

## Chinatown Tomorrow Planning Initiative: “Chinatown Teahouse” Launch Event Engagement Summary

Date of event: Saturday, November 25, 2:00-5:00pm



*Images of “Chinatown Teahouse”*

### Introduction

The project team hosted a project launch event at Chinatown Centre on Saturday, November 25, 2023, from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m.

- The event was hosted in the atrium space in the lower level of Chinatown Centre mall at 222 Spadina Avenue.
- The project team, including team members from the City of Toronto, ERA Architects, ThinkFresh Group, and Urban Minds, facilitated the event with the support of six Local Facilitators recruited from the Chinatown community.
- Over 100 visitors participate in various activities at the drop-in style event:
  - Share their perspectives on Chinatown with facilitators who were fluent in the following languages: English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Shanghainese, Vietnamese, and Spanish
  - Complete the online survey (available in English, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese)
  - Identify legacy businesses, family associations, and “hidden gems” in the Chinatown community on printed maps
  - Nominate themselves and/or others to participate in future Chinatown Advisory Roundtable meetings
  - Watch a City-produced video about the Chinatown Tomorrow Planning Initiative

*Chinatown Tomorrow Planning Initiative - “Chinatown Teahouse” Launch Event Engagement Summary, Submitted December 12, 2023*

- Light refreshments were purchased from local vendors and provided at the event
- Chinese calligraphy pens, calligraphy templates, and Chinese magazines were provided at tables for visitors waiting to speak to the facilitators
- Deputy Mayor Ausma Malik attended the event and spoke directly with the audience
- The demographics of the visitors varied widely; there was a mix of families, seniors, and youth, as well as a mix of community members, including Chinese-speaking residents, members of the Chinatown Community Land Trust, and local business owners.



*Images of "Chinatown Teahouse"*

## Methodology

### Facilitated Discussions

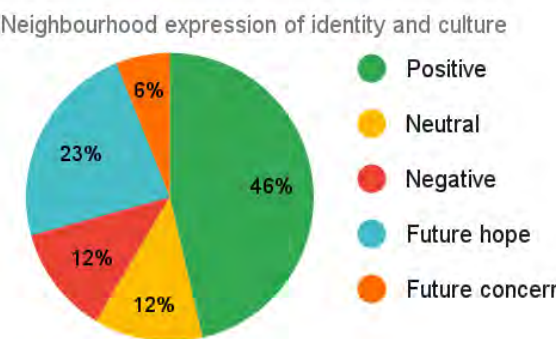
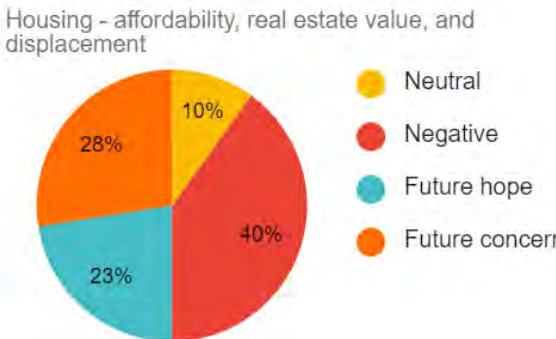
The project team and the Local Facilitators took notes on sticky notes during discussions with participants at the event. The sticky notes were then transcribed, and translated where necessary, and organized by themes.

### Online Survey

As of December 3, 2023, the online survey received a total of 104 complete responses. The project team analyzed all the responses and coded each comment by the issue it related to and the respondent’s sentiment (i.e. positive, neutral, negative, future hope, and future concern). Comments in Chinese were first translated into English before being coded.

## What We Heard

Key insights and select quotes from the facilitated discussions and online survey responses are summarized below based on 13 different issues, ranked by the number of comments related to each issue.

<p><b>1. Neighbourhood expression of identity and culture</b></p> <p>23% of the insights were related to perceptions of “Chinese-ness” of Chinatown, as well as the ways other cultures are expressed and experienced there</p>  <p>Neighbourhood expression of identity and culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive</li> <li>Neutral</li> <li>Negative</li> <li>Future hope</li> <li>Future concern</li> </ul> <p>Key insights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People really enjoy the Lunar New Year festivals and performances that celebrate Chinese culture</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. Housing - affordability, real estate value, and displacement</b></p> <p>11% of the insights were about residential real estate in Chinatown, including rent prices, land values, tenant/landlord relationships</p>  <p>Housing - affordability, real estate value, and displacement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neutral</li> <li>Negative</li> <li>Future hope</li> <li>Future concern</li> </ul> <p>Key insights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concern about speculative development and an increase in privatized space</li> </ul>
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- The Dragon was seen as an architectural icon representing the neighbourhood’s Chinese culture
- The neighbourhood also needs the ability to more strongly express the unique cultural identity of the community
- There is a sense that the neighbourhood is in a decline phase

