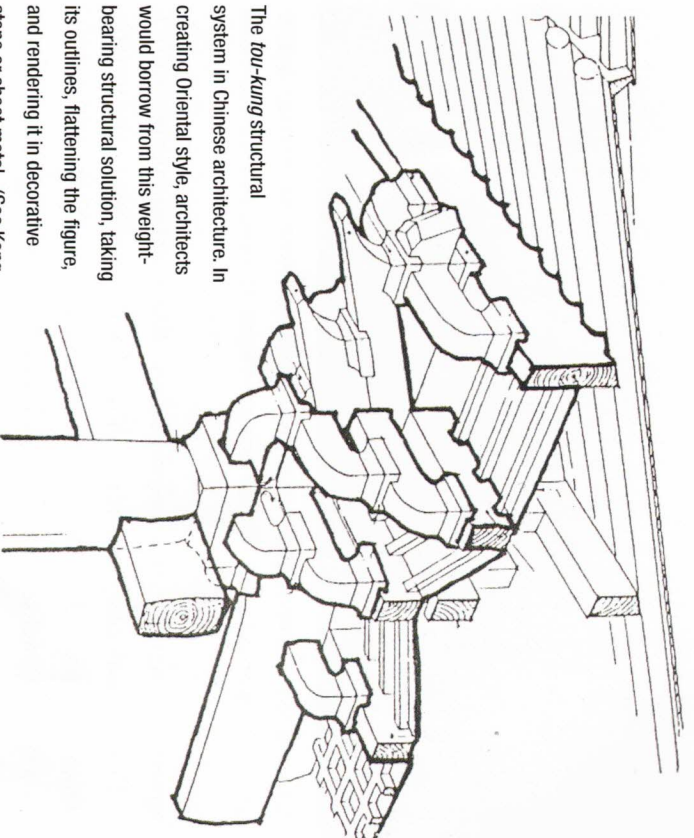


THE NEW CHINATOWN SKYLINE

IT WAS NOT UNTIL AFTER THE 1906 earthquake that the present-day Chinatown skyline took shape, and then this was not by accident but by design.¹⁰ It was a tactical response to the constant threat of removal and annihilation of Chinatown by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and other anti-Chinese forces.

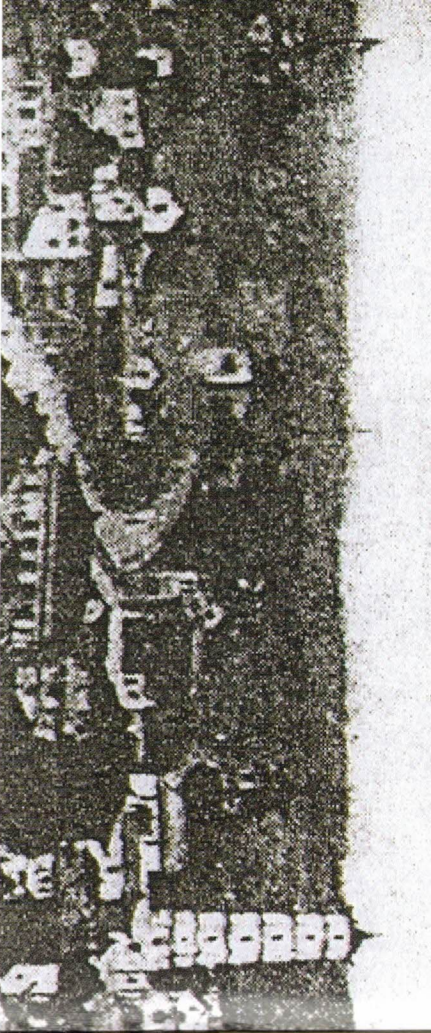
From time to time the Chinese presence in California met with general resentment. In San Francisco during the Civil War years, the expansion of Chinatown corresponded with Chinese merchants' expansion into light industry—they soon dominated the sewing industries and the manufacturing of cigars, shoes, boots, and slippers. The labor union movement targeted the Chinese as the tools of the capitalists and the competitors of white labor. The adoption of the second state constitution in 1879, which incorporated Article XIX, Section 4, gave power to the incorporated cities and towns of the state to remove the Chinese from their cities. Communities of the West Coast underwent a wave of anti-Chinese activity, with San Francisco taking the lead.

In the municipal report of 1885 the San Francisco Board of Supervisors documented justification for the removal of Chinatown. A special committee was appointed to investigate and report on those conditions of the Chinese quarters that were injurious to the public health or public morals.¹¹ The committee reported on Chinese idolatry, gambling and opium dens, labor competition,



The *tou-kung* structural system in Chinese architecture. In creating Oriental style, architects would borrow from this weight-bearing structural solution, taking its outlines, flattening the figure, and rendering it in decorative stone or sheet metal. (See Kong Chow Temple photo page 22).

and violations of sanitary, housing, and fire ordinances. Other topics covered included relationships within families and between the sexes. The report's findings were that sexual relations among the Chinese provided for the gratification of the animal proclivities and that the presence of Chinese women had given (white) boys an opportunity to gratify themselves at very slight cost. The report continued on with the discovery that white prostitutes were patronized almost entirely by the Chinese and that there were numerous instances of white women cohabitating with "Chinamen."¹² The report recommended that city agencies not relax any effort in securing from Congress additional legislation to put a stop to Chinese immigration and to deal rigorously with these Asian people so as to drive them to other states.¹³ When this failed in 1900, San Francisco's board of health alarmed the public by announcing the existence of the bubonic

