

# THE JOY WE MAKE: CULTURE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN

*THERESA HWANG*

Can cultural planning connect people?  
Build power? Strengthen place?

Can we redefine cultural planning as a strategy to create policies that root histories and foster opportunities for growth for communities of color?

Can cultural planning have impact beyond the sector of arts and culture?

Unsure if these questions had solutions, we set out to seek answers with the cultural planning process: *People:Power:Place*.

At first glance, it may seem strange for an arts organization focused on racial equity to lead community development efforts, but Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) understood the value that an arts organization can play in the improvement of a neighborhood. AAI used the arts and creative strategies to bring planning and community development policies to an experiential level to engage a wide audience in determining the future of the neighborhood. As a host to the cultural planning process, AAI offered an accessible entry to planning through hands-on arts activities and framing neighborhood development through stories and memories, rather than technical policies and development goals.

We defined culture as the shared resources, beliefs, and practices that build the defining character of a community, and in this case the neighborhood of Chinatown North/Callowhill. Culture also extends beyond formal arts to include informal interactions that define the nature and customs of everyday life. It is a celebration of what a community is, where it has come from, and where it is going—its identity and memory and the expression of the people.

*People:Power:Place* is cultural plan as anti-displacement tool; a way to keep the existing community rooted in the area as large market rate development rapidly builds. AAI had already been displaced once and wanted to prevent any future upheaval for themselves and others as the Chinatown North/Callowhill area becomes a hot spot for new development. As the process developed, we realized the opportunity to use *People:Power:Place* as a platform to leverage planning to foster solidarity, seed community control of development, and begin to create a collective identity for Chinatown North/Callowhill.

Rather than limit the impact of the cultural plan to the sector of arts and culture, we wanted to examine ways culture showed up in the neighborhood and expand the realm of influence of cultural planning to create a framework for shared values and vision, through which all community planning could be examined and evaluated. Rather than create a document that road mapped ways cultural institutions, arts programs, and artists could thrive, we used culture as a foundational element that connected all aspects of daily life and represented the shared values of neighbors. Rather than a discrete element, culture was the connective tissue of the neighborhood. We also wanted to leverage culture as a resource, an infinite resource that we all generate and can all utilize, to preserve and make visible the existing members of the community. Beyond integrating arts into the public realm of the neighborhood, we wanted to memorialize, monumentalize, and make visible the

people who live, work, and play in Chinatown North/Callowhill. We wanted to turn their daily experiences into policy to ensure their quality and way of life can continue.

As a process, we centered people: the community members that activate and give meaning to the neighborhood. For the cultural plan to authentically reflect the community, the plan must be led by the people creating the culture, not policy makers or planners. If not, the cultural plan will be superficial, aesthetic. We expanded the notion of cultural producers, to extend past those formally trained in the arts to those that contribute to daily life and validate informal methods of expression to include people who grow their own gardens, attend church in the area, do tai chi in public spaces as people that make up the fabric of cultural interactions and make the experience of the area diverse.

To ensure we made the cultural planning process accessible, we rethought the entire process and grounded it in experience and informal interactions, so that all members of the neighborhood would understand they could contribute to the plan. During asset mapping, beyond looking at technical aspects of the area such as land use, and densities of arts programs, we additionally examined fond memories and favorite places as data points and the feel of the everyday as design parameters. People responded with contributions that took the form of stories, snapshots, unforgettable moments, and corresponded with visions of improvement that supported more of these favorite memories and events.

We made the planning process an exploratory time, an invitation for each participant to also be a creative person, so all activities were generative and arts based. We used familiar materials from childhood like construction paper and pipe cleaners, to lower the barrier to entry to be creative and alleviate pressure to sculpt precious artifacts. We invited people to be hands-on, express opinions in new ways, in the form of a giant model of the neighborhood, a drawing of memories, a collage of favorite places. Participants were collaborators, co-authors of the cultural plan, not just receptors giving feedback on assumed policies and improvements. Neighbors designed and solved solutions. The real experts, not policy makers, designed possibilities for the neighborhood.

Chinatown North/Callowhill share boundaries but have little social overlap. It is an aggregate place that policy makers have determined into census tracts and planning districts, but on the ground, there is little social cohesion between disparate groups. The diversity of the area is a strength, but an untapped resource. In the community, there are working artists, immigrant workers from China, unhoused residents in social service programs, youth, alongside new college grads looking for affordable rent, and more. Few efforts have aligned all these identities, even less have brought them all together. In hopes to begin fostering solidarity and shared values, in addition to addresses, we formed a Working Group comprised of various stakeholders in the area to advise the cultural planning process. The Working Group members shared a table for the first time, with the same goal of equitably developing the neighborhood while stabilizing and fostering diversity. Community leaders learned of each other's efforts, their struggles and successes, and began to see underlying commonalities of experiences, and clearly saw similar desires for a thriving future. As planning meetings continued, relationships beyond *People:Power:Place* formed and

created opportunities for collaboration and cohesion, beyond the planning work. A long-term goal was to create a more connected group of neighbors, ready to mobilize and organize in support of each other and in support for campaigns that positively impact the neighborhood.

*People:Power:Place* was an initiative that started out as a way to support the existing members of the community, but grew into a larger experiment that examined ways of expanding the definition of culture: the role culture has in neighborhood development, and how culture can engage people to become more active citizens and serve as the root of place-making and keeping.

As the field of cultural planning continues to grow, alongside the efforts to integrate arts and cultural strategies into community development, it becomes necessary to ask why culture sits separately from neighborhood development, rather than an essential part of all aspects of the community. Culture needs to be the foundation of design and planning. Culture is the DNA of a community: the expression of the people. Culture is what sets apart neighborhoods and gives unique character to places. Without it integrated into planning and design, which manifest values into the built environment, we are losing what makes places special. In immigrant neighborhoods and communities of color, such as Chinatown North, culture is embedded within all the daily practices of life, from meals, to porches, to the appropriation of public space. People of color intuitively imbue cultural aspects of their life into their homes and streets. Cultural planning becomes an opportunity to honor these informal practices and author policies and resources that support these activities. By integrating cultural practices into neighborhood development, we hold the opportunity to monumentalize the people, especially people of color, and begin to push equitable representation within the built environment while creating social and physical infrastructure that will support a thriving community.

This becomes an important tool to offset displacement, segregation, and other means of stripping space and dignity from communities of color.

Cultural planning is also an opportunity to lift up qualitative and experiential metrics of development that move beyond unit counts and return on investments. By integrating a framework of creative expression, we can, and should, start tracking the number of relationships built and the amount of joy created as indicators of impact that foster a sense of ownership and comfort that is integral in community development.

As a community-engaged architect, *People:Power:Place* was a valuable experience of professional growth and experimentation. Beyond the project scope, it was an opportunity for me to explore the importance of culture within my own practice. I had to reflect and ask questions about how my own upbringing and experience as an Asian American woman has influenced my neighborhood or lack thereof, and how to articulate and integrate the importance of culture into my own life and professional practice, and how culture can be scaled up to impact the built environment. Culture is the way to craft a counter narrative to exclusion and embrace a spectrum of identities. As my investigation of cultural planning and design continues, I know that cultural practice and culture-bearers are the tools to subvert and dismantle existing manifestations of white supremacy in the built environment.

By making space for a range of expressions and identities for communities of color in neighborhoods, we can begin to uproot histories of segregation, erasure of identities, and the upheaval of social networks, to authentically move towards equitable neighborhood development.

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*Theresa Hyuna Hwang is a community-engaged architect and founder of Department of Places, a participatory design and community engagement practice based in Los Angeles, CA.*