

## **To “Build a Better City”: Women and Culturally Hybrid Grassroots Resistance to Slum Clearance in Vancouver (The Leadership Role of Ethnic Minority Women)<sup>1</sup>**

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Strathcona is the residential neighbourhood adjacent to “Chinatown” in Vancouver. One of the oldest residential neighbourhoods in Vancouver, Strathcona has been an important staging ground for different waves of immigrants arriving in “Saltwater City,” as early Chinese immigrants called the city. The neighbourhood is geographically significant because, in a city known for its severely limited land base, it is strategically located in the neck of the peninsula of land that connects the downtown business core with the residential bedroom communities on the North Shore and up the Fraser Valley. All rail and automobile traffic into the downtown core from the Northeast has to pass through Strathcona.

In the late 1960s and 70s, a relatively powerless group of residents and tenants from minority ethnic, working class backgrounds, mounted a successful campaign to halt a tri-level government program of urban redevelopment that had been funded and legislated through the National Housing Act of 1956. Strathcona’s importance to city planners and urban historians lies not only in its strategic siting, but also in the successful battle that residents fought to save the neighbourhood from wholesale destruction, and in the broader transformational effects that this resistance had on future city planning and governance. Much can be learned about urban policy development and direct democratic engagement in a diverse, multicultural city by looking carefully at what transpired in the Strathcona case.

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The story of Strathcona residents' successful struggle to reform a political system that marginalized them from their own community is not widely known outside of urban geography and planning circles. It is a story that has been told, in part, in Kay Anderson's *Vancouver's Chinatown*, Shlomo Hasson and David Ley's, *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*, Wickberg, et al's, *From China to Canada*, David Lai's *Chinatowns*, and Ng's, *The Chinese in Vancouver*. In addition, there are several community accounts including, Hayne Wai's, "*The Story of Strathcona*", "*Vancouver Chinatown: 1960-80, A Community Perspective*," and *Don't Rest in Peace, Organise!* a manual for citizen engagement published by the Neighbourhood Services Association of Vancouver.

Drawing on participant observation, individual interviews, and primary archival documents, we suggest that there are several compelling reasons to reconsider existing explanations. Most importantly, extant accounts fail to take gender into consideration. Although individual women are recognized, gender and its interaction with other structuring dynamics, has not received analytical attention. Consequently, existing accounts fail to recognize and understand the centrality of ethnic minority women's roles in organizing community resistance, and fail to comprehend the importance of culturally hybrid forms of grassroots resistance undertaken by community-based, ethnic minority women. They simplify the complexity of the community, and do not take into account its changing composition over time, ultimately misunderstanding the specific nature and forms of ethnic minority political resistance. By attending to interacting race, class, gender, and ethnic dynamics as they have shifted and changed over time and in different contexts, we provide a more full account of grassroots urban resistance in the Strathcona case, and we extend the significance of this struggle to its transformational effects on the city's future urban trajectory, and on participants' lives.

In reviewing the historiography of Strathcona's last-ditch resistance to urban renewal, we found three main explanatory frameworks that we summarize under the rubrics: Orientalism, Evolutionary Functionalism, and Elite Instrumentalism.

The Orientalist approach to Strathcona's resistance draws on conceptions of racialized spatiality as the central explanatory feature for the area's targeting and subsequent resistance. Regarded via Said's model as a discursively constructed space, Strathcona was viewed as a racialized place largely because of its physical proximity to Chinatown. Following this, the "Chineseness" of Strathcona tarred it with the same perceptions as those held by Vancouver's majority population towards Chinatown: undesirable, dangerous, immoral and unhygienic. In this account, exemplified by geographers Anderson, Hasson & Ley, and Ng, Strathcona was targeted for destruction because of its perceived "difference," and city planners wished to remove this "other" from what was, in the mid 1950s, a city naturalized as "white." This approach ultimately attributes the success of neighbourhood resistance to the involvement of external actors and forces; in the case of Anderson, Hasson & Ley, and Ng, sympathetic social workers and community minded professionals, who assisted this relatively powerless community.<sup>i</sup>