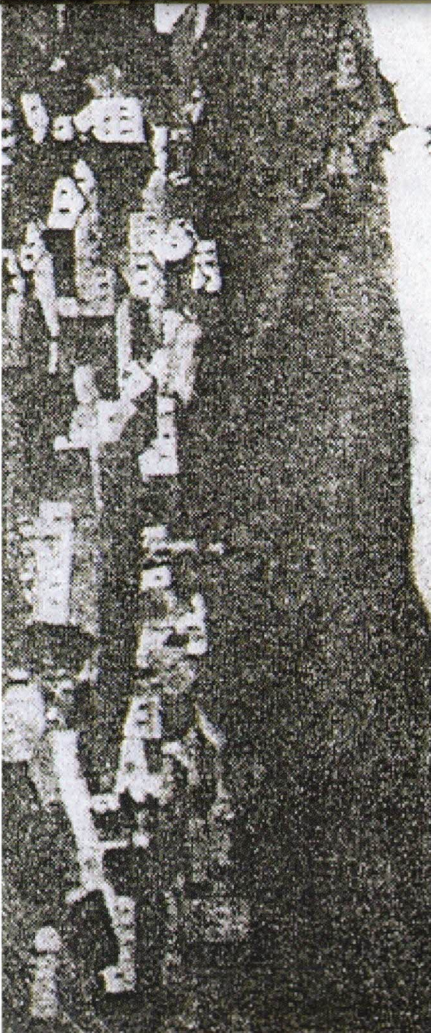


"SAN FRANCISCO MAY BE FREED FROM THE STANDING MENACE OF CHINATOWN. Plans Have Been Arranged, and a Corporation Formed to Turn the Chinese Quarter into a Business Section, and Build a New

plague in Chinatown. The board of supervisors attempted to snuff out Chinatown's economic life by imposing quarantine on the whole district. On May 29, 1900, Chinatown was roped off and 159 policemen were assigned to prevent the Chinese from leaving Chinatown.¹⁴ The Chinese filed suit against the board of health; Judge Morrow, upon declaring the quarantine illegal, wrote in his opinion that there was no plague in San Francisco and never had been.¹⁵

Various plans to turn the site of Chinatown into a park or a business district were proposed by outside interests. In 1905, the United States Improvement and Investment Company put forward its own proposal to demolish Chinatown. Company spokesman John Partridge boasted that "the City would be relieved of the continual menace of contagious disease and quarantine of the worst contagion of low moral standards ... at the same time Chinese inhabitants would be given an entirely new district ... built in an oriental city ... on the bayshore."¹⁶ The Chinese were to live in an environment complete with their own sewage plant, electrical plants, hospital, street railways, theaters, and schools, neatly contained for tourists to see, like animals in a zoo (see figure this page).

Immediately after the 1906 earthquake, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors appointed a subcommittee to study the relocation of Chinatown. On April 23, 1906, the committee announced that



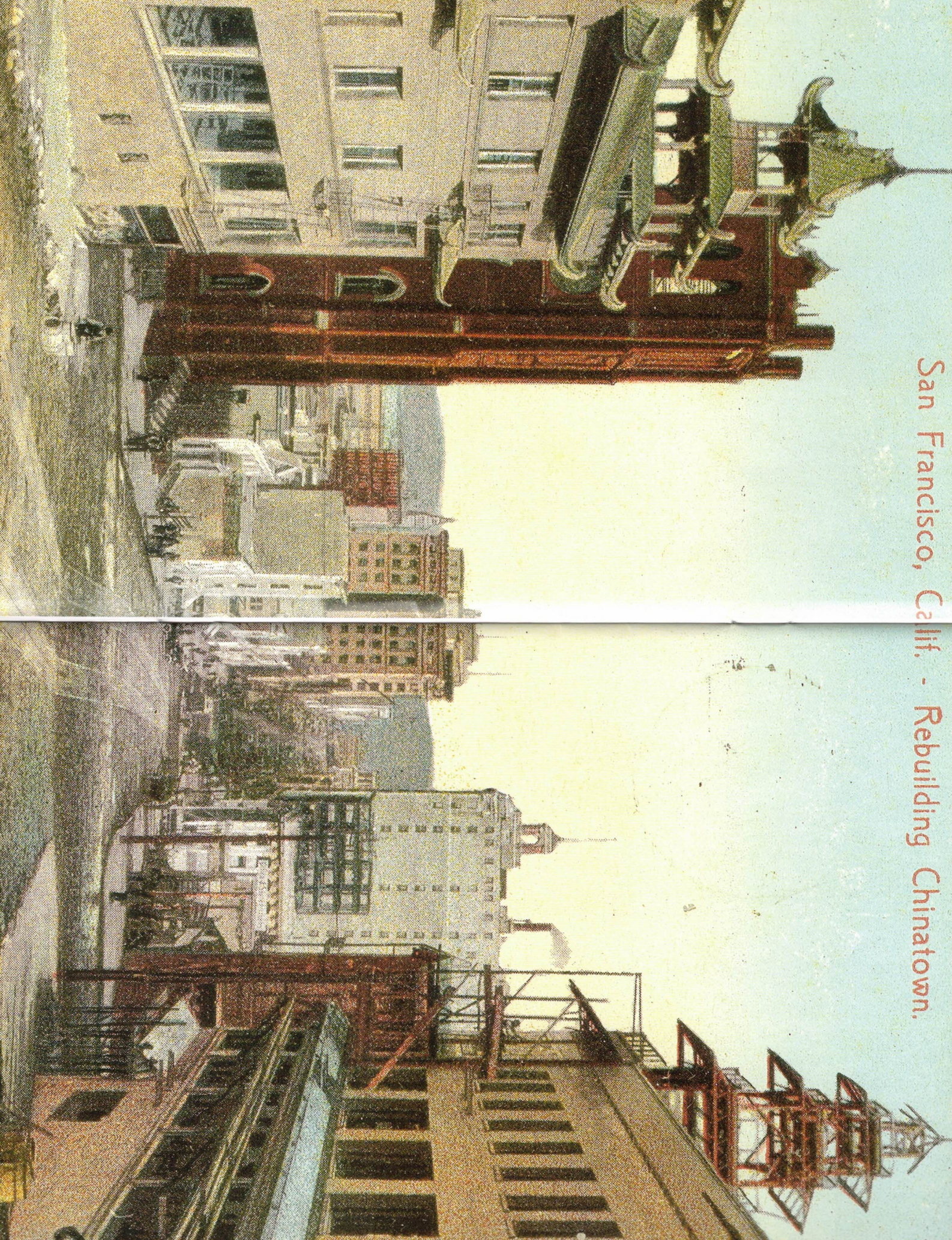
Oriental City on the Bay Shore." A 1905 proposal to remove Chinatown to the south bay. (*Merchants' Association Review* February 1905, courtesy San Francisco Public Library San Francisco History Center)

