Chinatown in Boston, MA: Rising land values and demographic change

Background

Chinatown in Boston is the only remaining Chinatown neighborhood in all of New England. While home to thousands of residents, the future of this neighborhood is increasingly uncertain. Several hospitals, academic institutions, and high rises have been built and expanded in recent decades, placing pressure on the community, which has a vulnerable population to displacement, with 24% of the population below the poverty level.1

Proportion of Asian Residents in Boston Neighborhoods, 2010

As the overall population in Boston has increased in the last decade, Boston’s Chinatown has seen its share of Asian residents drop sharply—from 70% in 1990 to 46% in 2010.1,3

Still, Chinatown continues to be home for the largest proportion of Asian residents per unit area (see map on left). The research undertaken by this poster will build a spatial understanding of the ways in which land values and racial composition have changed in the neighborhood since the turn of the 21st century. In demonstrating these shifts and analyzing land value change, this research will equip advocates and community pressures and shifts over time.

Methodology

The conceptual model illustrated by these maps aims to understand population change and rising land value.

Change in land values over time.

This research compares land values per square foot between 1999—2014. To contextualize this rate of change, this poster contrasts land values per square foot with the South End. Data were collected from the City of Boston from 2014 and the Harvard Geospatial Library from 1999 parcel data, used as the baseline upon which change is measured.

These data were transformed with a zip code constraint, and selected by Land Units that were residential, thereby eliminating other uses for land, such as commercial, for which values may increase at different rates. Value per square foot was calculated using the square footage of the parcel and the land value of each building.

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Demographic change, 2000-2010

Mapping demographic change using Census data (see right) helps us to understand the increases in population of different neighborhoods. Overall, the population of Boston increased by 28,453 during this decade, of which the Asian population grew by approximately 24.7% citywide.5 We can see that Chinatown is increasing at a rate below this average, while other neighborhoods are seeing larger areas of growth. In Chinatown, the White growth rate is significantly higher than the Asian growth rate.

Using these data, community advocates may be able to better understand the ways in which the composition of Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods is changing, and how rising land values may come into play. This foundation may help policymakers to consider mechanisms that can protect the community from displacement, such as community land trusts, mixed income development requirements, increased affordable housing and other protective measures.

Future Analyses and Data Critiques

Zip codes: The land area of Chinatown uses the 02111 zip code (see methods section). However, neighborhood boundaries can be nebulous, and this analytical framework may not fully capture the entirety of each neighborhood. Further, in each neighborhood, property values may vary, and aggregation loses granular details.

Aggregation of Asian residents into one category: Census data offer a nuanced breakdown of Asian residents’ racial background, and Chinatown houses a diversity of Asian residents. However, most City of Boston analyses aggregate into broad racial categories to understand general trends. Still, the data become less nuanced when residents’ specific backgrounds are not identified.

Precision: The data that I am modeling for the US Census are imprecise, as they model by zip code rather than census block. It is helpful to compare neighborhoods, however it doesn’t give specifics to what is happening within each neighborhood, at a coarse scale of analysis. The granularity of the parcel data is quite detailed—values are available by parcel, which enables the viewer to look at individual parcel values for land within each neighborhood.

Contrasting neighborhoods

Chinatown is a distinct neighborhood because of its high percentage of poverty. Though contrasting with the South End is helpful to note the virtually identical rate of increase per square foot, it is important to note that these areas and populations are very different.

Sources