Lai's evolutionary functionalist perspective attributes the rise and decline of Strathcona, seen as the residential extension of Chinatown, to the same forces that affect the growth and decay of Chinatowns. Chinatowns become established as a response to exclusion and social needs but their sustainability depend upon continuing flows of immigration, since established residents move out as they become integrated into the host society. When immigration slows, Chinatowns slowly wither away as their commercial base dries up; Chinatowns expand in response to new waves of immigration. Successful resistance is attributed to the arrival of a new crop of educated Chinese immigrants.<sup>ii</sup>

The third approach to Strathcona originates largely from community-based perspectives that tend to focus on elite instrumentalism to explain the targeting of the area. Strathcona's strategic inner city location at the narrowing neck of the peninsula, the area's cheap, "inefficient" and "chaotic" land use, older housing stock and elderly, ethnic, and working class residents, made it an obvious site for redevelopment under a National Housing Act which offered infrastructure funding based on slum clearance. The city's political and economic elites eyed the land for transportation corridors, public housing, profitable commercial development, and as a funding source for rationalizing the city's land base by modernizing its industrial infrastructure. Planning documents demonstrate that city hall wanted to maximize its revenue potential to the city coffers by accessing the federal and provincial government's contributions to the shared costs of redevelopment. In these accounts, resistance is theorized as a groundswell of community consciousness of injustice and civic immorality.

These explanatory frameworks offer crucial, if partial, insights into the motivations and rationales for bulldozing the neighbourhood, and the subsequent resistance. Our research suggests an even more complex explanation is needed to more fully understand the dynamics underlying what actually took place in Strathcona. Although existing accounts do help to account for *why* the community was targeted, neither the Orientalist, the apolitical evolutionary or stage model, nor the elite instrumentalist account fully comprehend how and why the community came to be targeted, or how a relatively powerless, low-income, ethnically mixed community that had been wholly marginalized from the political and planning processes, succeeded in mounting a successful campaign against the will of three levels of government and ultimately reforming structures of citizen and neighbourhood participation in governing Vancouver.

In this essay we focus on three aspects of the Strathcona neighbourhood's struggle : 1) uncovering the overlooked role of women as leaders in neighbourhood resistance to urban renewal, arguing that the classic trope of resistance leaves little room for the often informal strategies of resistance and engagement demonstrated by Strathcona's women leaders; 2) suggesting a more complicated rationale for understanding the Strathcona case that better integrates the changing historical conditions of the community, the cultural context of planning at the time, and Strathcona's relationship to city planners and politicians; and 3) questioning the use of a masculinized model of resistance and social activism which focuses on forms of political engagement that obscure and overlook non-masculine, non-Western forms of resistance and elides recognition of ethnic minority women's roles in contemporary urban social movements. We outline methodological and conceptual strategies researchers can employ to make sense of historical events in ways that (literally) look to the margins to identify the central role of diverse cultural practices in forging resistance and social action in ethnically mixed communities. We speak briefly to what we consider a useful strategy of entering the historical archives as insider/outsider, participant/observer. In our case of two researchers working together, these dual roles reached across generations, ethnicity, and disciplinary training and the research strategies that we bring to the archives and the field.

While somewhat of a historiographic paper which raises questions about how we study, identify, and define what constitutes social action in historical inquiry, we draw from a large body of original research in making this case. Both in this paper and the larger body of work that we are engaged in, we make use of the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants' Association (SPOTA) files in the City of Vancouver Archives. These files include a range of ephemeral materials ranging from minutes from bi-weekly Executive meetings, SPOTA Annual General Meetings, and emergency community meetings, as well as community newsletters, internal and

external correspondence, handwritten notes, briefs to City Council, newspaper clippings, reports made to various government ministries and agencies, and consultants' reports. Interviews with several Strathcona residents who were key organizers during this time, and having a participant in the process as a researcher assisted in interpreting the extent to which culture and individual histories shape the strategies and tactics of resistance and political engagement. The studies and reports conducted by the City of Vancouver figure prominently in the research, as do publications put out by the neighborhood and community service organizations that formed in Vancouver during this time.

