

Kearny Corridor: Remember and Reclaim

Chinatown Urban Institute 2012

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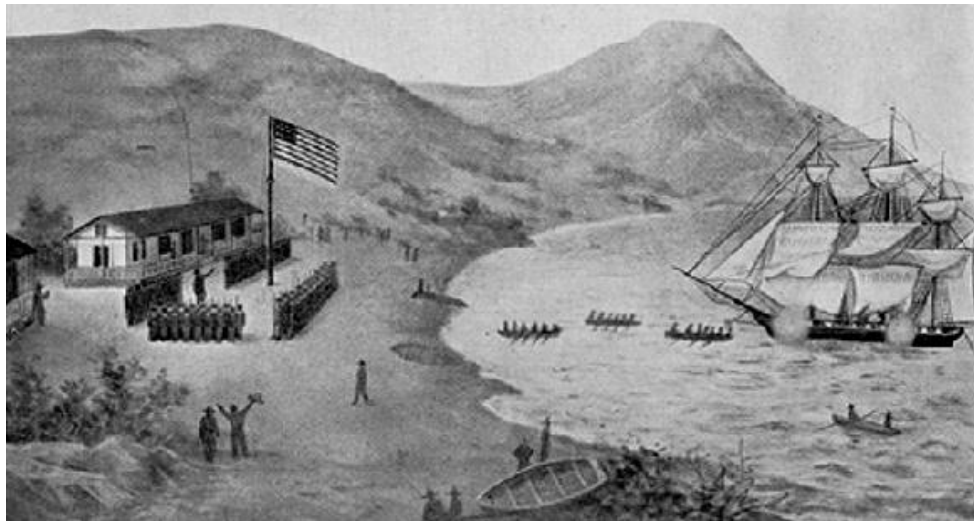
INTRODUCTION

Project Kearny consists of four members, Sandy, Tracy, Wendy, and Wisely. Although we come with different backgrounds, we find it to our advantage to be able to bring a wide arsenal of skills, experiences, and understandings to enable us to help improve Kearny Street. Kearny Street lies along the edge of Chinatown and the financial district and is definitely an up and coming street to be reckon with. With the new additions on the street such as St. Mary's and City College of San Francisco (CCSF), we find it as the perfect timing and opportunity to help improve Kearny.

SIGNIFICANCE OF KEARNY: PLACE OF MANY BIRTHS

Kearny Street is both a birthplace and home to many historically significant places such as the development of Chinatown, the founding city of San Francisco, as well as the history of California.

- Located a block away from the original shoreline where Montgomery St. lies today, Kearny Street was the former site of a seasonal indigenous Ohlone campsite and subsequent Spanish settlement of Yerba Buena.[1]



Yerba Buena Cove, the Spanish settlement in San Francisco, was located where Chinatown is today.

Source: [http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:Birth1\\$birth\\$us_itm\\$us-territory-proclamation.jpg#filehistory](http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:Birth1$birth$us_itm$us-territory-proclamation.jpg#filehistory)

- After the United States invaded and claimed the settlement and parts of Mexico (present day California) in 1846, Yerba Buena was renamed San Francisco and became the entry point for thousands of immigrants lured by the 1849 Gold Rush.[2] Today Portsmouth Square on Kearny between Clay and Washington is attributed as the birthplace of SF.
- Bachelor enclaves such as Chinatown rapidly developed in this port city, but were even more quickly leveled by the 1906 earthquake, which is why almost all the buildings on Kearny were built post-1906[3].



Hall of Justice remains in a leveled Chinatown after 1906 Earthquake.
Source: San Francisco: A Natural History, Images of America 2006.

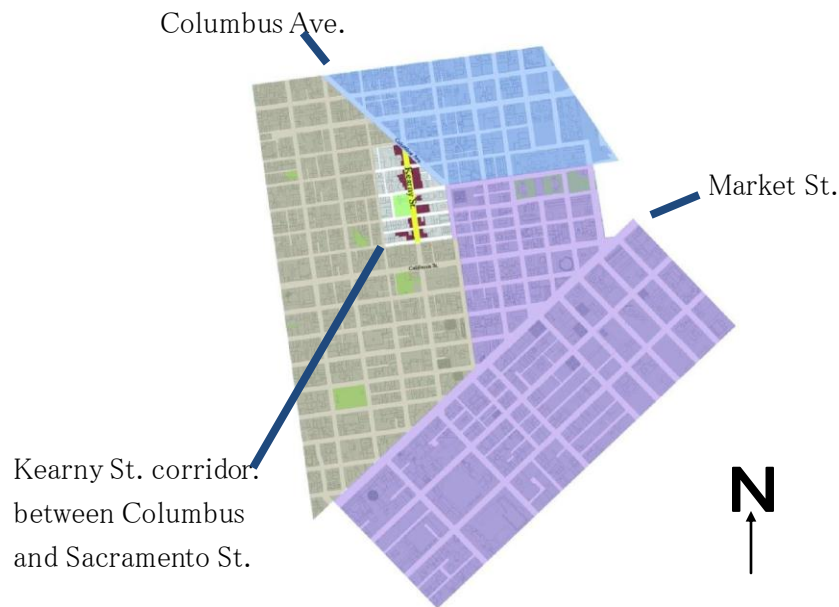
- After the US invaded and claimed the Philippine Islands, Filipino immigration into the US surged and created a robust enclave of Filipino bachelors, or “manongs” in Manilatown located on Kearny from Columbus Ave. to Market St.
- As Financial District continue to expand during the 1970’s “Manhattanization” of the city, buildings on Kearny St. were slowly converted to downtown office buildings. The International Hotel, or I-Hotel symbolizes the last stand in which a 1977 protest failed to prevent the eviction of elderly Chinese and Filipino seniors.[4] After nearly two decades in which the I-Hotel site remained a hole in the ground, the block was redeveloped in 2006 to include affordable housing in the new I-Hotel, the St. Mary’s School, and City College of SF.



