehicular traffic, most notably Site 4 (See Figure 5). The variety and irregularity of paths at Site 4 represent observations including children who played in the street as their group walked along the roadway, people who walked around a musical performance, and other people not necessarily using the street for mobility (such as those simply choosing to spend time along Valencia St.). In contrast, the nearly linear paths typically represent groups using the street primarily as a means of mobility. If these blocks remained open to vehicular traffic, such a variety of uses would be impossible outright without major safety hazards.

**Figure 5. Path Variety in Proximity to Site 4**



***B) Street closures may facilitate or encourage OCS permitting and operations.***

The importance of street closures was also evident through their association with OCS permitting and use. Permitting data from the City of San Francisco (2021c) indicated that street closures may encourage businesses to apply for OCS permits (see Table 4). In total, 60% of Shared Spaces curb-use permits and pending permits (including OCS) from the study area were on

blocks with street closures despite the fact that only 3 of the 8 blocks in the study area had weekly street closures. While it must be noted that the blocks with closures had more restaurants, bars, and cafes than the average block on Valencia Street, nearly all the OCS permits were issued *after* the reoccurring street closures began in summer 2020 (City of San Francisco 2021c).

**Table 4. Shared Spaces Curb Use (OCS) Permits by Block Type**

Block Type	Open	Closed	All
Number of <u>Shared Spaces</u> Permits	23	<b>34</b>	57
Proportion of <u>Shared Spaces</u> Permits	40.35%	<b>59.65%</b>	100%

Furthermore, some OCS were fully deployable only *during* street closures. For example, one of the businesses with an OCS at Site 2 could open their OCS's walls outwards into the bike lane only during street closures without interfering with bicyclists. In this case, the street closure enabled the full use of the OCS structure. Other OCS expanded outside of their built-out structures with additional chairs and tables when needed and only while the streets closed to vehicles.

The street closures also enabled the safest use of OCS by reducing the possibility for motor vehicle involved accidents. On Valencia Street, the street closures during Friday evenings and weekends facilitated safety by removing passing vehicles from the street during times when OCS are at their busiest.

***C) Street closures mitigate some of the exclusionary effects of OCS on the sidewalk.***

Finally, street closures played a critical role in mitigating any negative impact on the public's "ownership" of the thoroughfare, particularly in regards to the rights of way on the sidewalk. Ongoing news coverage cites concerns that Shared Spaces and similar programs may lead to the privatization of public space, and street closures may indeed encourage attempts to exclude non-patrons from the sidewalk. This could be seen at the southern end of Site 1 where a bar/restaurant deployed a roped-off cordon area during street closures. When fully set up, the sidewalk passageway was blocked except for a small gate with signs that seemingly indicate the bar/restaurant's exclusive use of the sidewalk (see Figure 6). The sign, which was at the edge of a series of consecutive OCS of type 3 and 4 – with more visual prominence – directed potential patrons to a street-facing podium to be seated.

