



Calgary's Chinatown

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The first Chinatown was formed in Calgary in the early 1890's following the completion of the Trans Canada railway. It was located at the corner of Centre Street South and Ninth Avenue East and by 1890 contained two groceries, a laundry, two restaurants, and a rooming-house. However, it was soon too small and second one was established at Tenth Avenue and First Street SW. By 1910, it contained twelve businesses and the Chinese Mission, the precursor to the Chinese United Church. The pending arrival of the Canadian Northern Railway pushed up land prices forcing Chinese Canadian residents to vacate; however, by then they were in a position to buy rather than rent property. Thus, in 1910 several Chinese merchants pooled their capital to purchase land at the corner of Centre Street and Second Avenue SE and build the two-storey brick structure, the Canton Block, that still stands.

This building would be Chinatown's anchor for the next eighty years but not without overcoming opposition. Alderman James Short petitioned city commissioners on behalf of local property owners to prohibit Chinese Canadians from establishing themselves there, on the argument that their presence would drive down property values. There was, however, support for the new owners within the broader community and their project was allowed to proceed.

The size and wealth of the Chinese Canadian community attracted a visit in April 1911 by Sun Yat Sen, seeking support for the overthrow of what would be China's last dynasty. Calgary's Chinatown also stood as bulwark supporting Chinese Canadians as their population declined following the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923 and when they were denied equal government support during the Great Depression .

The 1960's were a turning point for Calgary's Chinatown. The Chinese Exclusion Act had been abolished in 1947 allowing Chinese Canadians to be reunited with their families. Then in 1967, all restrictions on immigration to Canada were eliminated. The recovery of normal family life and the arrival of skilled immigrants created greater purpose for Calgary's Chinatown. However, this still needed to be communicated to the broader community, especially the various levels of government.

During this time, Chinatowns across Canada were being targeted for replacement in urban renewal projects and it was proposed that a freeway be built through Calgary's Chinatown. Consequently, the Sien Lok Society of Calgary organized the National Conference on Urban Renewal As It Affects Chinatown in 1969 to discuss projects threatening Chinatowns across Canada. This conference led to preservation of these Chinatowns, including Calgary's, and preceded a series of measures that would revitalize it. For example, city government officially designated boundaries for Calgary's Chinatown, from the riverbank to north side of 4th Avenue SW and from 2nd Street SE to 2nd Street SW in 1974.

In 1976 the Chinatown Development Task Force was established to provide more housing facilities. In quick succession, Oi Kwan Place, a seniors' residence; Bowside Manor, a nonprofit housing project; and a building owned by the Mah Society were completed or began construction. In 1983 a compromise between the Chinese Canadian community and corporate interests led to permitting greater building density on the edges of Chinatown in exchange for property and funds for the construction of a cultural centre. The Wai Kwan Manor, a senior citizens' residence, opened in 1985, and that same year there were ninety-three businesses in Chinatown.

The Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre, after ten years of planning, fund-raising, and construction, was opened in 1992. Modeled after the Hall of Prayer in the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan) in Beijing, it is one of the largest Chinese cultural centres in Canada.

In spite of its revitalization since the 1960s, Calgary's Chinatown continues to face challenges. Businesses have moved to outlying areas to meet the needs of the increasing number of Chinese Canadians living there. This has drawn clients away from businesses in Chinatown thereby undermining their viability. This, combined with the high-density development in areas surrounding Chinatown, has led to pressure to rezone Chinatown for high rise office buildings, which would probably change the area completely. Another challenge for Calgary's Chinatown is the age and poverty of its residents. More than 50 percent are seniors and they have the lowest median household income in the city.

The response to these challenges seems to reflect a lack of unity among Calgary's Chinese Canadians as social organizations work hard to provide extensive services for the mostly elderly residents and others from across the city while properties lay undeveloped as owners probably await better commercial opportunities. However, the reality underneath this impression may, in fact, be a careful balancing of the various interests involved.

There are many aspects of Calgary's Chinatown that are not easily transferred to other locations. There is the Cultural Centre with all its activities, the Chinese elderly who reside or socialize there, the language classes, the clan halls, the temples, the public school groups that tour the facilities, the diversity, the tourist attraction, and so on. Even more important is the symbolic value of the Chinese Canadian ability to provide for themselves in the face of adversity. The value of these aspects has neatly coincided with the local governments desire to create more diversity in the downtown area, particularly the presence of residents and pedestrians.

Given the underlying value of preserving Chinatown, leaders in the community have sought a balance between preservation and development, keeping in mind the presence of the elderly, as well as young Chinese Canadian's attraction to a more lively environment. Social groups have implemented programs and lobbied for a greater police presence in order to create a safer environment. Merchants have promoted their services to the workers in the surrounding office towers. Academics have reminded us of Chinatown's role as a gateway for new immigrants—of which the Chinese are a major component—to transition into mainstream society and for non-Chinese Canadians to interact with the community. Perhaps most importantly, is the overall reminder of the fundamental values that have led to the success of this ethnic community. Chinese Canadians have built upon a collective effort of their community to overcome many obstacles and achieve what they have today. It is unlikely that Calgary's Chinese Canadians would forsake the most obvious symbol of this effort and the inspiration that follows from it.



Builders and Patriots 2: A History of Calgary's Chinatown Photo Exhibit was a collaborative project between the Sien Lok Society of Calgary and members of the Calgary community at large, who contributed images and recollections about Chinatown's history. It is undoubtedly a project that has been created by the community, for the community. These extraordinary contributions make the exhibit truly unique, and the spirit of their participation, along with the very committed volunteers who worked tirelessly to create it also reflects the essence which has kept Chinatown alive to witness its 100th Anniversary in 2010.

BUILDERS AND PATRIOTS 2: A HISTORY OF CALGARY'S CHINATOWN EXHIBITION COMMITTEE

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