Chinatown would be moved to Hunter's Point.¹⁷ The Chinese merchants bitterly opposed the idea. While the city was preoccupied with reconstruction, so were the Chinese, who wasted no time in rebuilding Chinatown before it could be relocated.

Look Tin Eli, Tong Bong, and other Chinese merchants planned for a new "Oriental" city of "veritable fairy palaces."¹⁸ They were credited for starting this trend when Tong Bong erected his building, the Sing Fat, at the southwest corner of California Street and Look Tin Eli erected the Sing Chong building on the northwest corner of California Street and Grant Avenue.

While the architects were busy designing San Francisco's Civic Center and the commercial and financial districts in the Beaux Arts tradition, American architects for Chinatown were searching for a Sino-architectural vernacular. Their exposure to Chinese architecture was limited to images of pagodas and temples with turned-up eaves and massive curved roofs, forms and expressions that were already centuries old. Their challenge was to transform these ancient forms into a new Sino-architectural vocabulary using Western methods of construction and local building materials in accordance with local building codes. This conscious effort to pursue an exotic, Asian form in architecture, drawing on a limited number of stylistic elements, is termed *Oriental*.

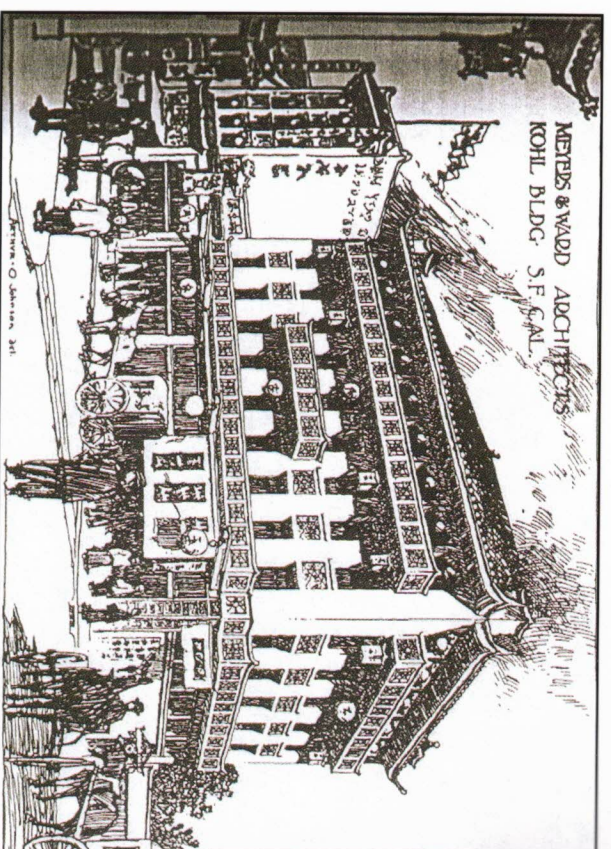
San Francisco, Calif. - Rebuilding Chinatown.



Charles Paff attempted to emulate the complex assemblage of sets (*tou-kung*) of blocks and corbel bracket arms found in Chinese monumental timber-frame structures. The brackets were structural elements of wood blocks, mortise-and-tenon in successive tiers cantilevered outwards to support the overhang of a massive roof (see figure page 11). In the Kong Chow temple the brackets were nonstructural, fabricated out of sheet metal and made to appear to support a Chinese roof. Again, what was used as a structural necessity in Chinese construction was reduced to decoration by Paff to convey an "Oriental" image. A later example is the YMCA at 855 Sacramento Street, built in 1925. The system of *tou-kung* becomes an Oriental cornice.

Whereas corner lots inspired Ross & Burgren to use the pagoda as an Oriental architectural element, the narrow interior lots presented a different problem. In the design of the Chinese Six Companies building at 770 Commercial Street, the architect merely grafted a false, curved Oriental roof onto the facade of the building at the parapet level. The rest of the building remained inflexibly Western and is typical of the simplified commercial stuccoed brick buildings. The ground-floor commercial storefront likewise was common throughout the city. This design approach was used by architects throughout the district.