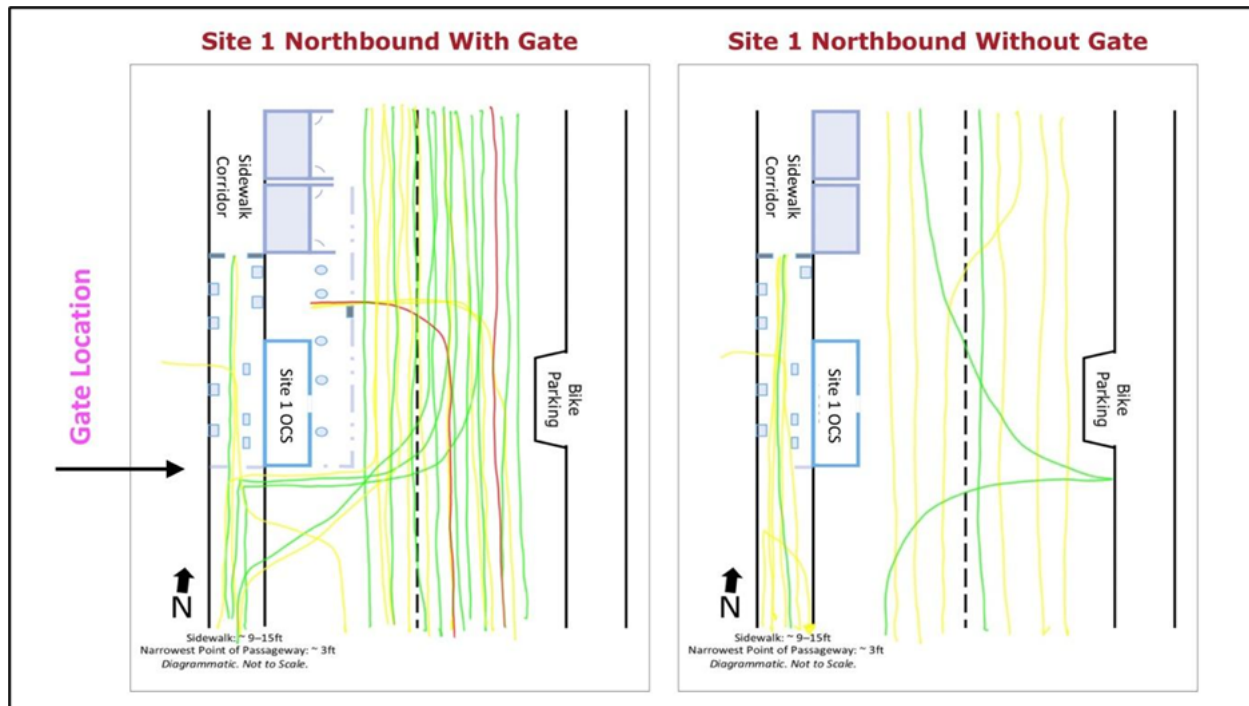


**Figure 6. Partially Gated Entry on the Sidewalk on the Southern End of Site 1**

The path drawings for northbound pedestrians at Site 1 (See Figure 7) show that many pedestrians approached the gate before detouring into the roadway and around the OCS corridor. Pedestrians were still allowed to enter the officially public OCS corridor, but the cordon and resulting bottleneck implied exclusivity, leading many pedestrians to abruptly divert their path. As shown in Table 5, this type of pedestrian behavior was absent in nearly all other observations, even northbound observations at Site 1 without the gate fully deployed. Only 11% of the groups who walked past or approached the Site 1 gate went through it (*into the OCS corridor*). That is about one quarter the proportion of pedestrian groups who entered OCS corridors across all observation sites on blocks closed to traffic (see Table 5). The finding is bolstered by feedback from many walking interviewees, many of whom commented that the gate gave the impression of the sidewalk being an extension of the restaurant's indoor space.



**Figure 7. Pedestrian Behaviors (Paths) as they Approached the Site 1 Cordon Gate**



**Table 5. Proportion of Pedestrian Groups Entering OCS Corridors\***

	Site 1 Northbound With Gate	Site 1 Northbound Without Gate	Closed Block Observations	All Observations
Observations Entering OCS Corridor	11.11%	28.57%	40.91%	54%

\* $n_{(\text{Site 1 Northbound With Gate})} = 27$ ;  $n_{(\text{Site 1 Northbound Without Gate})} = 14$ ;  $n_{(\text{Closed Block})} = 484$ ;  $n_{(\text{All Observations})} = 663$

In this case, deployment of the roped barriers and signage appeared to be the most impacting design feature discouraging pedestrian activity through the OCS corridor, rather than the OCS itself. This is evident by the otherwise typical pedestrian behavior along the same OCS corridor without the cordon deployed, and comments from walking interviewees reflecting the same. As one respondent said, “I think it’s fine as long as I’m still allowed to walk through, or if I can walk in the street,” with several others noting that it was the gate, not the OCS, that influenced their perception of public access. The comment also reflects that the street closure simultaneously mitigated the negative impact of the gate, providing relief to the crowded sidewalks when the OCS corridor was congested. A few others actually expressed appreciation for the cordon, suggesting it improves the legibility of boundaries between public and private space and activity while also limiting further expansion of restaurant patrons into the sidewalk.

In summary, the results show how opening the street to pedestrians during peak corridor activity helped OCS contribute to the public space while minimizing the negative impact to pedestrian mobility through the public sidewalk.