In examining the evidence, we conclude that as Vancouver's first settlements, the Downtown Eastside and Strathcona contained the oldest structures and the greatest amount of mixed land use, which influenced the area's targeting for renewal policy. We posit that "race" and racialization of space, suggested by the Orientalist accounts, was only one of many means by which Strathcona was stigmatized. It was also marked by its "deviant" gender, class, non-family, transient population as well as by its strategic location as the eastern gateway through which future planned transportation corridors had to pass to connect suburban residential commuters to the downtown core.<sup>iii</sup>

The residential facilities in the city's core consisted of a combination of single-family dwellings that were home to successive immigrant groups. Many hotels and rooming houses were built early in Vancouver's history to house the large population of single men, both retired workers and those still working in the provinces' resources industries to whom "Terminal City" provided a transit point and a break from the mines and lumber camps. The east side was therefore characterized by a decidedly working-class population, and historian Jill Wade notes that a long-standing housing problem resulted from the combination of the lack of satisfactory affordable housing both in the city's core and in middle-income dwellings outside of downtown.<sup>iv</sup>

Historian Norbert MacDonald describes the mindset of policy mindset in post-war Vancouver as “structured by a middle class ethos” which made the city “a community of like-minded people who agreed on what was good and what was needed.”<sup>v</sup> It was assumed that the interests of planners and the Vancouver residents with whom they interacted—those with political access—were shared. The taken-for-granted assumption that any clear thinking citizen would agree with the need for urban renewal is evident in the language of the plan to direct the City’s first urban renewal activities.

The authors of the *Vancouver Redevelopment Study* of 1957, which set out a twenty year plan for the city, state that they are “sure the people of Vancouver are proud of their city and want to see it progress,” and these urban renewal plans should therefore “appeal to the citizens who believe as they do.”<sup>vi</sup> The city’s need to rationalize and justify the need for “urban renewal” of a “blighted” area as a means to access federal and provincial funds to undertake broader public works, chiefly the installation of a modern transportation system were also factors that triggered a comprehensive offensive on the community. Strathcona’s “Chineseness” is barely mentioned in the Vancouver Redevelopment Study of 1957, simply because at the time of the study, the population of the neighbourhood was only about 30% Chinese. Its Chinese residential characteristic was not to be a defining feature until the late 1960s after two earlier phases of urban renewal had already been completed.<sup>vii</sup>

Strathcona represented the antithesis of rational planning, of efficient land use, and indeed, of middle class respectability. With its mixed commercial, industrial and residential land use, the chaotic, crowded and often dilapidated state of the neighbourhood buildings, and with its mixed population of ethnic families, elderly single men, ageing bachelors and working class pensioners, Strathcona was an affront to what planners believed *a community* ought to be. Armed with the double mandate of improving the physical condition of the neighbourhood while

simultaneously uplifting the social condition of its residents, planners and policy makers saw urban renewal very much as an exercise in rescue and redistribution; an exercise that assumed the universal desirability of a middle class standard of living.

A “cult of modernity” provided a collective mindset that made all of this seem perfectly logical and necessary if Vancouver was to develop and reach its potential. The timing was right: permissive legislation was in place, funding was available, and the city’s civic elites had been galvanized around the vision of the future planned modern, North American city. The 1957 *Vancouver Redevelopment Study*, a textual exemplar of ‘modernist’ temporal idealism, justified and mapped Vancouver’s future:

Development implies change. Nothing remains static. Housing becomes obsolete and falls into decay and must be renewed; nature’s cycle of birth, growth, decay and renewal applies to the parts of a city as it does to the cells of a living organism.<sup>viii</sup>

Read as a classic modernist text, the *Vancouver Redevelopment Study* complies with established modernist discursive regimes for producing knowledge as “truth.”<sup>ix</sup> Planners were convinced that their vision of the city represented the interests of the “public” and that theirs was a noble cause for “building a better city” that was efficient and rationally planned. This was the title given to a publicity film commissioned by the City of Vancouver and CMHC to persuade federal housing officials of Vancouver’s urgent need for urban renewal funds. The discourse of urban renewal and slum clearance provided city planners a language with which to report their data and research in order to justify their redevelopment plans. The class and ethnic composition of Strathcona offered ideal fodder to fit the underlying race and class-based connotations of “blight,” a pseudo-scientific term with an underlying medical association.

### **Actors and Action: Strathcona’s Resistance Through an Intersectional Gender Lens**



While existing scholarship on Strathcona does enrich our understanding of why Strathcona was targeted for demolition, our research uncovers a gender dimension in the fight to stop the clearance of Strathcona; its tactics, strategies, and visions, originated from the adaptation of multiple cultural influences and the significant organizing role that women of the neighbourhood played in mobilizing and educating neighbors. Their ability to garner the ear of politicians employed unique methods to cultivate personal relationships with politicians and planners. Among the ethnic, gendered strategies of mobilization and resistance that have not yet been fully acknowledged are: the strategic deployment of ethnic festivities to which politicians and bureaucrats were invited and given highly visible symbolic roles, such as cutting ribbons, turning the sod in new housing, making speeches, and the organization of landmark annual Chinese banquets with up to 500 people in attendance, which turned into an annual who's who gathering of planners and policy makers.

