

CHINATOWN AND THE LOWER EAST SIDE COMMUNITY PLAN

Hunter College, Department of Urban Affairs & Planning

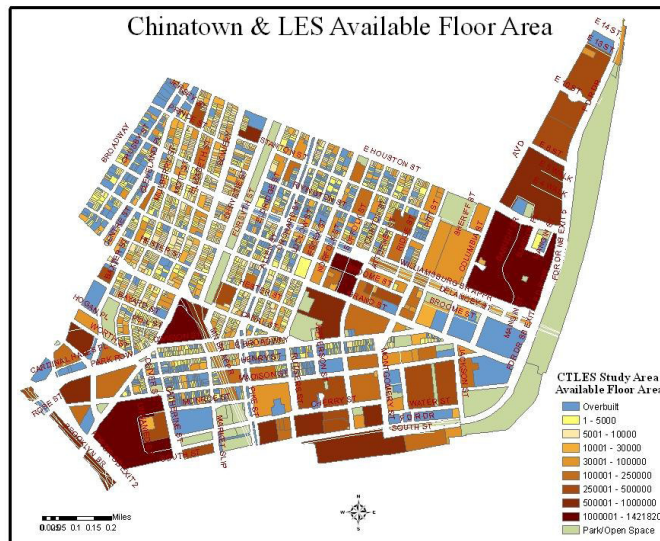
During the 2008-2009 academic year, Hunter College’s Department of Urban Affairs and Planning engaged in a studio project with the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side (“the Coalition”). This project resulted in two reports—Part I: Background Conditions and Part II: Strategic Choices. In this second part, the studio team summarizes key issues facing the Chinatown/Lower East Side Community (CTLES) and offers potential strategies for their resolution.

The studio focused on such issues as housing, economic development, zoning, environment and infrastructure, and community investment. Below are excerpts of the studio’s description of some of these key issues and its recommendations.

1. Housing

Given heightened development pressures with the recent East Village/Lower East Side rezoning and NYCHA’s budget woes, the low-income working class residents within Chinatown and the Lower East Side require policy prescriptions that will aim to ensure their tenure will remain in light of the vast changes affecting their communities.

The following is a map of the study area which illustrates the current development potential of each parcel within Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Blue parcels indicate no potential for as-of-right increases in development density. All other parcels illustrate some potential for increased development as-of-right; the darker colored parcels have more available FAR. In all, 75% of the parcels in the CT/LES area are currently built to less than the available FAR, representing more than 20 million square feet of development potential given existing zoning.



Hunter College Studio recommendations include:

- [T]he Coalition can focus on cataloging existing rent stabilized buildings in an effort to guarantee all buildings which fit the rent stabilized criteria are registered with DHCR. Using the existing listing of rent stabilized buildings provided by DHCR as a basis, this effort would result in an accurate inventory and even more valuable, provide recourse for addressing buildings which fit the rent regulated criteria but are not currently on the list. Having a verified listing of such building will also ensure any future policies directed towards rent stabilized buildings will encompass all eligible properties.
- As a supplement to the recently upheld tenant harassment law, which provides renters with legal recourse in the case of threats or intimidation, the city should implement a system to allow renters to withhold rent should essential repairs not be made. This will also allow renters to challenge unlawful harassment. One example of such a system is that managed by the City of Los Angeles, which provides residents living in buildings that are not compliant with existing building codes the opportunity to place their monthly rent into an escrow account.

2. Economic Development

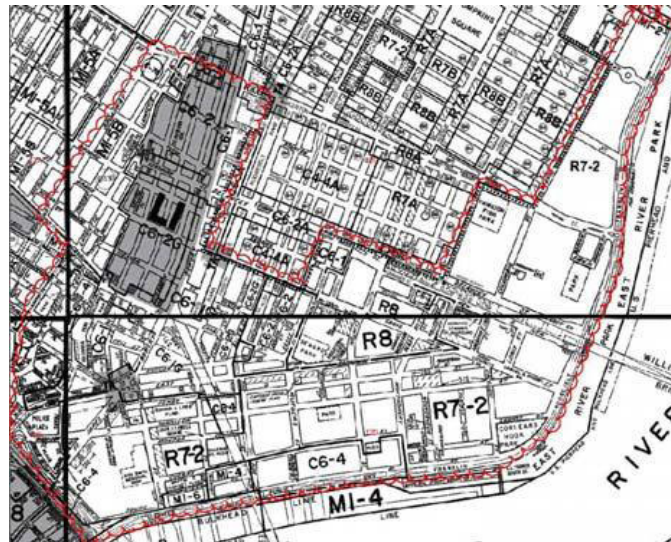
In the past several decades, real estate developers and investors have seen Chinatown and Lower East Side (CTLES) as a potential area for luxury hotels and condominiums and for high-end trendy businesses. This is effectively pushing out long-term residents and local and ethnic-owned businesses to make way for those who can pay higher rents.

Hunter College Studio recommendations include:

- Commercial rent control or rent stabilization is a more controversial, but potentially more effective, idea for stemming displacement of small, local ethnic businesses. New York City had a form of commercial rent control that started in the 1940s as part of the wartime price controls.

3. Zoning

[T]o prevent the threat of out-of-scale development from taking place in the CT/LES study area a rezoning proposal should be promulgated to address the height factor zoning districts that remain in Community Board 3 that were not rezoned as part of the EV/LES rezoning. The zoning map below shows the CT/LES study area that was excluded from the EV/LES rezoning outlined in red.



Hunter College Studio recommendations include:

- NYCHA has been operating under severe financial constraints for years. There is speculation that they may privatize their developments, or portions thereof, in order to raise revenue. . . . While many recognize that NYCHA needs to raise revenue to effectively maintain and manage the public housing development they are in charge of . . . any remaining floor area or development opportunities that stem from NYCHA properties should be used to develop either more public housing or some sort of affordable housing. We believe that a mechanism should be provided to allow NYCHA to profit from those development rights in a manner that continues to protect the status of existing public housing on NYCHA sites and ensures that any development resulting from sale of such unused rights results in future construction of low income and affordable housing.
- As it stands the average CT/LES resident could not afford affordable housing units that are affordable to households earning 80% the Area Median Income. Modifying the Inclusionary Housing regulations so that the Area Median Income is reflective of the local median income rather than that of the Metropolitan Statistical Area would serve to ensure that more of the local CT/LES residents could afford lower-income housing units produced through the Inclusionary Housing program than current standards allow.