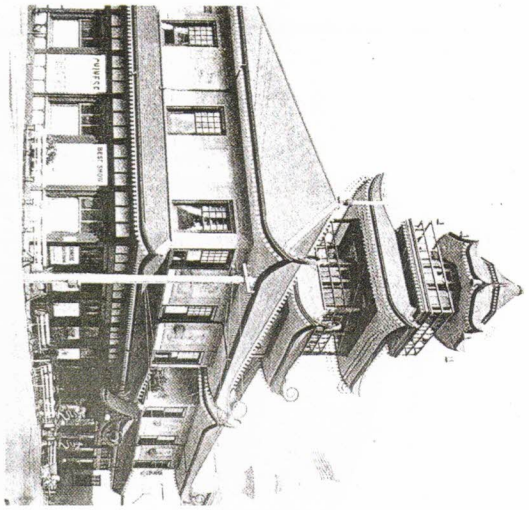
While the majority of people raved without reservations about the new Chinatown and praised its "beautiful artistic fantasies of the Far East,"¹⁹ a few architects expressed concern and displeasure with the manner in which the Chinese style buildings were being designed. Clarence R. Ward, an architect in the firm of Meyers and Ward, commented, "If the whole (of Chinatown) is to be carried out along the lines of most of the architectural aberrations now being erected in the quarter, the result will be a failure, both



Architect Clarence R. Ward's proposal for the southwestern corner of Washington Street and Grant Avenue and for the Sam Yip district association.

artistically and in a great measure financially."²⁰ He also suggested that a Chinatown association of three architects of repute be formed to review projects for the area. Those who disagreed with Ward pointed out that it was impossible to design an appropriate building of an "Oriental" type. Ward responded by presenting proposals for a corner lot at the southwest corner of Washington and Grant streets and for an interior lot for the Sam Yip district association, neither of which were used (see figure this page).

The proposed structures were to be concrete or rough brick, with deep recesses emphasizing the structure, or "bones," of the building. Special features were made of the fire escapes, which were transformed into elongated balconies with Chinese design motifs. The windows were highlighted with screens and grilles. He suggested the tile roof could be copper, treated with acids to give a beautiful green and brown patina. Ward's design philosophy was never adopted and the search for



San Francisco's Chinese merchants participated in the 1894 Midwinter Fair in Golden Gate Park and created this pseudo-Chinese building.

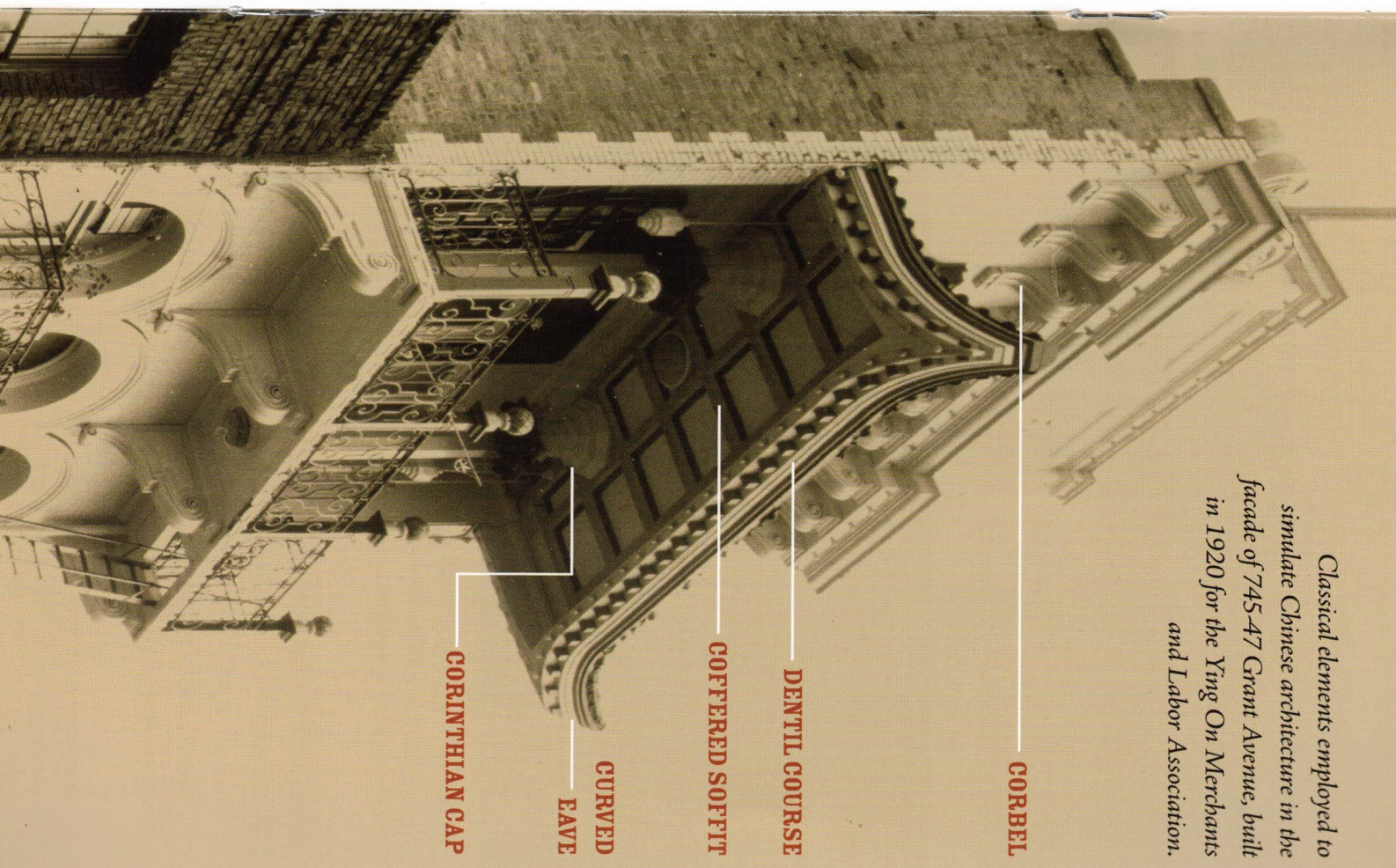
a Sino-architectural vernacular continued.