SPOTA's women leaders used traditional Chinese food and hospitality to establish a political relationship of reciprocity between themselves and politicians. Given their unequal social status and lack of power, this practice helped shift the balance of power in their favor. By inviting politicians and bureaucrats to share food and to take part in Chinese ceremonies and festivals as honored guests, SPOTA's women leaders brought powerful individuals into the neighbourhood where SPOTA could speak to them on their own terms. Invitations to attend festivals, tea parties, sod turning ceremonies and banquets also forced politicians and bureaucrats to travel to the community, and allowed the wider public to see politicians in the area, thus forcing a reconsideration of perceptions of the area as a "slum."

Ethnic minority women leaders transformed *guanxi*, a traditional social system of gift exchange among Chinese social and kinship networks, into a new hybrid cultural form by drawing on their cross-cultural gendered knowledge and skills.<sup>x</sup> Women were involved in

making and sharing Chinese food and organizing Chinese banquets, tea parties, and open houses. But more than just the preparation of food, long meetings were held to decide the strategic placement and seating arrangements at tables, the order of speakers, the topics that would be discussed with each individual, and so on. This can be witnessed in correspondence between SPOTA Executive members in the planning stages of banquets, such as one memo written to the executive outlining “what we want out of certain visitors” to the 1974 banquet. We uncovered hand drawn diagrams of seating plans that showed the sitting arrangements of dignitaries next to SPOTA members with notes on what each politician or bureaucrat were to be lobbied on. City officials such as Mayor Art Phillips were to be cornered on zoning concerns, while Ron Basford, Federal Minister of Urban Affairs, was targeted for funding commitments and for more active support of SPOTA’s bid to develop non-market housing.<sup>xi</sup> Officials were guests in SPOTA’s neighbourhood, not visitors at the invitation of a minister or official, and with the presence of several hundred residents, the power of authority was shifted in favour of the hosts.<sup>xii</sup>

*Guanxi* was also used between SPOTA members and between SPOTA and residents of Strathcona. When Bessie Lee was having difficulty with her husband who was upset with the number of hours she was spending in meetings outside the home and with her growing notoriety in Chinatown, Mary Chan would come to her aid. Mrs. Chan would prepare a special delicacy for Mr. Lee, pay him a social call, and charm him into good humour, allowing Bessie to continue attending meetings and organizing resistance. Exchange of vegetables grown in backyard gardens, gifts of baking or special dishes, were often used as a way of solidifying existing or opening up new neighborly relationships. In this way, over time, SPOTA managed to build a tight social network that could be mobilized at a moment’s notice to appear at city hall.

SPOTA’s hybrid and gendered cultural practices of *guanxi* helped it to build and strengthen relationships of reciprocity between residents and, albeit unequally, between the organization and

politicians as a way to increase political influence. Although gift exchange is customarily understood in economic anthropology as a form of economic exchange, in SPOTA's case, it was used not to exchange commodities of economic value, but to demonstrate and acquire cultural capital for political purposes. Building *guanxi* relations worked to educate and raise awareness as a way of leveraging their cultural capital into political influence; to build personal relationships with politicians and bureaucrats; and to share their alternative visions of the neighbourhood with decision-makers.<sup>xiii</sup>

Beyond organizing banquets, SPOTA also pioneered walking tours of the neighbourhood as a central activity for engaging invited politicians during election campaigns to tour the neighbourhood on foot, explore the backyard gardens, and finish with a sumptuous tea at a restaurant or at someone's home. SPOTA believed that the process of convincing officials that the neighbourhood was not a place of moral and physical decay but was in fact a stable, respectable and family-oriented community was as simple as showing it to them, and made tours a central part of its action repertoire. Community tours became one of the most utilized and effective strategies at SPOTA's disposal. In the lead up to city, provincial, and federal elections, area candidates were regularly invited to the community to be given a tour and to attend general meetings. Tours served as an opportunity for SPOTA to achieve commitments to their renewal and housing initiatives, as well as an opportunity for politicians to ingratiate themselves to a highly politicized neighbourhood. While entertaining politicians in this way, SPOTA was able to shift the representation of the community as a "slum" or "ghetto" in the imagination of policy-makers and state officials. In place of the language of technical rationality, and racist stereotypes, SPOTA's political discourse offered alternative discourses of culture, family, neighbourhood, and home. Seemingly objective statistics such as health standards, buildings' structural conditions, and stigma surrounding the class and ethnic nature of the area had served to