Select quotes:

- “A place for people to understand this neighbourhood, and respect its cultural and historical values. City could do better to promote the image of Chinatown and turn it to a more welcome and public accessible place.”
- “I like that even over a long period of time, there’s a rich tapestry of local businesses that serve the community’s needs in a cultural context that’s familiar and approachable. I’ve also noticed that when my Chinese friends and family visit, they’re excited to see the legacy street signs with Chinese writing and I think continuing to embed Chinatown’s legacy in its infrastructure would be a great move.”
- “The place where Chinese people gather has a Chinese flavor. Chinatown is now depressed and has no bright spots”

- Need for more and to preserve existing affordable & community housing
- Preservation of buildings and businesses that have history or cultural heritage

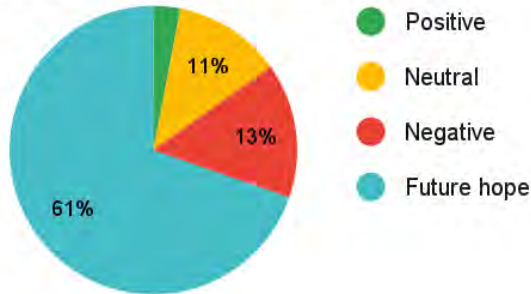
Select quotes:

- “Chinatown turns into a tourist spot instead of a livable world. It becomes more of a tourist spot that makes it difficult for seniors to find an affordable place to live in.”
- “I love Chinatown for its diversity, affordability, culture, and delicious foods. I feel sad that it is being gentrified and many who make the area great are being forced out by increasing rents, living expenses, and policing. Any new developments should absolutely forefront affordability, and new housing should be majority (if not completely) subsidized housing.”
- “Overall I think I feel a mix of hopeful about things and having found a community here in the last few years, I feel excited about the fact that there are activations like this and art and malls happening again. I’m worried about ongoing sustainability, lots of fears that I share about how long will be we able to stay here, how will we create vibrant community if we get priced out?”
- “What is missing from Chinatown is preserving its residents. Chinatown must mean preserving the people that live here.”

### 3. Business - survival and succession

11% of the insights were about business turnover, comparison of past, present, future types of businesses and who owns/runs them

Business - survival and succession



#### Key insights:

- Chinatown has a good variety of shops and services
- Need to protect Asian small businesses and affordable retail and services
- Need to maintain the mix of businesses for future survival of the neighbourhood

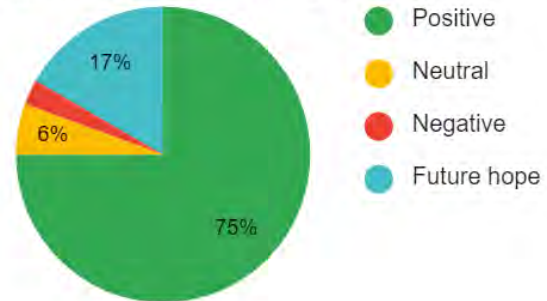
#### Select quotes:

- “Definitely preserve the grocery stores and mom and pop shops. Some have closed down over the COVID lockdowns, so it'd be great if we can preserve the existing ones.”
- “Future hope: Current businesses and residents don't get pushed out due to high rent and condo development”
- “Support for community members and business owners to revitalize the community through decision making with all members of the Chinatown community.”

### 4. Neighbourhood sense of belonging and inclusion

10% of the insights were about who feels like they belong and do not belong based on their language, culture, immigration status, class, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality, etc.