***Finding #4: The Shared Spaces program amplifies the commercial character of Valencia Street unevenly across business types***

An additional finding from the interviews and observational methods is how the commercial character of Valencia Street has been amplified in uneven ways with restaurants – and to a lesser extent, cafes – becoming more prominent on the street than other business types. The contributions of these establishments to the street’s environment were more noticeable because of the OCS and street closures. These businesses’ unique atmospheres, previously kept internal to their storefronts, may now unfurl into the streetscape. The contributions manifested in varying ways, with some businesses functionally privatizing portions of the sidewalk and street for their use and control, fencing off areas and/or barricading OCS during business off-hours. Others blurred the boundaries between public and private, encouraging sprawling socialization and a spectrum of uses at all times of day, and especially during street closures. But *non*-dining establishments such as those selling clothing or other merchandise did not yet utilize Shared Spaces opportunities to the same extent.

Different businesses also attract different demographics to the area. Upscale restaurants and bars/clubs arguably draw a more city-wide or even regional clientele. One interviewee described a common sentiment that “Valencia’s food and drink options make it a destination spot”; but cafes, convenience stores, and more affordable shops may attract a more hyper-local customer base. If so, disproportionately high OCS adoption among upscale restaurants, for example, *might* amplify Valencia Street’s appeal to non-local users, such as tourists and night life seekers. However, walking interviewees noted several examples of windfall benefits to other storefronts. One respondent living nearby Valencia Street for over a decade said that “working-class joints” had more opportunities to expand their business too, through “less formal, more open and communal” OCS installations.

Additionally, many respondents seemed to believe that even if the OCS inadvertently favored more upscale businesses, it would merely align with changes already occurring – or already *occurred*, according to some. To paraphrase a former resident of the Mission District and current owner of a Valencia Street business for more than ten years:

*All the [Shared Spaces] changes will likely just exacerbate the existing directions that businesses were going: if they were gentrifying, privatizing, commercializing public space already, they'll only do it more after these changes, and if a business was community-centric and doing positive things with their space, they'll likely be able to do more of that with these changes.*

This finding renders the Shared Spaces program a commercial tool that can result in both positive *and* negative outcomes for the area. Whether OCS alienate or ingratiate existing community members (and/or a geographically broader customer base) depends on the individual business and their mindset. “Shared Spaces” can be used for either end.

***Finding #5: Equity remains a major concern for Shared Spaces***

Equity is a complex but crucial element of urban development at large, and the Shared Spaces program is no exception. We arrived at three distinct-but-related levels for assessing the equity implications of OCS along Valencia Street: the human level, the business level, and the neighborhood level.

***A) At the human level***

The human level references the impacts of OCS and street closures on physical accessibility and inclusiveness on Valencia Street, which both observational and interview data underscored as a major concern. In short, different people experience public space differently, and the large-scale changes to the streetscape on Valencia Street *may* favor certain demographics and needs over others.

For OCS themselves, the city design guidelines explicitly required that Shared Spaces preserve at least six feet of open sidewalk space for public thoroughfare, and we observed multiple instances failing to meet this standard. But even when this condition was met, additional features of OCS can impede individuals in wheelchairs and those with other mobility impairments. Examples include protected extension cords from the building to the OCS (to power lights and heaters in many type 3 and 4 structures) and the expansion of social activity beyond the boundaries of the OCS, which we observed in OCS of all types. In this way, businesses that installed even minor physical barriers – such as the rope cordon described earlier – were praised by some of the walking interviewees for clearly delineating boundaries. **Rather than exclude the public, the additional barriers may contain the patrons.** Though street closures may mitigate this tension, it may simultaneously render handicap accessible parking and/or drop-off points unavailable, making it more difficult for differently-abled individuals to access businesses and services on blocks closed to vehicular traffic. The City's permanent legislation raises the throughway requirement by two feet (to eight feet), but the concern remains relevant.