rationalize the urban renewal schemes on paper. Slums were given a rational, scientific-sounding definition that was easy for planners and politicians to accept as a problem. But by actually getting decision makers to visit the area and showing them the community, as well as bringing them face-to-face with residents, who happened to be their constituents, SPOTA was able to demonstrate just how subjective and inaccurate ‘official’ descriptions of the area were. Neighbourhood tours forced politicians to see the area as a *community* where people had their homes, rather than a slum from which anonymous residents needed to be rescued.<sup>xiv</sup>

During SPOTA’s most active decade, between 1969 to 1979, there was rarely a politician running in a municipal, provincial, or federal elections who did not receive an invitation to attend a banquet, a ribbon cutting ceremony, an open house to mark Chinese New Year, or give a speech to a general meeting of the neighbourhood. One strategy that SPOTA frequently used in later years to solidify the relationships that it had built among various levels of government was the awarding of honorary memberships in SPOTA. By doing this, SPOTA was essentially declaring those politicians and officials with whom they had developed close links, as symbolic residents.<sup>xv</sup> Former Vancouver Mayor and Premier of BC Mike Harcourt’s regular references to his work with residents in Strathcona during campaign speeches was just one piece of evidence of the cultural capital that SPOTA had achieved as a result of bringing politicians into the internal community. Yet, although individual members of SPOTA may have been active in a political party, SPOTA itself remained resolutely non-partisan, and negotiated and nurtured relationships with federal Liberals, successive Social Credit and NDP provincial government, and several distinct civic political parties. Bringing politicians into a personal relationship to SPOTA enabled this relatively powerless neighbourhood organization to gain access to high-level officials and politicians.

SPOTA developed several effective mechanisms to educate, build and mobilize its members and neighbourhood residents. Most important was the principle that all meetings had to be conducted in two languages, Chinese and English. Meetings lasted for many hours as everyone's contribution had to be translated into either English or Chinese. Meeting minutes were also always transcribed in both languages, and several AGM minutes were also translated into Italian. All printed communication was issued in two languages, and intermittently in Italian, and during the years that SPOTA had a funded office, all staff were able to communicate in English and Chinese.

Resident and SPOTA Executive member, Jonathan Lau's community development strategies were also important in terms of community mobilization. In addition to being poetically bilingual (he became known for making a speaker sound more eloquent in translation), his low key, personal style helped him establish rapport and trust with all residents. When asked how he did his work, he said that he would just walk through the neighbourhood, and stop to talk with whoever would come his way.<sup>xvi</sup> His intimate knowledge of the everyday lives of residents, not only helped him gain their trust and to mobilize them into active support of SPOTA's initiatives, but more importantly, their stories and problems provided the basis for SPOTA's political agenda. From these intimate conversations, emerged an understanding of broader social needs and political issues. This level of personal day-to-day contact and constant input of residents into SPOTA's broader activism is essential for understanding the nature of community mobilization in Strathcona.

Internal communication was tantamount both to SPOTA's operating structure and its ultimate successes. Effective communication and networking relied on long-standing personal networks and obligations. Most of the strategy meetings took place around Bessie Lee and Mary Chan's kitchen and coffee tables where coffee, tea and goodies constantly flowed. If not there,

the meetings would convene in the old Hong Kong Café on Pender Street. Among Strathcona's longtime community leaders like Mary Chan, Anne Chan, Sue Lum, Bessie Lee, Inez Leland, and Tom Mesic, and many others, a so-called informal "chopstick telegraph," was developed that enabled SPOTA to be in constant personal contact with most residents of the neighbourhood. Much of this organizing took place in back lanes and over fences as residents tended their backyard vegetable gardens. The use of "block captains" was another effective means of communication and mobilization. SPOTA leaders chose block captains or block individuals volunteered because they already had a relationship with a SPOTA member. Block captains also played a crucial role in organizing protests and rallies, often rounding up residents to load onto busses for demonstrations at City Hall and organized disruption of council meetings.<sup>xvii</sup> The system was built on an already existing network of associations and personal relationships, much of it developed by Mary Chan who was the unofficial social convener, marriage broker, job finder and counselor to many Chinese speaking residents. Shirley Chan recalled how the Block Captain system came together centered on the informal pre-existing neighbourhood networks:

*My mother you have to understand was instrumental in helping people find houses, jobs, she did it all right. So there were a lot of debts out there. Therefore, when she called her debts in, people responded and so she worked with her team of people, saying, who would take what block, and they would just assign the blocks out. They knew the community and they had to take charge of that community. In addition, they talked to their neighbors. In addition, if you lived on that block, then your credibility was higher. That was her sense too. So, who lives on such and such a block? Well, so and so, well, let us have her come; let's go talk to her.<sup>xviii</sup>*

In later years, during the neighbourhood rehabilitation phase, block captains distributed SPOTA's monthly newsletter and canvassed their neighbors for opinions on important matters.<sup>xix</sup>

Mobilizing, organizing, educating and communicating with neighbors should not be assumed and taken for granted as "natural" due to shared ethnicity, locational proximity, or political or class consciousness. Effective networks had to be actively nurtured and maintained over the many

years of SPOTA's existence. SPOTA's internal organization and organizing strategies ought to be recognized as a unique contribution by SPOTA's multi-ethnic women leaders and should receive analytical attention.

SPOTA involved many generations, from young to old. The oldest active member was Mr. Lo Po Yin, who was over 90 years of age, but bright and sharp as a tack. He spoke flawless British accented English and several dialects of Chinese, and could always be counted on to "perform" as the wise, Asian gentleman scholar. Indeed, the manipulation of perceptions and stereotypes was not an infrequent part of SPOTA's action repertoire. In addition to the Confucian-esque image of Mr. Lo Po Yin's, Shirley Chan and former social planner, alderwomen, and MLA, Darlene Marzari recall using a certain amount of "our feminine wiles and our trickeries," as part of their strategic arsenal, as Marzari later recalled with a hint of irony. While female sexuality wasn't always an overt strategy, Marzari did recognize that there were aspects of these tactics that were consciously strategic:

*We didn't start laughing about it until we were much older... That we could start to talk about the use of miniskirts as a structural or strategic item in our arsenal. But at the time, none of us was thinking about it. But we were conscious about Shirley wearing her headbands and her bobby sox and now we know they were leotards.<sup>xx</sup>*

Shirley Chan's early participation is well known and documented in Ley, Anderson, Ng and Wai's accounts. A university student, during SPOTA's formation, Chan's political education began at age 8 when she accompanied her mother as she went door to door raising money to pay a lawyer to argue the residents' case at city hall during Phase I and Phase II of the urban renewal scheme. Chan, Marzari, and the author recall using feminine wiles as a subtle part of their overall plan, with Chan wearing a miniskirt with "hair down to there, legs up to here" to the Commission's proceedings and during her meeting with Hellyer and his officials, in part as a bid to present Chan as a more media-friendly figure than the politically conscious community

organizer that she had already become.<sup>xxi</sup> Despite being a university sophomore, SPOTA organizers had consciously set out to make Chan look younger so as to appear more a more sympathetic figure, a tactic which worked with the local media who represented Chan as a high school student.

Intergenerational and familial relations provided opportunities and resources for political experience. Bessie Lee's daughter and one of the authors of this essay was also a high school student at the time. She remembers editing and typing SPOTA's first brief to politicians soon after the initial public meeting in November 1968. Larry Chan, Shirley's brother, began a community-based home repair program to assist low-income homeowners and seniors in home rehabilitation and he and his friends started a Chinese language library. The intergenerational aspects of SPOTA enabled a bridging between older, non-Canadian born, non-English speaking members and recent immigrants who were not well versed in Canadian culture and politics, with the Canadian-born and educated in Canada generation. The younger generation recruited outside assistance to support SPOTA's cause from among their wider spheres of contacts.