Neighbourhood sense of belonging and inclusion



#### Key insights:

- The neighbourhood's Chinese culture creates a feeling of familiarity for the local Asian community and recent Chinese immigrants, who find the area to be a space for self-determination.
- Appreciation of the neighborhood's history of resilience and mutual aid

#### Select quotes:

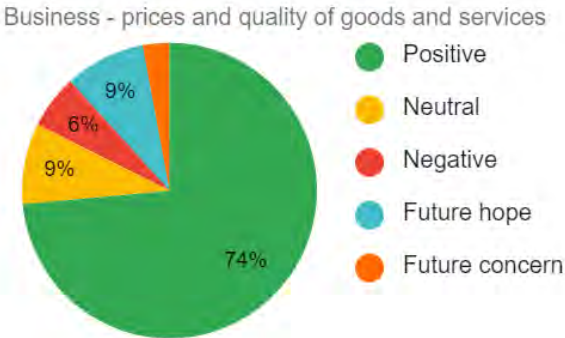
- “Chinatown is essential for people who don't speak English well as we can do 90% of essential daily activities here, e.g. grocery shopping, banking, restaurants, postal office, traditional Chinese medicine/herbs, etc. We feel comfortable here.”
- “Safe and comforting; people can find community here against all odds; veggie granny (street vendor); good community; affordable and culturally appropriate food”
- “The resilience and ingenuity of the residents in continuing to provide spaces that are accessible and culturally responsive to the

community. Preserve affordability to allow these residents to continue making Chinatown what it is.”

- “A place that holds old memories; memories of belonging and eating and buying delicious food with friends and family.”

**5. Business - prices and quality of goods and services**

10% of the insights were about how much things cost in Chinatown (excluding housing/rent) and their quality/value to customers



**Key insights:**

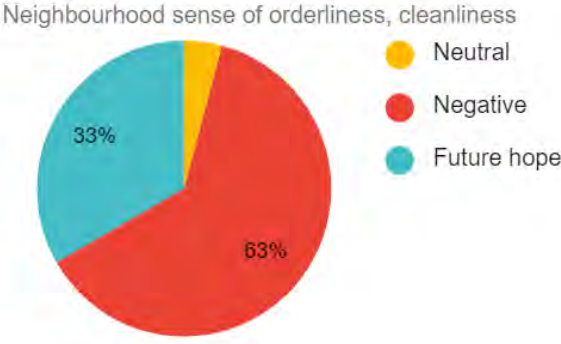
- The neighbourhood is intergenerational and affordable
- Food (supermarkets and restaurants) is one of the areas where affordability is felt the most
- A good variety of shops and services
- Desire for some “higher end” businesses

**Select quotes:**

- “Concentration of Chinese food is good. I can always find what I want to eat. The cheap grocery stores should be preserved.”
- “Preserve cheap food and grocery”
- “Unique features: Convenient to buy things, and very complete”

**6. Neighbourhood sense of orderliness, cleanliness**

7% of the insights were related to cleanliness, order, and hygiene



**Key insights:**

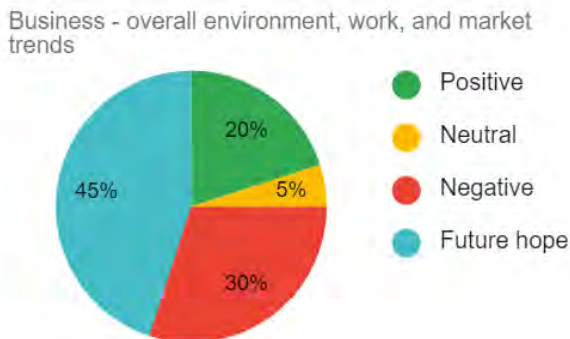
- A feeling of “decline” of the neighbourhood
- A perception that Chinatown is untidy and unclean
- A lack of new development, with existing infrastructure considered “old-fashioned”

**Select quotes:**

- “A little run down, dirty congested”
- “I think the malls are in a dire state of disrepair compared to some of the modern establishments.”
- “Future expectations: cleaner and sanitary services”

## 7. Business - overall environment, work, and market trends

6% of the insights were about the overall market for goods and services in Chinatown/Toronto, workforce/labor, policy environment (e.g. licensing, minimum wage laws, government supports/restrictions)



### Key insights:

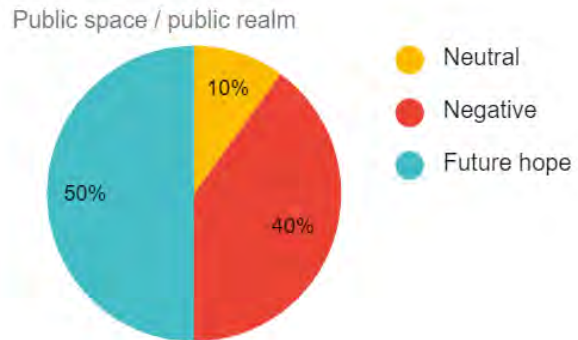
- Desire for new development in the community and revitalization
- Hope that affordability can stay
- Convenient location and very accessible

### Select quotes:

- “Toronto Chinatown is the best of the entire Canada. Close proximity to the UofT, over 90,000 students”
- “Integrate the development with neighbouring areas (e.g. The Well), can preserve the character of the Chinatown so people would travel here just because of Chinatown.”
- “I hope it will develop into a place where people can enjoy shopping and sightseeing.”