Additionally, some interview respondents expressed concerns about Valencia Street's function changing from a thoroughfare for active mobility (walking and biking, with the bike lanes to support it) to an open arena for varied uses, including loitering. For example, one walking interviewee commented that "As a female, I don't love having more drunk people hanging around on the sidewalk." A few other female-identifying respondents mentioned concerns about being watched or approached by strangers (especially men) while using OCS, and preferred the privacy of more enclosed, type 3 and 4 OCS. This contrasts with several other interviewees (male and female) that reported feeling safer along the entire corridor thanks specifically to the large number of people (again invoking Jane Jacobs' "Eyes on the Street" sentiment). Many respondents raised additional concerns about the implications of OCS and unhoused residents: some worried about public health and sanitation if folks slept in type 3 and 4 OCS overnight, while others praised OCS for precisely that potential use. Though we did not talk to any unhoused residents for this research, we did observe several of Valencia Street's OCS serving as overnight shelter for some. The City's permanent legislation, however, with these concerns and vandalism in mind, allows businesses to close down public access to their OCS between midnight and 7am. It remains unclear how this might change operating policies of existing OCS.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the police station at the intersection of Valencia and 17th Street has served as the endpoint for numerous public protests throughout the pandemic, many of which have been in response to the high profile (and continued) cases of police violence in the U.S. This has an unclear influence on the perception of Valencia Street as a whole; though street closures did allow for expanded public activism – for both celebration *and* protest – with less concerns for pedestrian safety from vehicular traffic, the symbolic presence of the police station (and, consequently, armed police) complicates Valencia Street’s public perception.

Suffice to say that different people experience public space differently, and the many-layered changes happening simultaneously on Valencia Street – including the proliferation of OCS – may not be universally welcoming.

### ***B) At the business level***

In many of our interviews with residents, business owners, and other key stakeholders, we heard broad but clear concerns regarding *which* businesses are able to take advantage of these streetscape transformations and *who* they truly benefit. In concrete terms, more prominent, type 3 or 4 OCS, which offer the most visible opportunity to reshape the public streetscape, can cost tens of thousands of dollars to build and permit, making them inherently less feasible for smaller businesses with lower operating capital. Such establishments are often the city’s most vulnerable: small, independent, and/or minority-owned businesses with existing, intersectional disadvantages and difficulty accessing available resources. For both the public parklet programming before the pandemic, and Shared Spaces during it, the City of San Francisco partnered with corporate sponsors to offer grants to help eligible businesses finance their parklets and OCS. However, more than one respondent with experience on the matter (that do not work for the City) reported that the program lacked transparency and that little to no funding was actually administered, ultimately deepening many business owners’ distrust of city administration and the sincerity of the lifeline. This reinforced a common sentiment among the business owners interviewed: it is difficult to navigate the complicated bureaucratic processes and multi-agency guidelines for OCS and other permits from the City. This complexity can be especially challenging for non-English speakers and those without the time or resources to push through permitting procedures. The grant program extended into February 2022 to provide financial assistance to those bringing their OCS into compliance, but it is unclear how many businesses could and did take advantage of this opportunity. The City’s permanent legislation also offers a 50 percent discount on Shared Spaces permit fees (which range from \$1k-\$3k for initial permits and up to \$2k for annual renewal) for businesses with less than \$2 million in gross receipts, though this tends to be a small proportion of the total cost to construct permanent OCS.

A more abstract consideration in the business-level equity conversation is the inherent preference of specific business types over others that may be embedded in Shared Spaces programming. The legislation was written and implemented with the express intent to allow *sit-down dining* establishments to maintain operations during the pandemic by installing OCS, and this is partially evident in that the majority of OCS on Valencia were installed by restaurants. A handful of non-dining business owners we interviewed claimed that the street closures and OCS of neighboring businesses led to a general increase in pedestrian activity, which they believed to

benefit their business as well. And both walking interviewees and some business owner respondents expressed optimism that non-dining retail *could* take advantage of permanent OCS in creative ways over time. But several other business owners and residents reported that type 3 and 4 OCS visually block other storefront's signage and obstruct the "window shopping" on which many non-dining businesses depend, though we should note that the City's permanent legislation requires minimum sightlines. A few business owners worried about stores that rely on vehicular access for deliveries and customer pickup, though they all expressed equal concerns with the status quo of street parking. Lastly, there are ongoing concerns around a wholesale decline of in-store retail due largely to a rise in e-commerce platforms and services (Berman, 2019; Helm et al., 2020). Amidst such concerns, OCS may exacerbate a disproportionate growth in dining establishments over other business types, with unclear implications for equity.

