

9/1/20

Working thoughts on The Museum of Chinese in America and Chinatown.

By Arlan Huang

Has MOCA become the community anchor institution for mass incarceration?

When did this begin?

On Nov 8, 2018 the NY Post announced jail plans for 80 Centre Street. Chinatown overwhelmingly opposed and protested the plan with a temporary victory. But City Hall pulled a bait and switch. The City axed 80 Centre and moved the site to 125 White St. City Hall devised a cruel and insidiously impossible Faustian bargain. Close Rikers and build jails in 4 boroughs. A win/lose equation. Furthermore, their plan was to split the Chinatown community. The tactic is divide and conquer and have the community claw over City money for a Yes vote on this jail plan. The political term is community givebacks, money for previous investments, simply known as payoff bribes. Many groups saw thru the reprehensible plan and refused the jail money and stood morally strong for no new jail in Chinatown. Sadly, City Hall won out with shameful results.

How could this happen?

One institution took the big bait. The Museum of Chinese in America received \$35 million. Proof is in the Mayor's Office public letter addressing the Points of Agreement for closing Rikers and building new jails in 4 boroughs (10/18/19). A Yes Vote from Margaret Chin for a new jail in Chinatown sealed the deal. The betrayal set in motion the suspicion of political back room deals. These deals are done all the time. Just because its common practice does not make them right. This time it was unconscionable and it crossed a moral line.

Fire at 70 Mulberry (1/23/20)

70 Mulberry is ground zero for Chinatown. It was PS 23. It was the home of long-standing community groups like the CPC senior center, Chinatown Manpower, United East Athletics Association and The H.T. Chen Dance Center. It was the home of the former Chinatown History Museum whose space became storage for the original archive. The voice of the archive in dialogue with the present was the Spirit that drove the Museum's mission. MOCA is the guardian of this inheritance. MOCA must protect, and continue that legacy. It must do so with care and honor. It is demanded by the community.

Why was there a moratorium on the jail issue?

Despite mounting distrust in MOCA's silence on the jail issue, an age diverse group of community volunteers came to assist MOCA in saving whatever remained of the archive after the fire. The archive is the heart and soul of Chinatown.

Why is the moratorium over?

To this day MOCA has remained silent and refuses to engage the community with an official public statement regarding their involvement with the 4 borough jail plan. MOCA continues to rebuke questions, deny involvement and dismiss/denigrate people who question as dissenters of their truth. They have insisted on a one on one persuasion campaign.

Hollow words or words of honesty?

On July 31, 2020 MOCA participated in a videoconference with the Africa Center. Nancy Yao Maasbach, President of MOCA said, "let's listen to each other and create space for conscience. We have always been a museum of conscience and we will continue to do that." She said, "the museum has a deep, deep sense of priority on listening." She claims her staff is better than her. "They are wonderful listeners".

Shall we put these words into practice?

I have lived in the Chinatown community for 41 years. My wife worked for the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund for 38 years. Before AALDEF she was the coordinator of the New School Committee for building the Sun Yat Sen Intermediate School. In 1971 we were part of Basement Workshop producing the portfolio, Yellow Pearl. Basement's Oral History Project (1970) was the genesis for the Chinatown History Project. My seminal art project, Dim Sum Hearts Desire, 100 Smooth Stones for Grandfather, was installed at the Chinatown History Museum, 70 Mulberry St. in 1993. Our children graduated from PS 124.

In a letter to the art group Godzilla, of which I was a part of, Maasbach signed off with, "in search of community,"

Who am I?

I am community. We are community. We ask that MOCA listen to us. We ask for respect and an honorable response. It is a matter of conscience.

We ask MOCA for an official, detailed public explanation of their involvement in the jail vote and their acceptance of monetary concessions. We ask MOCA for an honest explanation for their continued obfuscation in the matter.

Further stonewalling will repudiate the spirit of dialogue with the community. By continuing to hold themselves above question they become unworthy of their claim to be 'an anchor institution of the community.' MOCA dishonors the legacy of The Chinatown History Museum.

How could this have happened?

Arlan Huang