## 8. Public space / public realm

6% of the insights were related to plazas, public art, street furniture, public assets (e.g. parks), public events/festivals, look and feel of Chinatown



### Key insights:

- People enjoy the places for gathering, including green spaces, places of worship, and spaces for cultural activities such as lion dances, kung fu, and live music
- Yet at the same time, it is not enough - there is also a sentiment that Chinatown needs more public space and more places to gather, and critically, this should be public, freely accessible and not private
- Also perceived to be missing are community arts spaces, public art, and murals

### Select quotes:

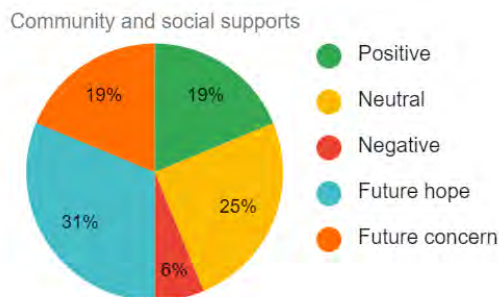
- “There needs to be more community events. What happened to Dragon City Centre? It’s a big opportunity space in the central location, but mostly abandoned. Similarly to how people can play chess in parks in NYC, where are communal spaces for elders to hang out and drink tea/play mahjong and similar activities? It’s like they’re relegated to places like Tim Hortons because they have needs for

community, but a place like Tim Hortons is a makeshift solution. Chinatown overall feels neglected in celebrating our culture - it's just "there".

- "Future hope: Public art; events (community group cleaning); be proud and be responsible to the neighbourhood; accountability; free and welcoming public space; culturally appropriate"

### 9. (tied) Community and social supports

5% of the insights were related to public, nonprofit, and community groups that serve the community (religious and family organisations, community centres, shelters, etc.)

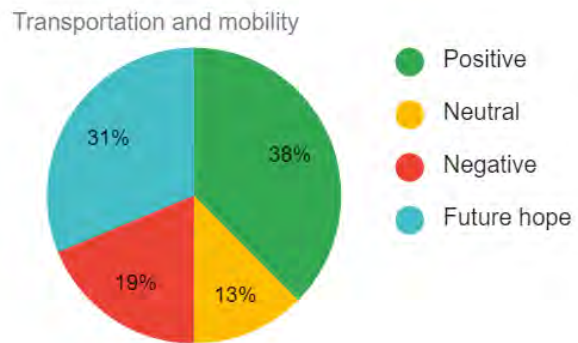


#### Key insights:

- Many good supports and institutions already in the community - libraries, community centres and cultural centres
- There was a sense that what is needed is more community centre spaces offering community services and programming in Chinese, particularly for Chinatown workers and recent immigrants, such as English language lessons
- Also a desire to protect the services and supports that already exist

### 9. (tied) Transportation and mobility

5% of the insights were related to traffic, traffic safety, public transit, parking, and overall mobility.



#### Key insights:

- Improved transportation and streetscape, with larger sidewalks, better bike lanes and traffic priority for streetcars
- General affinity for the Spadina streetcar
- Needing more parking

#### Select quotes:

- "510 is really good. 505 does not work as well as the 510."
- "Ban all traffic crossing Dundas and Spadina. Ban all left turns on Spadina. Those intersections are terrible."



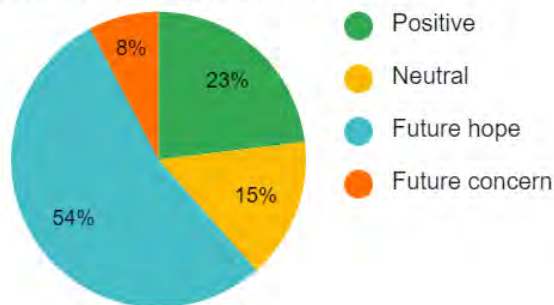
Select quotes:

- “Chinatown has been my home and a place for me to bring friends to my whole life. I wasn’t always proud of being Chinese-Canadian and in my younger years had rejected that identity. What I think is missing for me is more access to multi-generational programming and access to language exchange classes. I think there is a lot of potential for youth to help the elders and for the elders to pass on traditions that will be lost if they aren’t taught. “
- “Establish more institutions to help Chinese translate laws and find jobs in all aspects”
- “Cultural centres and family centres are to be preserved, more communication about these centres”

### 11. Business - buildings, built form

4% of the insights were related to commercial properties’ building formats, architecture, conditions, zoning, etc.

