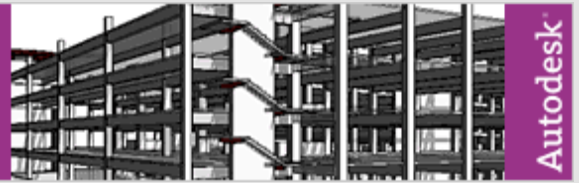


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Found in Translation

Laying the foundation for more sensitivity within a community's public spaces.

By Alec Appelbaum

Posted January 31, 2006

Spent firecrackers dot Manhattan's Chinatown in the early mornings this time of year as residents pour out to celebrate the Lunar New Year. Despite the neighborhood's pageantry and proximity to the rebuilding at Ground Zero, government efforts to help it in the aftermath of 9-11 stalled until a local group, [Asian Americans for Equality](#), engaged a non-profit architecture firm to help articulate residents' design priorities. To learn what that firm can teach about designing diverse neighborhoods, follow the teens with digital cameras.

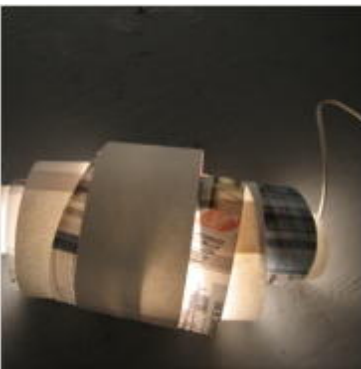
Those students, interns with a nonprofit design outfit called [Hester Street Collaborative](#), are investigating how Chinatown's jumble of signs, icons, and sidewalk food vendors can reflect a look that residents actually want. With the supervision of Anne Frederick and Alex Gilliam, Hester Street's full-time staff, students create "nonverbal tools" for residents who don't speak English (or design jargon). Last year, intern William Chung designed a board game, Bad Design Darts, to serve as a community survey. Hester Street would post a neighborhood map at a town hall meeting and the block that residents hit most frequently with darts would receive a cleanup or gardening campaign initiated by civic groups.

Jenny Chin, another of the collaborative's interns, developed Step On Your Neighborhood, in which the collaborative lends residents a small handheld paver. People would take the pavers around the their streets and stamp impressions of found objects in concrete. "Here's this way of making things that could be beautiful and are entirely specific to that neighborhood," says Gilliam of Chin's innovation, "This is something many ages can do."

Chinatown's from Boston to Yokohama are faced with the challenge of balancing immigrants' traditions with civic dignity. For this balance to emerge democratically, planning codes should honor imported symbols while promoting coherent street sign usage. Hester Street aims to show planners the array of curves, hues, and textures that distinguish New York's Chinatown. To do so, interns blend photography and craftmaking to formulate a visual census by making lanterns from prints of on-street photos they take. For the next step of this project, the collaborative hopes to help interns train Chinatown dwellers to make their own lanterns. The expected result is to learn what shapes are most treasured from observing the shapes that residents create.



Hester Street Collaborative's interns designed these lanterns to express Chinatown's grace without words. All photos courtesy Hester Street Collaborative



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Manhattan's Chinatown lurches in a single block from overcrowded fish stalls to the tranquil garden inside the spacepod-silhouette of Middle School 131. The lanterns, according to interns like Toni McDonald, capture the color that propels you along Chinatown's bustling sidewalks. Her lantern displays photos of "signs and mini-Buddhas lined up in a window with many colors." The interns plan to help residents shape their own lanterns and submit prevailing patterns for new lamps or ornaments at Sara Delano Roosevelt Park, a sprawling concrete playground where the city recently installed a synthetic track rather than provide space for more popular social activities in the area.



But the city is heeding Hester Street. The collaborative will soon install a ribbon of symbols to inject more immigrant histories into the flow. Students in a middle school facing Hester Street's office created a Web ballot in January that [neighborhood civic groups](#) will promote this spring in which residents select symbols to evoke different ethnic histories. 32 students then each design a banner or decoration along a boulevard that runs through Chinatown from the East River to the stylish East Village. For Frederick, this project will succeed if the ballot elicits residents' passions and plays out in on-street symbols. "If you come across as saying 'we're designers and this is a cool design,' it's really not relevant," she says. But the interns and staff never seem to tire of listening. And the collaborative's ability to excite and dispatch students suggest that Chinatown may soon redesign itself on democratic cues.

This Hester Street intern demonstrates how making casts of found objects can feed a useful English-free design lexicon.

VENTURING OUT: Hester Street receives major funding, administrative and office support from [Leroy Street Studio](#) --the two firms share a bilevel studio and recently cohosted a festive Chinese New Year party. The collaborative also works with the [Rebuild Chinatown Initiative](#). The question of how democracy runs through public places preoccupies the gang at the [Project for Public Spaces](#) and [New Yorkers for Parks](#). If similar groups in your Chinatown or immigrant neighborhood do similar work, tell us about them (or why one should be initiated).



An [exhibit](#) on Hester Street's methods opens at the Municipal Art Society on Feb. 15, with a reception on Feb. 22.

SPEAKING OUT: What nonverbal tools do you use in charettes? How can planners balance organic vernacular design with coherent guidelines? When do children show sharper intuition for vernacular design than professionals?

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