1977 Protest that unsuccessfully prevented the eviction of immigrant seniors from I-Hotel.

Source: <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/42-20217642/usa-international-hotel-protest>

Today, Kearny St. is a major artery for public transit, charter tour and casino buses, cars, pedestrians and bikes particularly, as it lies at the intersection of Chinatown, North Beach and the Financial District.



[1] Nancy Morita's artist drawing of SF in 1750 indicates that a seasonal Ohlone camp was located on the banks of Yerba Buena Cove. "Wild in the City: SF in 1750 and 1990s"

<http://natureinthecity.org/maps.php>

[2] Malletto, K., "Why San Francisco? City Origins: 1835-1849. FoundSF.org,

http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=WHY_SAN_FRANCISCO%3F%3F%3F_CITY_ORIGINS:_1835-

[3] SF Planning Department's "SF's Property Information Map" <http://propertymap.sfplanning.org>

[4] Habal, Estella. "Filipino Americans in the Decade of the International Hotel" in *Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology involves Chinatown Community Development Center's (CCDC) pedestrian and safety studies, interviewing merchants of Kearny Street, residents of Chinatown, as well as getting input from participants of CCDC's Grassroots Leadership Training. We also managed to do comparative studies, gather information through weekly fieldwork such as traffic counts of cars (between Kearny and Jackson), as well as using resources such as maps from San Francisco's Planning Department.

VALUES

In order to guide the vision of the Kearny Corridor, we took our methodology to come up with values that would ensure a balance to all stakeholders, interests, as well as our own when making decisions on planning and implementation.

We believe in...

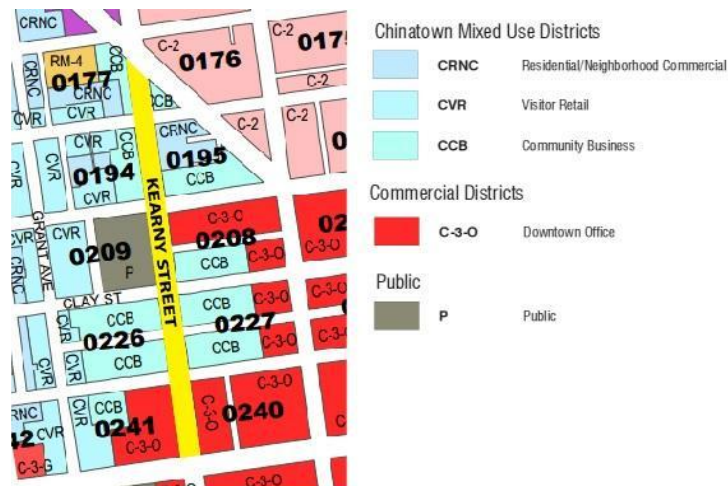
1. **[A Livable Neighborhood]** ...Safety can be achieved by improving the pedestrian experience and walk-ability of streets while improving efficient flow of traffic.
2. **[Strength in Economic Diversity]** ...Diversified economic development that caters to local residents as well as tourists are key to long-term sustainable growth and economic stability.
3. **[Art is Activism]** ...Given the high density of people, cleanliness of streets and implementation of long-term durable art is a challenge, yet also a priority for improved image of Chinatown, especially since we find Kearny as a gateway and entry point into Chinatown that welcomes residents, visitors, and tourists alike.
4. **[Environmental Justice]** ...Everyone who lives, works, plays, prays, and travels in Chinatown deserve safe and healthy conditions.

Lastly, the overarching theme that these values reinforce is Remember and Reclaim, a tagline we borrowed from the Little Manila Foundation in Stockton, CA. We believe in preservation of the cultural and historical legacy as well as inscribing it in the built environment by enhancing Chinatown's qualities and characteristics.