Business - buildings, built form



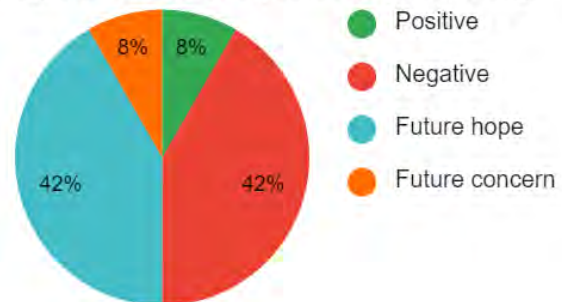
Key insights:

- Desire for preservation of buildings and businesses that have history or cultural heritage
- Mall improvements, such as a revived food court, and providing under-utilized mall spaces for use as community space.

### 12. Neighbourhood sense of public safety and policing

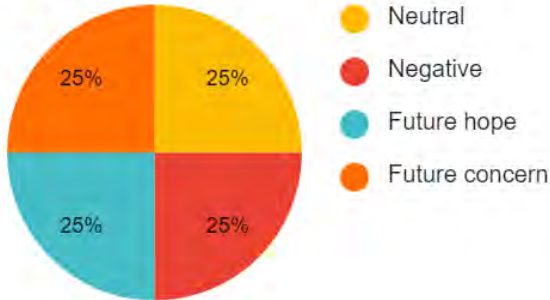
3% of the insights were related to crime, police presence

Neighbourhood sense of public safety and policing



Key insights:

- Safety concerns from subsidized housing with an increase in vulnerable populations and homeless individuals living in the neighbourhood
- Desire for more security against criminal activity
- Prevent the policing of marginalized

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of new development, with existing infrastructure considered “old-fashioned”</li> </ul> <p>Select quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “More space for various businesses from various regions of China to thrive. More street life, food stalls, markets”</li> <li>• “Lack of unified management and operation design, it is recommended that Chinatown adopt a holistic view of branding and have a systematic management”</li> </ul>	<p>groups like the street vendors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved safety features, such as streetlights, “buildings where people feel safe”, and community-based police</li> </ul> <p>Select quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Not as safe as it was before”</li> <li>• “Security needs to be improved to prevent violence against pedestrians”</li> <li>• “Future hope: Street vendors allowed to stay and not be persecuted. No police surveillance.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>13. Housing - buildings, built form</b></p> <p>1% of the insights were related to residential properties’ building formats, architecture, conditions, zoning, etc.</p> <p>Housing - buildings, built form</p>  <p>Key insights:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desire for preservation of heritage buildings</li> <li>• Desire for older housing to be maintained well</li> </ul> <p>Select quotes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Several properties, including one at the corner of Baldwin and Spadina, and another two on Grange Avenue, lay empty and neglected. There are several places like this in Chinatown. They should be expropriated by the</li> </ul>	

- city and housing should be built.”
- “I do have long-term concerns about the buildings along the main street because they're made of brick. They can't be maintained forever and I'm concerned if one day this entire stretch might be deemed no longer up to code and torn down entirely and we lose an entire section of Chinatown culture because Toronto loves condo.”

## Conclusion

Overall, the community members we heard from via the facilitated discussions and the online survey were very engaged and passionate about the future of Chinatown. Based on their input, we have identified its current strengths and weaknesses, as well as future opportunities and threats.

### Strengths

Most of the respondents felt that the Chinatown neighbourhood's strong cultural identity and community organizations have created a sense of belonging and inclusion for generations of local Asian Canadians and newcomers. They appreciated the diverse and affordable offerings of Chinatown's retail businesses, the cultural festivals and events, as well as the accessible location and walkability of Chinatown.

### Weaknesses

Some respondents identified a general feeling of decline in the neighbourhood. Some were dissatisfied with the levels of cleanliness and safety of the area, while others cited aging infrastructure and buildings, limited parking, and a lack of age-friendly public gathering spaces as issues to be addressed.

### Opportunities

There were many suggestions related to the expression and preservation of the community's unique cultural identity, such as through public art, community art spaces, community archives, and a digital multilingual library. Some respondents also identified the need for more community services and programming, particularly for Chinatown workers and recent immigrants.

