Background

Chinatown is a historically working-class immigrant neighborhood located in downtown Boston, and serves as an important cultural, social and economic hub for Chinese and other Asian communities in the Greater Boston Area. Chinatown’s population is 60-70% Chinese with 5% foreign born, and 95% renter occupied. Although the housing market in Chinatown has historically been affordable to the very low-income residents, Chinatown has been transformed by the encroachment of luxury housing developments into the neighborhood in the last two decades. Since 1990, the city has prioritized private development interests at the expense of Chinatown’s community needs. While 58% of Chinatown’s long-time Chinese and other Asian residents make less than $25,000 a year and 26% live below the poverty line, the Zoning Board and Boston Redevelopment Authority approved 2,462 luxury housing units in 2000, which represented 84% of housing units built in Chinatown in this period. These developments have decreased the stock of affordable housing in the community, and created drastic increases to average rents in the neighborhood that are no longer affordable to long-term residents. Chinatown is now facing a crisis in displacement of very low-income Chinese residents who have long called Chinatown home, who shape the community’s very character, and who rely on the important social services, jobs, community networks and organizations that Chinatown provides.

Methods

To represent the housing crisis in Chinatown, two different types of maps were made, using a geocoding (a GIS technique that uses addresses and zip codes of each data point created in an excel— and finding their geographic coordinates in ArcGIS from a US Census street address spatial reference data for Suffolk County). The first type of map is a series of time snapshots of affordable housing and luxury developments. I had an excel sheet from the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) with all designated luxury development projects in Chinatown. These developments are all on a majority high affordable designation for those making 120% of Boston Area Median Income) or market (designated affordable for those making 100% of Boston AMI; 100% Boston AMI is $68,950, is substantially higher than the Chinatown average income, which is less than $25,000) with some moderate affordable (80% AMI). Some luxury projects have units designated as Low-Income Affordable (60% AMI and/or Low-Income Family or Elder). The affordable units are represented separately on the affordable housing development maps. Affordable housing developments are all projects that are designated affordable, and this data was taken from the 2014 Chinatown Housing Inventory, an official City of Boston inventory acquired from CPA. These have all or majority units designated for those making 60% of AMI and/or designated Low-Income Family or Elder.

The objective of these time snapshots is to spatially understand the housing development trends in Chinatown. Since affordable housing developments start in the 1960s and the luxury developments don’t start until 1994, a first map was made with affordable developments from 1960-1994, separated into three decades on one map. Starting in 1994 there were no major housing developments between 1990-1994, I changed the maps to 5 year time frames of both affordable and luxury developments during those times. The second type of map is of Chinatown today, with all existing luxury and affordable developments, a small portion of private properties designated as condominiums/otherwise known to be market rate rentals, some known eviction sites (where tenants in the building were evicted or otherwise displaced all at once in order for the units to be converted into market rate rentals; evictions led to displacement of low-income Chinese residents who were usually unable to relocate to other places in Chinatown), and some community assets in Chinatown’s northern half that are now considered hazardous due to severe gentrification, and immediate efforts should be supported by the City of Boston to preserve the affordability of this area (by supporting efforts to preserve the private properties in this area, where low-income residents are most at risk of displacement, as permanently affordable), as well as stabilize the developments in Chinatown as a whole.

The Crisis of Aggressive Gentrification in Boston Chinatown
Affordability Crisis, Displacement, and Disappearance of a Historic Neighborhood

Results and Limitations

Mapping results clearly show the change in housing trend since the 1990s of substantial decreases in affordable housing developments and rapid luxury housing developments. Along with the increase in private properties designating market rate or market rate rental units, the majority of housing in Chinatown is no longer affordable to low-income Chinese residents. Although not all community assets and eviction sites are mapped, we can conclude from the Community Snapshot Today that Chinatown north of Kneeland Street is severely gentrified. While most of the community assets and affordable housing developments are concentrated south of Kneeland, we can also see a luxury development, several market rate rentals and eviction sites as well. This area of Chinatown should be considered highly at risk of severe gentrification, and immediate efforts should be supported by the City of Boston to preserve the affordability of this area (by supporting efforts to preserve the private properties in this area, where low-income residents are most at risk of displacement, as permanently affordable), as well as stabilize the developments in Chinatown as a whole.

Only a small portion of the data for eviction sites and private properties that underwent condo/ conversions/ currently market rate rentals were available for this project. Data for both evictions and displacement and market rate rentals are difficult to gather; often times tenants are evicted or displaced from a building and there is no way of knowing unless the tenants go to an advocacy group (such as CPA, which keeps track of eviction cases) or file lawsuits in court (and even then, someone has to go through court case files and dig up all the eviction cases in Chinatown). Market rate rentals can be found on Zillow and Trulia, but it’s unclear if those are the definitive market rate rentals in Chinatown. Another piece missing is data on when the affordability agreements expire on each of the designated affordable developments. There were also some issues geocoding (where some addresses couldn’t be matched and I had to use another address nearby) and the geocoded points don’t match up (although this is very minor) to the basemap (which does not contain the original street lines and neighborhood polygon data used to geocode) so the data points should not be used to find exact locations.

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