Between 1969 and 1973, SPOTA and Chinatown organizations spearheaded an awakening of Chinese Canadian cultural pride through the politics of resistance. Hayne Wai, an active SPOTA member, documents the transformational effect that these struggles had on those who participated, in an article written from a "community" perspective.<sup>xxii</sup> Wai makes the link between the protest in 1972-1973 against building the city's main fire hall in the heart of Strathcona with the rise of young Chinese-Canadian university students as cultural producers and activists, many of who were Canadian-born and not recently arrived "educated" immigrants from Hong Kong. These included Brenda Cha, Garrick Chu, Larry Chu, Sean Gunn, Karen Lee, Don Jang, Ruby Mah, Jim Wong-Chu, Colleen Leung, Sharon Lee, Paul Yee and many others.<sup>xxiii</sup>



A new generation of Chinese Canadian cultural activists also began to produce cultural works that reflected their experiences of growing up as Chinese Canadians. They organized youth conferences, produced *Pender Guy*, a Chinese-Canadian radio program at Vancouver's Co-op radio station, began writing workshops, edited and published, *Inalienable Rice*, an anthology of Chinese Canadian writers, and began to speak out on racism. Many went on to become award winning writers, movie directors, poets, and artists.

It is well known in Vancouver that former Premier and Mayor, Mike Harcourt, City Councillor and Provincial cabinet minister Darlene Marzari, and MP Margaret Mitchell (Vancouver East) gained their early political experience working with SPOTA and other inner city communities like the Downtown Eastside. Yet the equally important political transformations on other participants has yet to be recognized.

### **Masculinist Models of Resistance and the Omission of Ethnic Minority Women's Leadership**

Given the length, extent and breadth of women's leadership role in SPOTA's community mobilization against urban renewal, and the spin-off effects that brought other advocates to support their cause, the lack of acknowledgement of women's contribution in previous accounts and the failure to attribute analytical status to gendered and ethnicized forms of resistance and leadership requires explanation. One explanation, we believe, lies in the conceptual apparatus researchers employ when researching social activism. Another explanation lies in the failure of feminist analysts to include low-income, ethnic minority women as agents in social action. Too often they are seen as the victims and/or beneficiaries of the activism of others. Yet another factor lies in the way that social activism has largely been understood through masculinist lenses, overlooking the quotidian activities and spaces of everyday life, spaces seen as feminine. In the

Strathcona case, women provided the glue that held the community together and the places where they undertook their work of networking, planning and processing. Kitchens, living rooms, street corners, church basements, and coffee shops, are not perceived as “public” spaces, sites where social activism is supposed to occur. But of course, these are precisely the places where “backroom” strategizing occurs. Building hospitality and reciprocal relations through the use of food has also not been recognized as “political” or as forms of “resistance” nor has the cultural adaption of non-Western cultural practices, such as *guanxi*, been seen as “political” action. Moreover, ethnic minority women’s oppositional discourses differ from the administrative, bureaucratic, and technical language of planners and politicians, and most researchers, we might add. In Strathcona, discourses of resistance circulated around notions of family, community, neighbourhood, cultural ways of living, children, identity, shopping and other language perceived as “feminine.”

What counts as activism is often narrowly defined through theories that privilege mass, public and organized forms of resistance as in new social movement theories that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to explain the rise of non-class based movements. Such conceptual frameworks limit, narrow and focus research. We see what we want to see, we hear what we want to hear, we search for what we are looking for. Researchers carry their “working” theories of social activism with them into the archives and into the field.

Because researchers are trained to privilege “official” documents and to recognize resistance only when public, mass, vocal, and “organized,” much that occurs in social activism remains hidden from view. Given differential power, the self-conscious tactics of representation that subaltern groups deploy in the face of power usually do not appear in historical archives.<sup>xxiv</sup> Fortunately, SPOTA’s organizational records were presciently donated to the City of Vancouver Archives, where some wise archivist had the foresight to accept them as given. Moreover,