### ***C) At the neighborhood level***

Finally, the neighborhood scale of equity concerns about Shared Spaces refers to which communities and corridors are most able to take advantage of the opportunities to change the streetscape. Many interviewees across all stakeholder groups mentioned this in regards to the temporary street closures in particular. Multiple respondents described the considerable amount of knowledge and resources required to get approval and sustain operations even for *temporary* street closures through Shared Spaces. Valencia Street was among only a handful of corridors in San Francisco with regular street closures to support *commercial* activity, and it received approval from the City largely due to the organizing power and administrative support of the Valencia Street Merchants' Association.

Peripherally, an interviewee familiar with the similar street closure permits issued for Grant Street in Chinatown described great difficulty in financially sustaining the operation. Mission Street, on the other hand – one block east of Valencia Street and similarly dense with commercial activity from 14<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> Street – has not been able to permit similar partial, temporary street closures similar to those on Valencia Street. Mission Street has a priority bus lane (the still-controversial "Red Carpet", installed in 2016 with complicated constellations of support and opposition) whose service would be disrupted by any closures to Mission Street.

Concerns around which businesses are able to take most advantage of permanent Shared Spaces legislation also have neighborhood-scale implications. Certain districts – including the Mission – prominently feature in their high concentration of restaurants and other dining establishments. If these business types serve to benefit more from permanent OCS utilization than other retail (such as live music venues, clothing stores, auto shops, and others), Shared Spaces programming may influence community-scale economic development dynamics in complicated and unintuitive ways.

These are difficult questions with no obvious answers, but they magnify the passive and active role that the City of San Francisco plays in the proliferation of OCS, particularly as only certain corridors and businesses prove able to take advantage of the opportunity for expansion.



### **Limitations**

This research has many limitations. The first and most obvious is that the pandemic may have substantially altered the “typical” preferences of people in public space. This includes psychosocial factors, as our desire and/or capacity for human-to-human interaction may have heightened or lowered. The work-from-home mandate and the limited ability/willingness to travel outside the region may have also increased or decreased the number of people using public space recreationally. And for nearly the full duration of this project, outdoor space was the only space available for many of the businesses with OCS in our study area. Thus, the use and usefulness of OCS may change drastically as businesses reopen their full, unmasked indoor service capacity.

Additionally, though Valencia Street was a useful case study for this project due to its high density of OCS, the findings may not be generalizable across other commercial corridors even within the same neighborhood, let alone in other parts of the city (or other cities altogether). While we expect that certain aspects of our findings – such as the importance of equity considerations, for example – likely remain relevant in other study areas, individual comments and behaviors are more likely to vary across different geographies within and beyond San Francisco.

Lastly, even within our project’s limited scope, many questions remain. Our interview sample is likely biased in ways both predictable and not, and limited time and resources prohibited the use of potentially helpful data such as more detailed analysis of individual commercial spaces, such as length and type of tenure.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

Given the unprecedented scale and speed of the changes brought about by the Shared Spaces program across all of San Francisco, their recent permanent legislation, as well as the disproportionate impacts that the pandemic has had on residents and business owners of color, an equity-first lens is paramount. Our research implies that OCS and the street closures of Shared Spaces do not seem to create new problems on Valencia Street, but instead underscore existing issues. Broadly, these include who has the right to shape the public streetscape and how, the physical accessibility of sidewalks and streets, and the lack of regular and transparent communication between the City of San Francisco and its many business owners (and residents) about changes to the streetscape.

The complementary nature and use of the street closures along Valencia Street and its OCS will likely continue to yield important lessons as their mutual implementation sets new norms for commercial corridor programming. There are of course important considerations in this, including the diverse transit modes for different businesses’ customer base and the potential impact of diverted traffic flow on residents and adjacent blocks. But our findings highlighting the value of the temporary street closures, as well as the long-term goals the city has for promoting active mobility, may merit expanded access to street closures on Valencia Street and elsewhere.