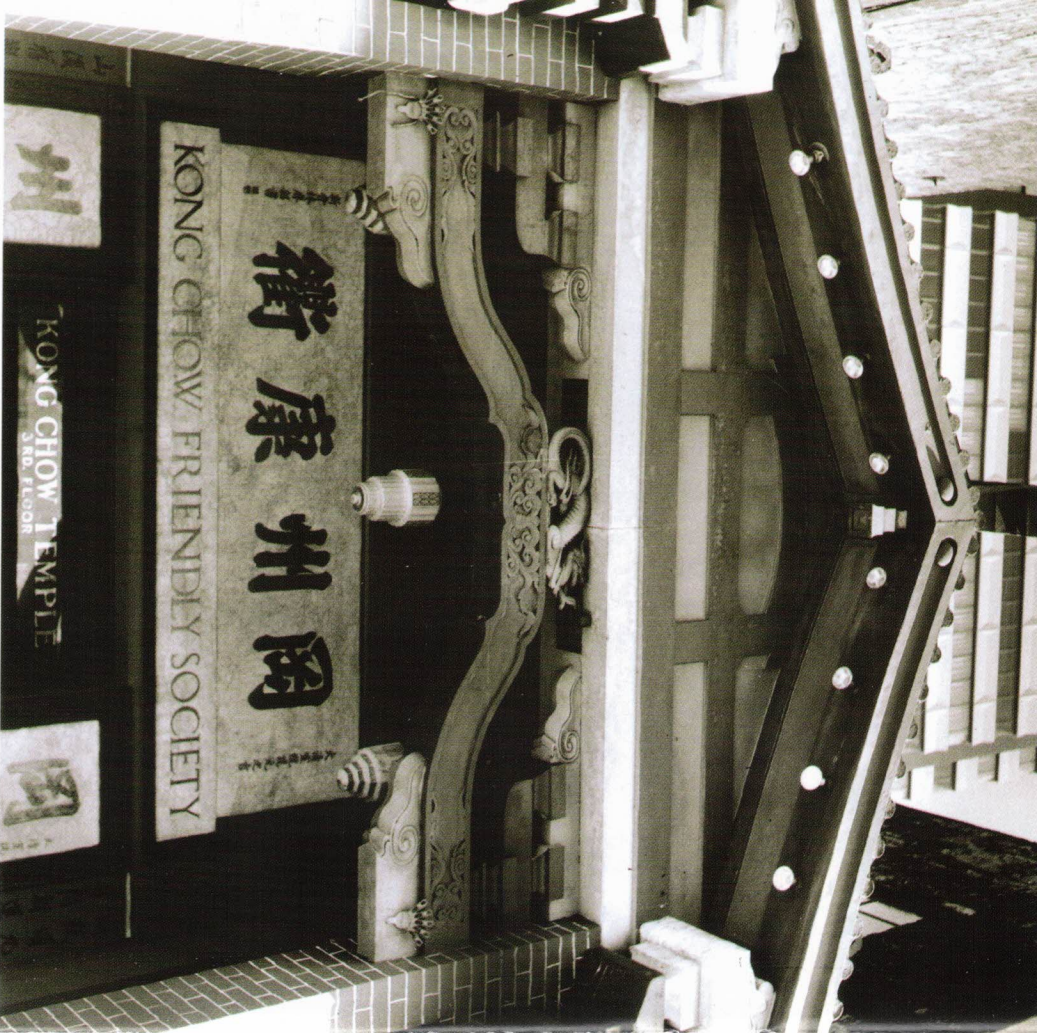
Yet another design approach in the promotion of an Oriental city was to create illusions of Chinese architecture through the prolific use of neoclassical architectural design elements with available construction materials of the day. Many of the

buildings in Chinatown occupied 100 percent of the lots and had narrow frontages. Only the street facades were available for architectural treatment. The need for commercial ground-floor space left room for only one entrance to the upper floors, so it was necessary to have fire escapes as a second means of exit for each floor. On the top floor these fire escapes were often transformed into loggias supported by brackets of neoclassical design. The top floor was recessed to allow for a deep overhang simulating an Oriental roof (see photo page 24). This false roof was supported by columns with Corinthian or composite-type capitals. The capitals in turn supported a coffered soffit, often painted bright red, yellow, and green. The ceramic tile roof was of simulated pressed galvanized iron. Neoclassical shapes and cornices profiled the parapet at the roof line. Chinese signs above the doorways, coupled with the use of bright colors, further enhanced the "Oriental" image.