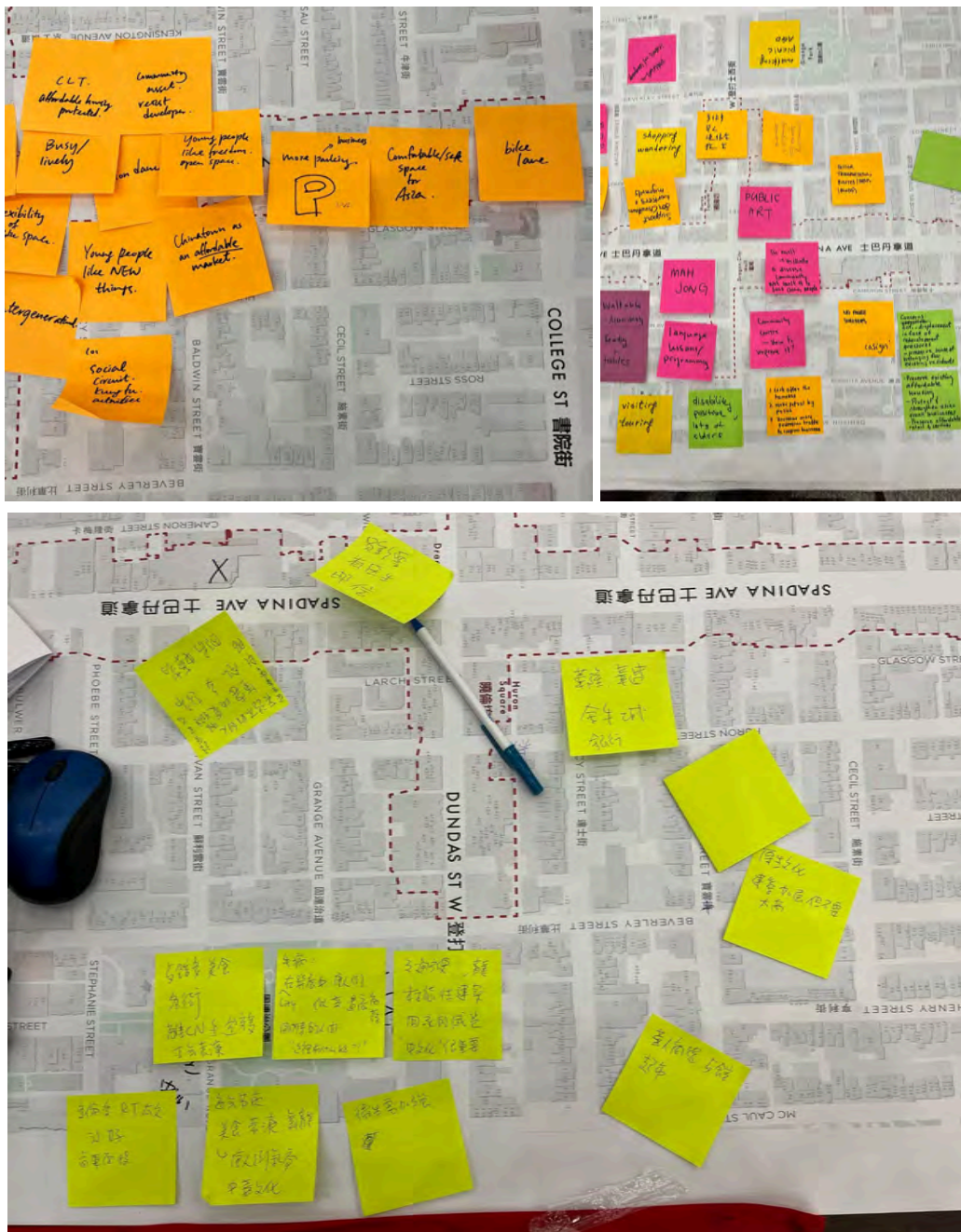
### Threats

Many respondents expressed concern about the speculative development and gentrification, which would threaten the preservation of affordable housing and culturally significant buildings and businesses. Yet, others felt that the neighbourhood lacked new development and investments and would risk falling into further disrepair and irrelevance.

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## Next Steps

The input from the Chinatown Teahouse launch event has informed the project team's understanding of key issues and audiences within the Chinatown community. These insights will be considered in the development of the forthcoming public engagement events, particularly the Chinatown Advisory Roundtable meetings and walking tours.



Images of sticky notes from the facilitated discussions at the "Chinatown Teahouse" event