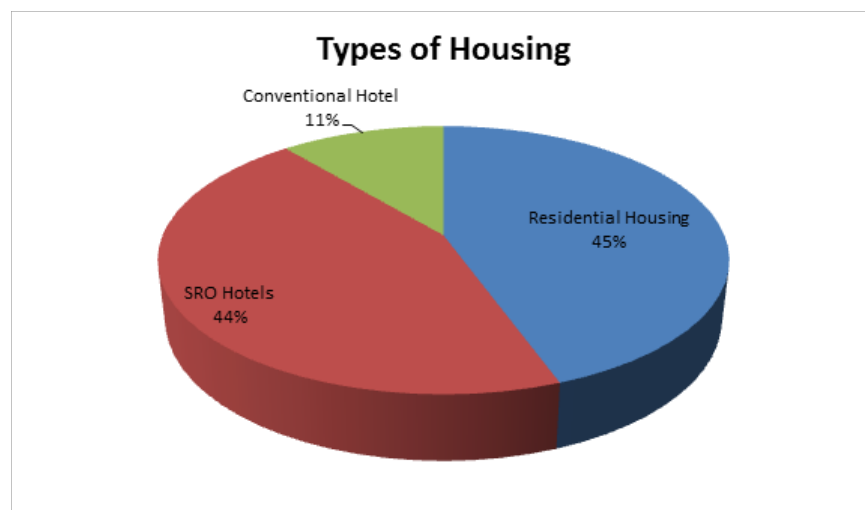
EXISTING CONDITIONS

1. Zoning & Housing

Our corridor is located at Kearny Street, from Sacramento to Columbus. According to the San Francisco Planning Code, this area is mainly zoned for Chinatown community businesses, with commercial businesses on the first floor and residential housing above. Under the Planning Code, with the exception of City College of San Francisco and the I-hotel, nothing can be built higher than 35 feet on Kearny Street.



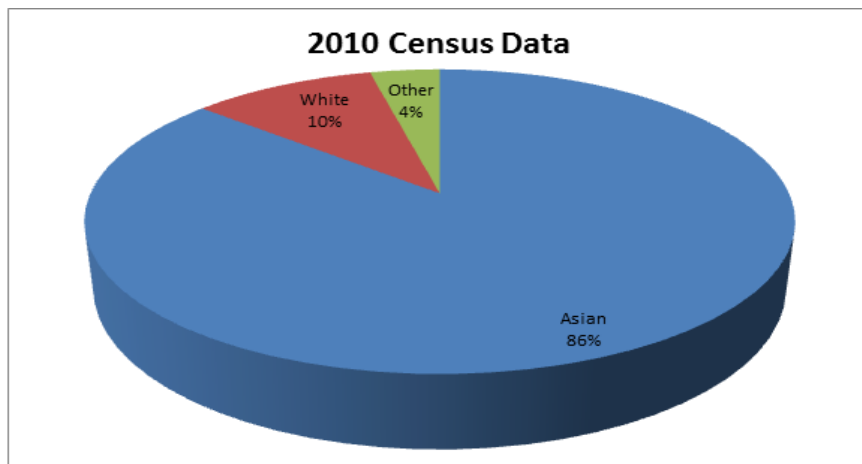
There are 928 units on this block including three types of housing: SRO hotel, conventional hotel, and residential housing. SRO stands for Single Room Occupancy, residents who live in a SRO shares the kitchen and bathroom with others in an apartment. Under the category of SRO hotels, there are two kinds of SRO. One is for long-term housing; its residents are usually low-income families or seniors. The other one is mainly for tourists whom stay in San Francisco for less than or equal to a month. For residential housing, there is the I-hotel and three apartments. On Kearny Street, there is only one conventional hotel which is the Hilton.



All of the available 928 housing units on Kearny St. from Sacramento to Columbus Ave. are located in buildings with commercial or mixed use spaces on the ground floor. All buildings with housing units were built shortly after the 1906 earthquake up to 1915, with the exception of the Hilton (built in 1971 and was formerly a courthouse and Holiday Inn) and International Hotel, or I-Hotel (2005). According to SF Planning Department's "San Francisco Neighborhoods: Socio-Economic Profiles" that used 2010 census data, the demographics of people who live in Chinatown are 86% Asian, 10% White, and 4% Other (SF Planning Department defines the area as Kearny to Powell, Broadway to Bush). In addition,



75% of Chinatown residents are foreign born, 70% have educational experience of high school or less, 66% of all households experience linguistic isolation (all members of the household age 14 and up have at least some difficulty with English, if they can speak English at all).