Where the buildings abutted each other, the contiguous pattern formed a Chinese streetscape. Today Waverly Place, with its concentration of these buildings, demonstrates this deception at its best. The illusion cre-

Classical elements employed to simulate Chinese architecture in the facade of 745-47 Grant Avenue, built in 1920 for the Ying On Merchants and Labor Association.





The former Kong Chow Temple at 514 Pine Street shows architect's Charles Paff's attempt to convey an "Oriental" image with a transformation of the Chinese structural *tou-kung* system (page 11, 16-17) into a simplified and purely decorative element. (Wayland Lee photo, CHSA, 1998-2, Gift of Wayland Lee)

ated is a masterful design solution, unique and indigenous, for it is neither East nor West. Rather, it is decidedly San Francisco (see photo page 23).

In the first decade following the earthquake the reconstruction of Chinatown was essentially completed. The experimentation with numerous methods for creating an "Oriental city" was apparently

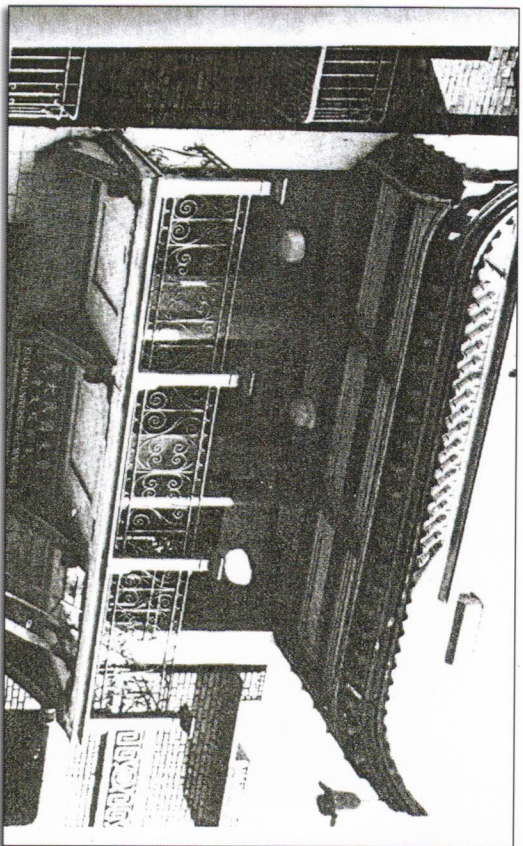


Waverly Place, with its neoclassical design elements, created the illusion of a Chinese streetscape.

successful. The plan to reverse the negative image of the Chinese community had succeeded. Magazine articles and newspaper editorials proclaimed Chinatown as one of the most noted places on the American continent, and one article took an apologetic tone: "We have unwittingly perhaps held up to the public gaze for too long the more sensational phases of Chinese life. We have concentrated our vision over much upon the differences between their lives and ours ... and thus the racial gulf that separates the yellow and white peoples of the earth becomes increasingly widened instead of being bridged."²¹

In the twenties, a new phase of building activity took place, giving opportunity to those who had not previously followed the spirit of chinoiserie. A number of benevolent associations added additional floors to their buildings.

A loggia for the meeting hall at the top floors was now a firmly established prototype. Architects, having the benefit of prototypes,