While the city continues to collect feedback on the permanent Shared Spaces legislation, the

diversity in the preferences even in our modest sample size implies that generic and rigid mechanisms for public engagement may not capture potentially important variations in perspectives. Interviews, though useful for assessing concise opinions, may miss important details in the conditional preferences of different constituents and stakeholders. In the short and long term, this suggests that businesses and the City should continue to collect open and qualitative feedback on OCS design and implementation. A promising sign is that the City already has an ongoing survey for Shared Spaces program feedback with some open-ended questions for small business owners (link: <https://sf.gov/information/give-feedback-impact-shared-spaces>). But this survey is only for small business owners, and it is unclear how long this communication channel will be available or whether or not there are accountability mechanisms for analyzing and incorporating feedback. Other potential mechanisms for this could be city-designed and mandated signage on OCS that includes a QR code for collecting open-ended feedback.

For all the terms in the permanent legislation, however, perhaps the most critical and pressing questions surround the program's governance in general – balancing the purview of multiple agencies and priorities – and enforcement in particular. Both of these may amplify or overshadow many of the concerns raised thus far, offering ample avenues for future study.

In spite of the circumstances, outdoor commercial spaces and temporary street closures have already appeared to create more people-centered, active streetscapes in San Francisco. There are important concerns around equity and the potentially exclusionary consequences of changes made under the banner of Shared Spaces programming. But we must also acknowledge many of the same concerns embedded in the status quo of car-centric planning that prioritizes on-street parking over pedestrian and social space. If the continued transition towards permanent OCS is done thoughtfully and intentionally, they can be a tool and catalyst for engaging streetscapes on Valencia Street and beyond.

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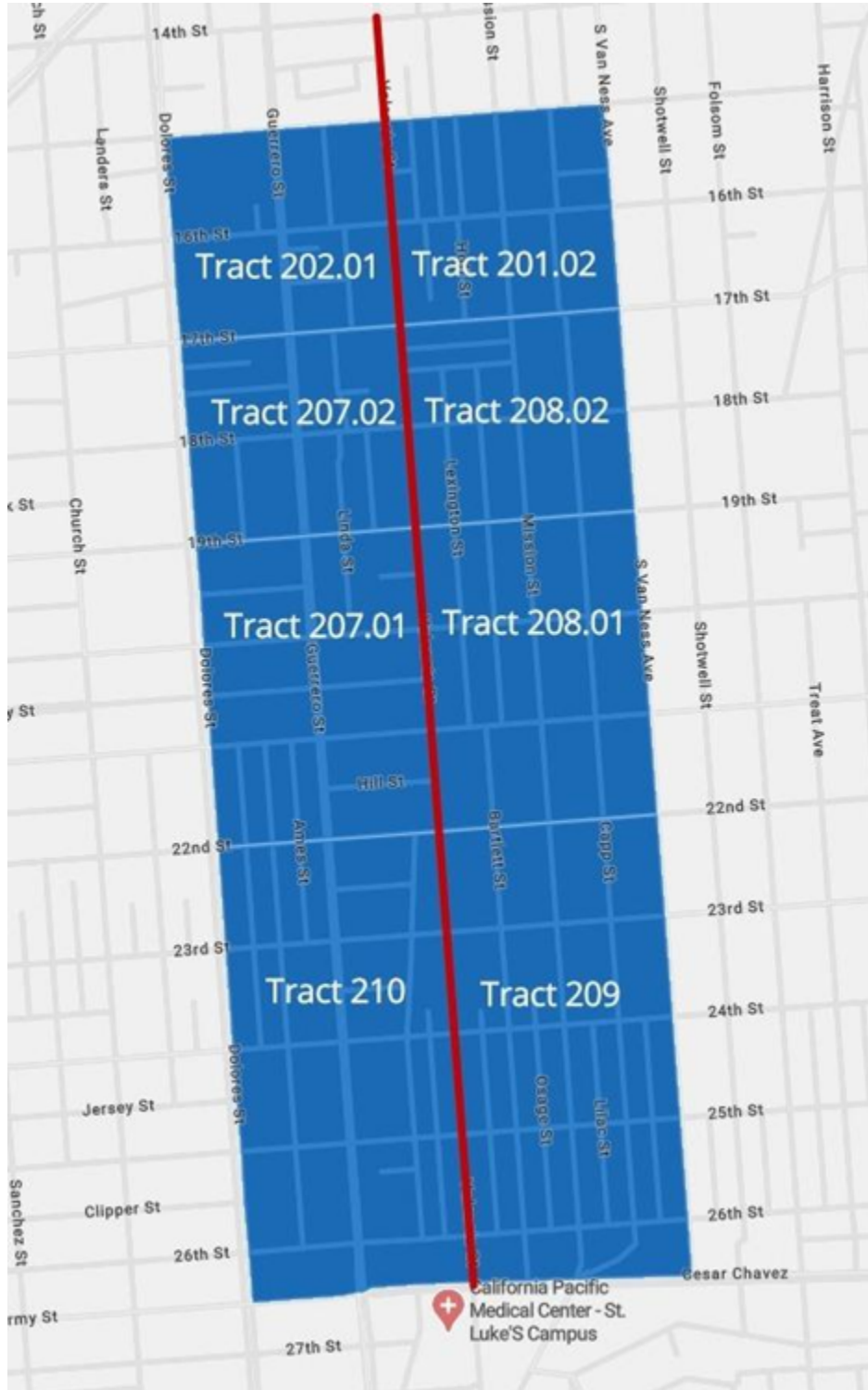
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Appendix