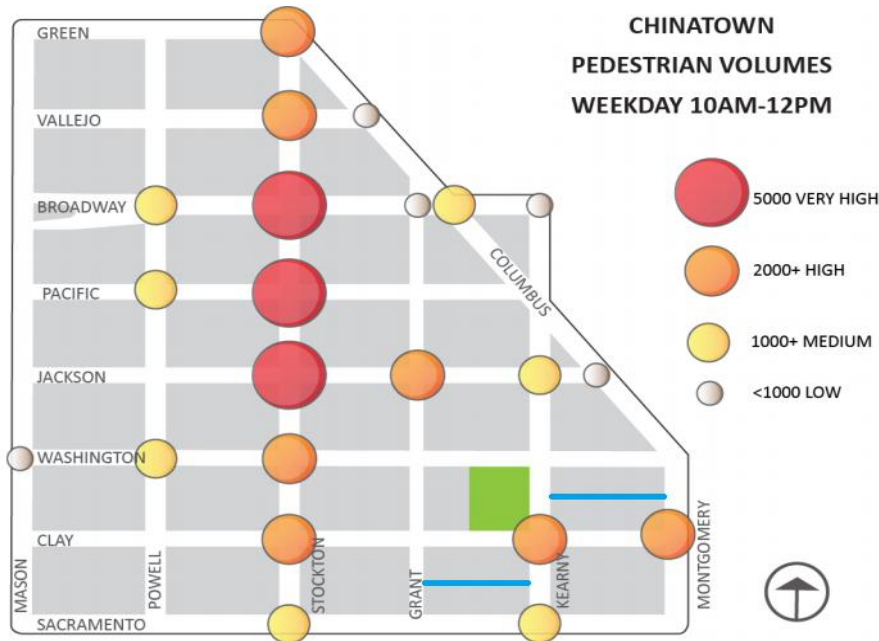


Hallway of SRO building
Photo By: Sandy Jiang

2. Pedestrian Safety:

According to SFMTA's TEP data shows that most passengers get off on Kearny and Clay, Kearny and Jackson, and Kearny and Columbus in the morning. The daily load for the Clay and Kearny intersection is 2,569 passengers, ranking the 4th most dangerous intersection according to CCDC's Chinatown Pedestrian Needs Assessment. This intersection consistently has a high volume of pedestrians (over 2000 per two hours) at peak use times (weekday 10AM-12PM and 3PM-5PM and weekend 10AM-12PM) In addition, through our observations, we noticed that the curbs between Merchant Alley and the Hilton (block between Clay/Kearny and Washington/Kearny) to be seriously used and ran over with apparent marks. We also find it important to note that a Chinese Education Center School is located along Merchant Alleyway. Moreover, Kearny is a major thoroughfare with high volumes of speeding traffic and where the critical 8x transit service runs, raises the importance of pedestrian safety. Therefore, one of our focuses is pedestrian safety, making Kearny a [Livable Neighborhood] for not only residents but also users and visitors of Kearny.

Weekday (Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday) from 10AM-Noon



Source: Chinatown CDC's "Chinatown Pedestrian Needs Assessment"



Highly used curbs
(Right) Photo By: Sandy Jiang
(Left) Photo By: Tracy Zh

3. Open Space & Public Art:

With Chinatown highly congested, open space is crucial and needed to meet the needs of the community. Along Kearny Street, the open space that exists includes the privately owned public open space (POPOS), Empire Park just located in Commercial Alleyway between Kearny Street and Montgomery Street as well as Portsmouth Square, one of the four playgrounds in Chinatown also known as "Chinatown's living room". After several observations, we decided to focus on Portsmouth Square as we found it to have the most potential to improve its open space.

Many users of Portsmouth Square come to this space to gather and socialize, to exercise, to catch some sun, and so much more. Even so, Portsmouth Square has people spilling out onto the sidewalks of the playground itself. On a Tuesday (July 10, 2012) morning, Portsmouth Square already has 160+ people

within a 30 minute time frame (9:30AM-10:00AM). With so many people utilizing the park, we find it crucial to have more seating.

We would also like to note the existence of the privately owned public open space (POPOS), located in Commercial Alleyway (between Kearny and Montgomery St.), Empire Park; a future study to look into.

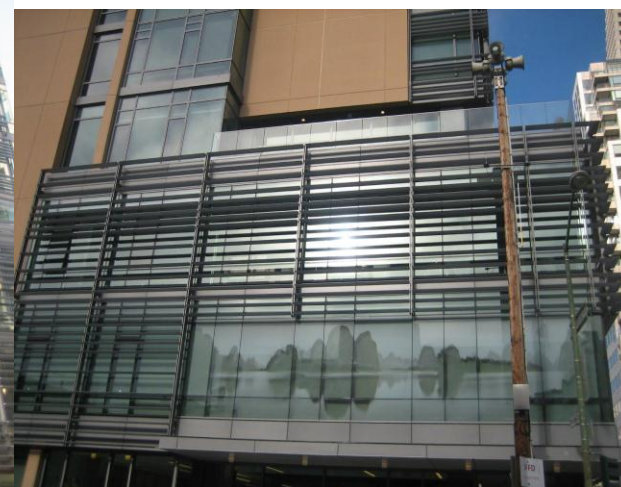


Picture of Portsmouth Square
Source: userwww.sfsu.edu
Photo By: Steve Bowles, 2006.