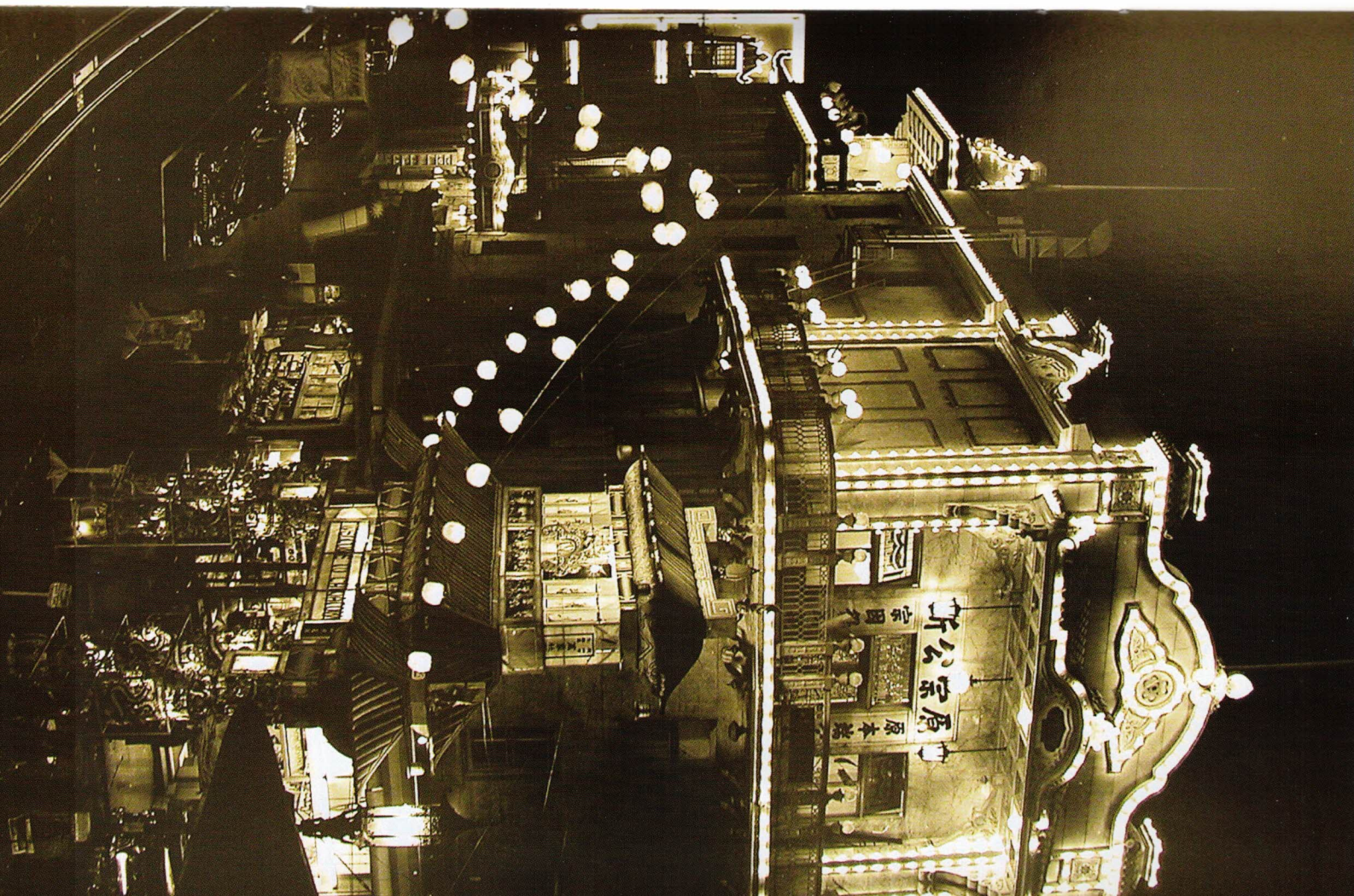


The top floor was recessed to allow for a deep overhang simulating an Oriental roof.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The 1922 remodeling of the Soo Yuen Benevolent Association at 924 Grant Avenue, designed by architect Albert Schoepfer and Edward G. Bolles. (Harry Jew photo, CHSA, 2000.2, Gift of Karen Jue Iovino and Calvin Jue)

proceeded with almost reckless overconfidence, and the designs became bolder in the use of standard available neoclassical ornaments. In some cases, with the exception of the curved eave, all Chinese elements were abandoned altogether.

This approach is reflected in the Soo Yuen Benevolent Association at 924 Grant Avenue, designed by architects Albert Schoepfer and Edward G. Bolles. Only a discreetly curved fascia can be detected at the corners of the overhang. The building is otherwise flamboyantly Baroque. A curved balcony sweeps across the loggia level. At night hundreds of light bulbs trace the curvilinear arches of the parapet and overhang (see photo page 25). Flaunting the traditional Chinese architectural forms, it nonetheless enriches the streetscape.



OCCIDENTAL STYLE

THE MASTER PLAN FOR TRANSFORMING the post-earthquake Chinatown into an "Oriental city" was not accepted by every property owner and tenant. Caught in the spirit of Americanization, the Ning Yung district association, the largest and most influential of district associations, instructed the architectural firm of Rousseau & Rousseau to design its building devoid of any Oriental decoration (see photo page 31). The discarding of old ways was only temporary and cultural self-image proved to be too permanent. Some decades later, in the forties, the association applied a simulated Chinese roof overhang across the facade of the building above the ground-floor commercial level.

Within the core of Chinatown there are also commercial and residential brick buildings. The ornate Victorian designs of the pre-earthquake era were simplified, notably in the designs of win-

OPPOSITE PAGE: Not all property owners and tenants accepted the master plan for transforming post-earthquake Chinatown into an "Oriental city." Rebuilding in its pre-earthquake location on Waverly Place, the Ning Yung District Association commissioned a building without any Oriental decoration, choosing instead a style that would reflect the new architecture of San Francisco, to physically demonstrate that Chinatown was part of an American community. (Brian Choy photo)



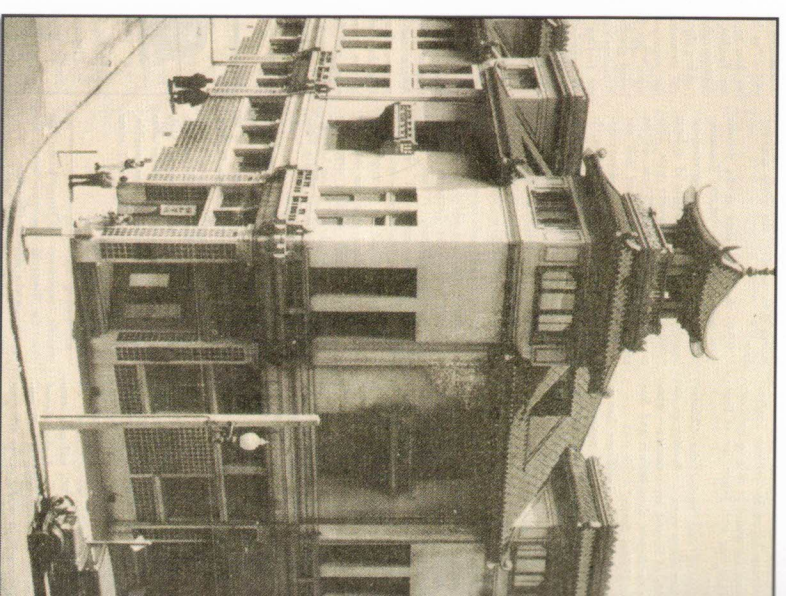
dows. The scale and proportion of the buildings were maintained. Brackets supported the sheet metal cornice at the roof line. The ground-floor commercial areas continued to resemble the typical small storefronts found elsewhere in the city. The former Chy Lung building at 640 Sacramento Street is an example of this. Although Chy Lung, until its demise, was the oldest purveyor of Chinese goods, dating back to 1851, it chose not to advertise its merchandise under an Oriental roof.