*A1: Mission District Background/Context*

**Figure A1. Census Tract Boundaries Bordering Valencia Street (Shown as the Red Line)**





**Table A1. Selected Census Tract Characteristics Across Valencia Street\***

<b>West of Valencia (from North to South)</b>		<b>East of Valencia (from North to South)</b>	
<b>Census tract</b>	<b>Median income (Table A14006)</b>	<b>Median income (Table A14006)</b>	<b>Census tract</b>
202.01	\$112,610	\$114,375	201.02
207.02	\$131,987	\$122,463	208.02
207.01	\$219,375	\$96,979	208.01
210	\$142,417	\$130,500	209
<b>Average</b>	<b>\$151,597</b>	<b>\$116,079</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Average differential between East and West tracts</b>	<b>\$35,518</b>		
<b>Census tract</b>	<b>% with Bachelor's+ (Table A12001)</b>	<b>% with Bachelor's+ (Table A12001)</b>	<b>Census tract</b>
202.01	40.25%	26.55%	201.02
207.02	45.19%	45.99%	208.02
207.01	46.44%	39.72%	208.01
210	39.90%	38.16%	209
<b>Average</b>	<b>42.95%</b>	<b>37.61%</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Average differential between East and West tracts</b>	<b>5.34%</b>		
<b>Census tract</b>	<b>% Hispanic (Table A04001)</b>	<b>% Hispanic (Table A04001)</b>	<b>Census tract</b>
202.01	29.09%	20.24%	201.02
207.02	33.25%	24.30%	208.02
207.01	14.80%	44.90%	208.01
210	12.55%	40.59%	209
<b>Average</b>	<b>22.42%</b>	<b>32.51%</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Average differential between East and West tracts</b>	<b>-10.09%</b>		
<b>Census tract</b>	<b>% Renters (Table B25003)</b>	<b>% Renters (Table B25003)</b>	<b>Census tract</b>
202.01	84.28%	87.47%	201.02
207.02	83.66%	78.55%	208.02
207.01	61.32%	92.18%	208.01
210	67.01%	83.12%	209
<b>Average</b>	<b>74.07%</b>	<b>85.33%</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Average differential between East and West tracts</b>	<b>-11.26%</b>		

\*All data is from US Census Bureau ACS 5-year estimates for 2020

### ***A2: Walking Interview Guide***

We conducted our walking interviews of San Francisco residents beginning at or near the intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Valencia Street, walking south. The following questions served as signposts to loosely guide the conversation, and as such were intended to offer open-ended thoughts and insight from respondents. The bolded questions were those asked during both walking interviews and the briefer “interveys” of patrons and pedestrians.

1. **What are your thoughts on the outdoor commercial spaces that have propped up since the beginning of the pandemic?**
2. Have you used them – in general, and specifically any of the ones on Valencia Street?
3. Do you prefer spaces with full walls and a roof, or when there are just chairs and tables out in the sidewalk and street?
4. When the streets are closed to vehicles, do you prefer to stay on the sidewalk or walk in the street?
5. If the business was closed, would you feel comfortable using the space?
6. [While standing next to or walking past unique spaces, whether by its design or its size] What are your thoughts on *this* space in particular?
7. **Which have been your favorite outdoor commercial spaces along Valencia Street?**
8. Is there anything you would like to see change about OCS if they become permanent?