Overspill of people on Portsmouth Square
Photo By: Tracy Zhu

A second area of focus is the usage of public art. The usage of public art can help bring a sense of identity and culture to a neighborhood, such as Kearny Street. With Kearny Street on the edge of both Chinatown and the financial district, Kearny Street struggles to claim just that; its own sense of identity. Some of the existing public art includes the window art on the new building, City College of San Francisco (CCSF) and the mural above the International Hotel.





(Above) Window art (Below) I-Hotel mural

Photo By: Wendy Chen

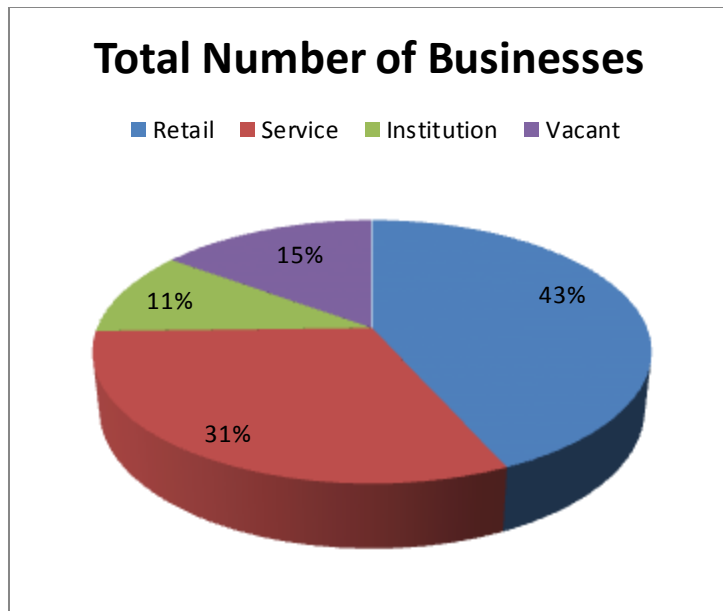
4. Transit

Another area of focus is the block right after Clay and Kearny intersection (location of Kearny and Clay bus stop) and Merchant Alleyway:

Many delivery trucks park for extended amounts of time in front of the bus stop making it difficult for buses to pull up to the bus stop. In addition, the alleyway next to the Hilton is usually filled with illegally parked cars on the right side of the alley. The issue is that it makes it difficult for cars to drive down that alleyway. It also makes it dangerous for the children whom use the sidewalk to attend the elementary school in the alley, with many of them spilling off the sidewalk. With the bus stop and loading zone in front of the intersection, along with the high amounts of traffic flowing through the Hilton driveway, right turn conditions on this intersection are very dangerous. During our field study, a commercial dishwashing vehicle was idle at the bus stop while eating lunch; the air pollution and unsafe unloading conditions for the bus created dangerous situations for the passengers.

5. Business Inventory:

Kearny's primary characteristic other than high traffic speeds is the fact that it is a commercial corridor. We took an inventory of businesses along our corridor and we broke businesses into 4 categories: retail, service, institutions and vacancies. We found that 15% of the businesses were vacant storefronts. Note: we did not count vacant businesses that were not storefronts.



* Interviews with Merchants

There are businesses that have been around for over 60 years like David's Food Store, ones that have been around for less than 2 years like Joy Hing restaurant which was relocated from Stockton due to the Central Subway displacement, and businesses anywhere in between. Examples of services include the SingTao newspaper, law firms, accountants, and acupuncturists; examples of institutions include Chinese Cultural Center, Manilatown Center, as well as the Chinatown One Stop Career Link. Most employees don't live in the neighborhood and commute from other SF neighborhoods, while there are some employees who walk from greater Chinatown.

* Strengths of Kearny Street Businesses

Merchants identified benefits of doing business on Kearny. While most employees commute into the neighborhood, they find public transportation or walking to Chinatown convenient. Some merchants commented that they had fair rent given the great location. Some businesses benefit from far reaching marketing and advertising, such as North Beach Hotel and House of Nanking, which is listed in the tourist guide book, Lonely Planet. Multiple merchants have mentioned the increased traffic and pedestrian safety over the years.

We observed and received anecdotal evidence from merchants that the businesses on the two blocks closest to North Beach neighborhood (Kearny between Columbus and Washington) receive a diversity of customers from Chinatown, visitors, tourists and business folks whereas businesses on the two blocks further south (Kearny from Washington to Sacramento) depend more on Financial District clientele.

