

Final Report

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Brief overview of the project topic and research direction

Our project topic has to do with exploring the connection between Land Use and Quality of Life. Land use refers to how humans manage/plan our usage of land whereas quality of life is understood as an individual's personal satisfaction with his or her wellbeing. Quality of life is closely related to land use as people are interacting with their physical surroundings all the time, from where they live, to how they get to work, to whether they have easy access to leisure activities.

Prior research done in Beijing over summer identified two types of housing and recorded the types and number of services and amenities available in the surrounding 500m radius of the identified housing estate.

To further investigate the link between land use and quality of life, we tried to reproduce the fieldwork methods employed in Beijing in two residential areas of San Francisco. Using a series of indicators (poverty levels, residential mobility, overcrowding, rent as a percentage of income and so on) from The SF Indicator Project¹ we made some inferences about various districts and decided to narrow our focus down to two neighboring areas in the city – Nob Hill and Chinatown. We were hoping to be able to gather similar data and observations in these two areas such that we would be able to draw some useful comparisons with the prior data collected in Beijing. We also thought that as an added bonus, it would be interesting to compare Chinatown, an area populated by ethnic Chinese with residential estates in Beijing to see if there were any similarities. A similar activity was conducted in Beijing again, this time by our Tsinghua teammates who looked at the Hutongs and compared them with an old residential estate in terms of the types of facilities, amenities and services available.

Fieldwork Observations

We used Stockton Street and Taylor Street as proxies for Chinatown and Nob Hill respectively.

Conducting our fieldwork at Stockton Street on a Saturday morning, we observed that there were many people out and about eating brunch, stocking up on groceries or simply visiting. The crowd was mostly made up of middle-aged or elderly ethnic Chinese, most of whom found their way to Chinatown via public transport, stopping at the many bus stops that line the street, making up for relative lack of parking spaces available. Pedestrian traffic was very high and the street was bustling with activity as locals and tourists make their way around. Land use was mostly mixed, where buildings mostly housed various services and amenities such as restaurants, grocery stores, community centers, and banks on the ground floor while the upper floors contained residences. One building took mixed use to the extreme, with a lawyer's office, a post office, temple and

¹ <http://www.sfindicatorproject.org/>

community association housed on different floors under its roof. Another fascinating way space was maximized we come across was how one group floor shop space was divided amongst a Western Union shop front, a phone repair service and a printing service. Based on the data collected, it is rather evident that Chinatown is mostly made up of mixed use buildings which house a variety of stores on their ground floors. Residents living above these stores can easily access an assortment of essential services and purchase daily necessities very conveniently. The congregation of these services in Chinatown also makes it much simpler for San Francisco's resident Chinese community as they need only to travel to one place to run all their errands.

To get from Stockton Street to Taylor Street (Nob Hill) we walked along Vallejo Street where we observed an almost immediate decrease in stores providing services and gradually, there was a conversion of buildings to single land use residential blocks.

Taylor Street was a completely new sensory experience for us after a crowded, noisy and busy Stockton Street. We immediately noticed the lack of human presence on the street and with it, the noise and pedestrian traffic. The street was almost completely empty save for a few passers-by. Public transport was nonexistent, as we did not see any bus stops or subway stations. Parking was readily available and cars filled the street, spilling over into adjoining streets as well. Single use residential buildings lined the street and the ground floors were mostly used as garages if not occupied by people. Buildings were also well maintained whereas some of Chinatown's buildings looked slightly rundown. Greenery was plentiful and carefully manicured trees and shrubs lined the street and its pedestrian walkways. There were a few restaurants, cafes and one grocery store, which sold goods vastly different from those sold in Chinatown grocery stores. In contrast with Chinatown, there were barely any convenient services along the street and we recorded only a couple of dry cleaning stores and one ATM machine. Towards the end of the street, we counted a playground and several luxury hotels, which formed the boundary of the Nob Hill district.

In Beijing, the team observed that hutongs had much less space than the residential estates which were constructed during the communist era. The hutongs also had less amenities whereas residents living in the residential estates has easy access to parking lots, exercise machines, sports fields and so on.

Brainstorming process

After consolidating our fieldwork observations, we noticed that despite the impressive amount of space devoted to providing essential services for Chinatown residents and the Chinese community at large, entertainment options were few and far between. Hence, we decided to try and come up with ideas to solve the problem and hopefully improve the quality of life for residents. To free up space for entertainment purposes in a crowded downtown area where land use is often maximized and space is limited was quite a challenge but we chanced upon the idea of a parklet, where space (e.g. parking lots, roads, pavements) undergoes a temporary land use change to serve the needs of the community

without major changes to the urban landscape. We adapted the idea and applied it to Chinatown, coming up with plans to introduce temporary entertainment venues such as night markets, open air theaters, outdoor concert and snack stalls by taking over certain side roads and pavements in the evenings. This way, entertainment can be provided and quality of life can be improved on without having to make any major changes to the land use pattern in Chinatown. Sharing sessions with our Tsinghua partners also yielded interesting learning points as they were intimately familiar with the idea of outdoor cinemas, which were surprisingly common in Chinese cities and towns. In return, we shared our experiences and opinions to help them with the process of narrowing down a topic of interest to focus on.

Prototype experience

Building

To test the idea, we created posters of possible entertainment events taking place in Chinatown and invited two groups of youths who lived in the vicinity to express their like/dislike of the ideas by voting Yes or No, respectively using 5 colored sticks that corresponded to each of the entertainment activities we came up with. They were also encouraged to provide written feedback by explaining their choices and/or offering suggestions on other potential entertainment options.

Testing

Despite the lack of an actual working prototype, the posters offered visual stimuli and the voting process, conducted with some verbal explanations, kick-started a lively debate on the issue. The testing process was a smashing success as both groups of youths agreed heartily with the lack of entertainment options in Chinatown just as we have identified based on our fieldwork observations. Many voted in favor of all the ideas we came up, though they were less enthusiastic about the concerts and movies. Night markets and temporary food stalls generated the most buzz and many of the participants started their own discussions spontaneously, declaring what types of food they would want to have available or what kind of goods they would like to have sold at the night markets. Participants contributed generously for the written feedback portion of the testing experience as well and offered many interesting insights by pointing out for example, that concerts might be too noisy for the elderly residents in Chinatown, or that safety at night is a key concern amongst the youth. Potential sites were also suggested, with Grant Ave strongly recommended due to the observed lack of road traffic at most times.

Future possible improvements

Based on the response and feedback we gathered, we are now certain that we are on the right track, having identified an actual problem that resonated with residents of Chinatown. Feedback also suggests strong support for solutions we came up with, indicating that the project is rather feasible and could have the potential to be positively received by the Chinatown community. However, the actual implementation of the project would require much more effort from

getting the permission to hold such activities on streets to canvassing for sponsors and store vendors (in the case of a night markets or temporary food stores, both of which received very “yes” votes).

Our teammates at Tsinghua chose to focus on the issue of loneliness experienced by new migrants moving into unfamiliar cities for work and came up with a prototype simulating an app which allowed users to share their interests and identify available, underutilized space to hold sharing sessions with others who have similar hobbies and interests.