Standard classical ornaments from sheet metal catalogues were applied onto the facades of brick commercial and residential buildings, creating instant Renaissance or Gothic Revival style buildings. These buildings concentrated on Grant Avenue between Bush and Pine streets, and between Pacific and Broadway streets, and along Stockton Street and Commercial Street. Two buildings more seriously designed and detailed in the neoclassical manner can be found at 638 Pacific and 833 Kearny Street.

Further evidence of Western architecture in Chinatown exists in church buildings. It would have been sacrilegious to win converts under the roofs of heathen temples. The first Chinese church in America was established by Reverend William Speer and four Chinese—Atsun, Lai Sam, A-tsen and Hi Cheong Kow—in 1853 at 800 Stockton Street.

Consistent with the general pattern of Chinatown expansion, when white congregations moved out of their church buildings, Chinese congregations replaced them. Chinese worshippers moved into the commodious First Presbyterian Church at 925 Stockton Street, which was built in the Gothic tradition. The Chinese Baptist Church, founded by Rev. J. Lewis Shuck in 1854, was Romanesque (see figure page 3), and the Methodist Episcopal

The Methodist Episcopal Church, built in 1913 by architect Henry Meyers. (*Chinese Digest*, October 23, 1936, CHSA, William Hoy Collection, 2000.1, Gift of Lily May Leong)



Church, founded by Rev. Otis Gibson in 1868, was a Second Empire mansard (see photo page 7).

The churches rebuilt after the earthquake continued the Western tradition of architecture with one exception—the Methodist Episcopal Church at 1001 Stockton Street, built in 1913. Architect Henry Meyers placed a minor Chinese-styled roof over the two-tier belfry surmounted by a cross. Balconies at the base of the windows suggested an “Oriental” influence and the overall design blended mission revival and Chinese style (see photo page 33).

The Chinese Presbyterian Church was distinctively Palladian. However, the Baptist Church and the Congregational Church at 21 Brenham Place followed the tradition of Gothic Revival for churches.

A DWINDLING HERITAGE

FOR THE NEXT FEW DECADES Chinatown architecture remained fairly static, particularly during the depression years. Businesses did not expand rapidly and the feverish building pace following the 1906 earthquake came to a relative standstill. The few buildings that were remodeled followed the architectural movements of the time, such as art deco. Minor renovations often included refacing old wooden storefronts with the ceramic tile popular in the thirties. A few grocery stores recessed their fronts to accommodate outdoor displays. More noticeable was innovation in lighting. Whereas hundreds of light bulbs once lit signs and marquees over the large restaurants, hotels, and night clubs, they became quickly outdated and were revamped when the new techniques of neon lighting became popular in the thirties and forties.

In the fifties, economic conditions changed dramatically when the United States prohibited trade with the People's Republic of China. Businesses that depended on Chinese goods were forced to make a

OPPOSITE PAGE: ("Ah Chün," from San Francisco Chinese Community and Earthquake Damage album, ca. 1906, BANC PIC 1993.033:78—ALB, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)



transition to other types of business. Financial institutions began replacing the old-time merchant import-and-export stores.

Today Chinatown is going through yet another drastic transition. Liberalized immigration laws of the fifties and sixties have brought in a new population. While the new immigrants have brought growth to Chinatown, they also compete for premium commercial space. A generation of older businesses has succumbed, one by one. The last links to the past are being severed.

With these changes modernization has come. Stores that represent links to Chinatown's historic past have been destroyed. Old marbled entrances with their classic details have been stripped; wood, iron, and bronze-sashed storefronts with wooden doors have been torn down, replaced by glaring anodized aluminum. Metal canopies have been replaced with ballooning canvas awnings that obscure the finer details of the building below and above. Time-worn natural brick and window details have been plastered over with monotonous stucco or faced with garish, glazed tile of bright red, yellow, and orange, and even stainless steel. Gold-leaf signs on the windows have been removed and replaced with huge back-lighted plastic signs that overpower the storefronts and violate the streetscape.

In an era of ethnic awakening and appreciation, second- and third-generation Chinese are joining with ethnic historians to rediscover their historical roots. Ironically a major resource, San Francisco Chinatown, the oldest surviving vestige of Chinese American history, is being irrevocably altered and its links with the past dismantled.

Community members today explore ways to effectively maintain San Francisco's Chinatown's physical links with the past.

A GLOSSARY OF ARCHITECTURAL TERMS

BAROQUE. An architecture of curved lines, departing from the classical formality of Renaissance architecture.

BEAUX ARTS. Refers to the aesthetic principles taught by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France, which emphasized the study of Greek and Roman architecture.

CHINOISERIE. Refers to a style incorporating Chinese elements, extremely popular in the eighteenth century when Europeans were enamored with things Chinese.

CLASSICISM. An architectural style inspired by ancient Greece and Rome.

COFFER. An ornamental recessed panel in a ceiling or soffit.

CORBEL. A supporting bracket on the face of a wall.

CORNICE. The uppermost member that finishes the top of a building or crowns the top part of a door or window.

DENTIL. A series of small rectangular blocks arranged like a row of teeth, projecting from the lower part of the cornice, employed in classical architecture.

EAVES. The lower edge of a roof overhanging a wall.