* Challenges for Merchants

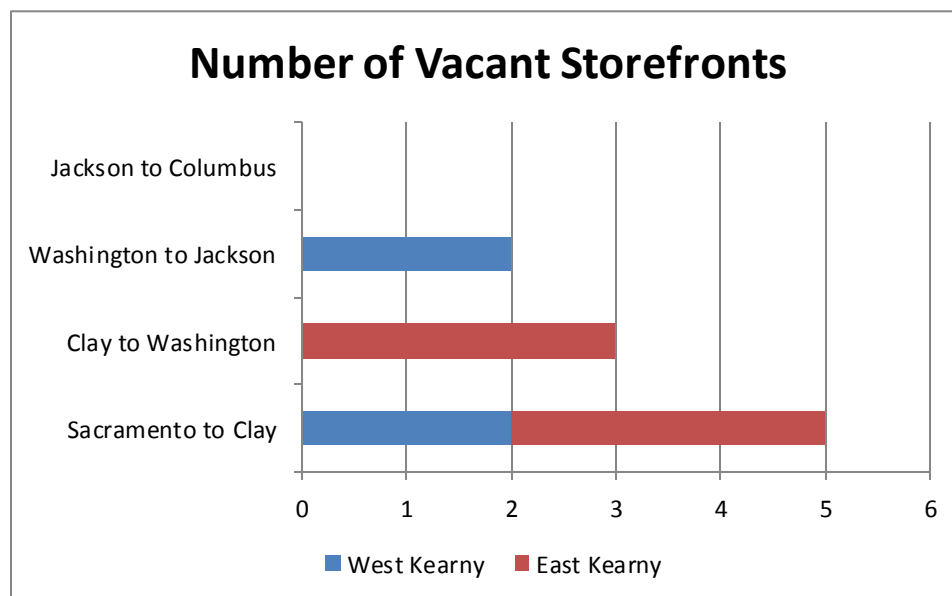
From talking to about 20 merchants in Cantonese and English over the course of a week in July, merchants identified these top four major challenges for economic success on Kearny:

- *Cleanliness* of streets
- Not enough or expensive *parking*
- Increasing rents that leads to *vacancies*
- *Lack of* business

Merchants cite that they hope to increase patronage from downtown business folks, tourists and the projected 5,000 CCSF students and 200 instructors. By attracting nightlife to Chinatown, diversifying businesses other than just food establishments, filling the vacant floors in the federal building on Kearny and Sacramento and developing Chinatown specific marketing, businesses believe more foot traffic will bring more business to the corridor.

*** Vacancies**

Among the focus group of Grassroots Leaders and merchants, vacancies were cited as an obvious challenge on Kearny St. The blocks on the graph are listed from north to south, with the northern blocks closer to Columbus and North Beach and the southern blocks closer to the heart of Financial District. There are eight out of the ten vacancies on the two southern blocks from Sacramento to Washington.



Small businesses are particularly vulnerable during a recession, and one merchant talked about the feeling that the City places a lot of restrictions on small businesses, such as the plastic bag ban. “It always seems like the City’s putting its hands into small businesses pockets,” says one business owner. A major challenge for the economic development on the Kearny corridor is encouraging new or existing businesses to settle into some of the vacancies in the face of rising rents, potentially prohibitive renovation costs of buildings with historic facades, and catering to a customer base of this transitional corridor between Chinatown and Financial District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Safety:

As we mentioned before, these corner curbs have to be fixed. We would like to propose the suggestion of implementing yellow ADA accessible curb ramps to replace the old ones. The yellow curb ramp will last for a longer period of time than the one with only red and yellow paints. We are also proposing a scramble system in the intersection of Clay and Kearny for the safety and convenience of pedestrians. We came to a conclusion to only implement one scramble system as to not mess with the flow of traffic for the whole corridor. Hopefully, the scramble system will benefit high volumes of pedestrians and passengers whiling solving some of its traffic problems.



Photo source: http://www.armor-tile.com/articles_docs4/Handicapped-Ramps-Curb-Ramps1.jpg



Photo source: http://sf.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01_15/grandpa_and_kid_2.jpg

2. Open Space & Public Art:

One of our suggested proposals is to replace the overgrowing bushes and trees that surround Portsmouth Square along the side of Kearny Street with amphitheater-like seating. The construction of this build-up would consist of cement and grass for low maintenance. Another design suggestion would be replacing the area with stone block seating. Doing so would increase space for people to sit, socialize, and so much more.



(Above) Overgrowing bushes/trees along Kearny St. of Portsmouth . Photo By: Tracy Zhu
(Below) Union Square. Photo By: Wendy Chen



(Above) Amphitheater from New York City's Highline Park.
(Below) Chinatown alley blocks. Photo By: Tracy Zhu

In addition, the lower portion of Portsmouth Square has wooden seating blocks that provide people the space to play Chinese checkers/chess. Our proposal is to improve the quality of open space by implementing Chinese checkers/chess set tables. Through our fieldwork in Portsmouth Square, we noticed that the wooden seating blocks had engraved outlines of a checker/chess set. Therefore, we found the need to implement these tables to help improve the quality of this open space, allowing it to be sustainable and lasting.

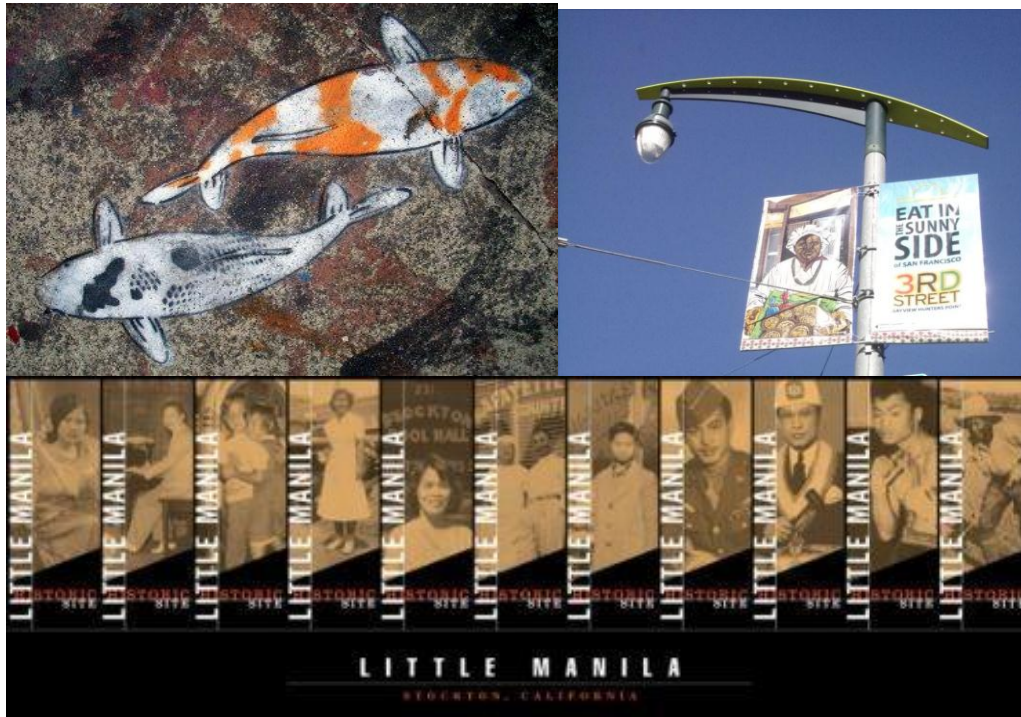


Photos By: Tracy Zhu



Photo Source: <http://thefridaycyclo-touriste.com>

Another proposal is to implement public art along the corridor block with the newly built schools such as St. Mary's school and CCSF, between Kearny and Washington to Kearny and Jackson. Such art suggestions include spray painting to stenciling along the pavement. Another suggestion would be implementing Manilla banners such as the ones in Stockton, to commemorate the historical significance of Kearny Street. Of course, all of this public art cannot be done without funding and permission as well as collaboration with the property owners, a future study to work on.



(Top left) Spray printed stencil art of koi fish. Photo by Tracy Zhu.

(Top right) Banners found on 3rd Street in Bayview. Source: Bayview Merchants Association.

(Bottom) Banners in Stockton, CA, commemorating Filipino figures from Little Manila Historic District. Source: Little Manila Foundation.

3. Transit:

One of our proposals for transit would be removing the commercial loading spot in front of the bus stop, to allow more room for buses to pull all the way up to the bus stop so they do not have to sit in the outer lane causing traffic to build up and making it harder to make right turns. We also recommend decreasing the width of the north side of Merchant, adding commercial parking all along the north side, and widening the south side of Merchant for pedestrian and children safety.



Merchant Alley
Photo By: Sandy Jiang

Also along the block of Kearny and Jackson, Block contains many new developments, CCSF, St. Mary's, as well as the I-hotel and commercial buildings. ALL the 8 lines (8, 8x, 8ax, and 8bx) stop at this bus stop.

- Counted 192 cars, 4 charter buses, and 1 muni bus from 10:40am-11:00am.
- Turn free parking in front of St. Mary's into a 5-10 minute loading zone or metered parking. We should not have free parking!
- Create a bulb out at the bus stop in front of I-Hotel.

Note on Bicycling on Kearny: According to the Pedestrian Safety Plan, the following Kearny intersections were ranked respectively relative to other Chinatown intersections in volume of bicyclists: Kearny and Sacramento (ranked 8), Kearny and Clay (ranked 7), and Kearny and Jackson (Ranked 10) on weekdays from 10am-12pm. During the weekend, volume drops, indicating that most bicyclists going down Kearny are morning work commuters.

Though the volume of bicyclists on Kearny doesn't justify adding a bicycle lane at the expense of transit and car volumes, we do recommend adding way finding bike symbols along the eastern (right) lanes or right turn lanes so that bicyclists have some guidance as to where to ride such that they won't get doored by parked cars or trucks.

4. Businesses

We were inspired by Chinatown CDC's articulation of its role in the neighborhood's economic development. A tenet of CCDC's "Role in Economic Development Strategy for Chinatown" by Cindy Wu and Vivian Chang asserts that "Chinatown's local economy should serve as a regional **cultural capital mecca** for Chinese and Asian-Americans and other visitors alike; its identity rooted in the history of the people and community-based, neighborhood-serving institutions. All economic development programs and strategies should serve to build community relationships, promote locally-owned retail, and support cultural institutions, all the while bringing more investment to the neighborhood."

A. Support Existing Businesses

The follow two strategies to strengthen existing businesses work towards CCDC's above vision.

i. Create a **Chinatown specific tour map** that would include anchor businesses.

- *Partners:* We heard that Chinese Cultural Center has had unfunded plans to create such a map, so we suggest that CCDC and other cultural organizations organize to perhaps apply for joint funding.
- *Ideas for distribution* include the Visitors' Bureau (the City's official guide for visitors), SF Tour Guide Guild (a professional development association for independent tour guide contractors), America's Cup official visitor's guide, and Sing Tao newspaper.
 - Currently, the Visitors' Bureau lists no Chinese restaurants in Chinatown as recommended places under "What to Eat," and no Chinatown or Chinese cultural center is listed under "What To Do > Museums and Performing Arts"
- *Issues* to consider defining criteria to identify "anchor businesses": who should be included and who won't be included? What will be a community informed process to identify such businesses?

ii. **Pilot a nighttime festival** that draw people to Chinatown near closing hours or early evening.

- Merchants and the focus group we talked to were *supportive* of bringing nightlife back to Chinatown, with Hong Kong as an example of ideal activities and qualities.
- *CCDC's 2011 Noodle fest and Art in Alleyways* are examples of past success in the neighborhood that can be a model for an evening festival that we recommend to run from 5 or 6pm to 9pm.
- Features from other successful events can provide ideas or partners, such as Kearny Street Workshop's Dumpling Wars or the Lower Polk/Haight Art Walk that draws visitors to the neighborhood during happy hours hoping to keep the visitors there into the evening.

B. Ease Parking Concerns

i. Conduct outreach and education for the existing program, Park and Ride

- *Partners:* Park and Ride is a project of CCDC, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Chinatown TRIP, SFMTA and Five Star Park, which offers all day weekend parking at Golden Gate Parking lot in the Financial District for only \$3.
- *Target audience:* Concentrate outreach efforts to SF residents who visit Chinatown often primarily through:
 - Chinatown institutions who draw regular visitors: Chinatown churches, Buddhist temple, Chinatown YMCA, Chinese Historical Society, NEMS, Chinese Hospital, Chinatown Community Convener
 - local blogs and newspapers of neighborhoods with large Chinese/Asian populations: Portola, District 10, Richmond, Sunset, Ingleside, Excelsior, Visitacion Valley, and other neighborhoods with large Chinese/Asian populations established tourism organizations, such as the Tour Guide Guild and Visitors' Bureau

6. Other Recommendations

Safety

- Initiate conversations with SRO building managers about improving safety at SROs in regards to doors left open
- Explore the possibility of installing more lighting in Commercial Alley

Art

- Explore installing more Art in Storefronts projects in vacant storefronts

Transit

- Initiate conversations with Portsmouth Square Parking garage regarding installing an audio alarm
- Submit request to SFMTA to convert non-metered parking in front of CCSF to loading zone
- Submit request to SFMTA to paint way-finding signs for bicycles on Kearny corridor

Policy

- Encourage Planning Department to update their zoning map regarding Kearny St.

AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

- Traffic/transit study after CCSF begin to host classes Research the physical building conditions of vacancies
- Needs assessment of types of businesses that local merchants and residents/visitors would like to see on Kearny that complements current businesses
- Research appropriateness and likelihood of use of parklets and seating areas on Kearny, such as the CCSF/St. Mary's block

CONCLUSION

Through our methodology and with the guidance of our values, we were able to make such recommendations of implementation. As aspiring planners, we all strive to have our own envisioning for the community. But we find that the best envision is the balance of all stakeholders, the actual people who interact in the community the most. But one thing is sure; we all strive for a sustainable community. We hope that through such implementations it will not only better the community but also be lasting for future generations to come.