narrative accounts of “resistance” tend to follow a well worn genre of romanticized idealism. In the case of Strathcona’s resistance to tri-level government state housing policy, the story told is one of a relatively powerless group fighting a seemingly hopeless struggle against overwhelming odds. Strathcona, constructed as feminine, is saved by “white” knights from outside. It is the David versus Goliath story of the weak winning against all odds against overwhelming power. Good triumphing over evil, justice over greed, humanity against technology, and so on. In telling the Strathcona story, the starring roles have been given to charismatic leaders and external agents who are seen to have saved the community, left standing in the wings as supporting actors were women and ordinary residents. Not surprisingly, the starring roles are assigned to those who best fit the traditional script of popular resistance: charismatic male leaders, and self sacrificing men and women from dominant groups. Minority men are given secondary roles, and minority women rarely appear on stage. We do not wish to give the impression that this was solely an ethnic minority women’s movement, for there were, of course, many individuals of diverse gender, age, ethnicity and backgrounds involved. Our argument is that in the absence of a gendered analysis, the significance of ethnic minority women’s leadership has been overlooked, that there are theoretical, conceptual and analytical reasons for why this occurred, and that our understandings of urban social movements are impoverished as a result.

Since the advent of new social movement theory (NSM), academic examinations have framed social activism as public, organized, mass and based on claims for identity recognition. Focusing on the fragmented and issue-specific nature of social movements in the post war period, “new” social movements are seen to have replaced the ideologically or revolutionary oriented movements that have predominated in the past two centuries. These theoretical models are often applied to the analysis of movements such as the environmental, women’s, and neighborhood movements. NSM theory has remained focused upon movements that challenge the government

to alter laws, funding priorities, and other aspects of state structure. In addition, particularly within the feminist movement, the slogan ‘the personal is political’ characterized the realization by women and other activists that there were injustices in their own lives and they began basing their activism on their own experiences. Not only were these realizations used as the basis for articulation of issues about which to lobby governments (e.g. pay equity, universal daycare), but also women began to effect change in their own lives (e.g. choosing not to wear bras, sharing childcare responsibilities). However, only some of these activities were (and are) considered to be activist or part of a social movement.<sup>xxv</sup> This exclusivity reveals the biased nature of dominant theories around social movements and activism, and also the exclusion of certain activities from what is considered effective activism. Actual activism differs greatly from idealized theoretical models; it is messy, emergent, confusing, shifting and tactics and strategies are often invisible to those outside the immediate context.

One way to counter the tendency to predilection, is to enter the archives with more ways of interpreting materials than just through a conceptual framework, no matter how sophisticated. One filter that we employed was the use of subjective and personal knowledge, a valuable resource for interpreting historical documents and events. Without insider, subjective knowledge, researchers tend to ignore, overlook and underestimate the quotidian acts of everyday life as sites of resistance and activism. The everyday acts that form and strengthen social relations and networks through the reciprocal obligations of neighbourliness and connection are set aside even when, rarely, as in the Strathcona case, the community organizations’ own files form part of the collection. We tend to overlook, literally, what is written in the margins of primary documents. The jottings on backs of dinner napkins, the musings on the edges of meeting notes, the scrawling handwritten pages of someone’s personal thoughts—all these are set aside in favour of the official report, the official minutes, and other “formal” documents. We

found clues to forms of political organizing invented by leaders of SPOTA in the handwritten margins of meeting minutes where the menu of banquets were composed, in the receipts and records of banquet ticket sales, in diagrams of circles written on scrap paper that laid out the strategic seating arrangements of political guests and SPOTA executive members at political and fundraising banquets, in the personal snapshots of tea parties, open houses, ribbon cutting ceremonies, walking tours, and banquets contained in family albums and in the laughter of insiders' memories of the past in personal interviews.

Naples notes the strong connection between feminism and community organizing in that a consistent theme of feminist analysis of women's political involvement is "the significance of constructions of community for women's politicization and social action."<sup>xxvi</sup> Ethnic minority women's contribution to SPOTA's success was largely possible because they based their activism in everyday interactions and discourses. The site for activism was not in the remote halls of power far away from their base of power. Through their strategies they brought the power brokers to their backyards. Media reports loved the storyline and helped to draw the stark contrast between planners' and politicians' claims that they were acting and speaking in the best interests of all citizens and SPOTA's struggles to survive as a community. SPOTA's battle with city hall fueled a growing dissatisfaction with a bureaucratically managed city by invisible mandarins, replacing it with a more accountable, and democratic structure, made up of individuals who were more politically connected and sensitive to the needs of an increasingly diverse citizenry in Vancouver.

Other inner city, ethnic and working class neighbourhood organizations such as those in Grandview-Woodlands, Mount Pleasant, the Downtown Eastside, Hastings Sunrise, and Little Mountain, all took inspiration from SPOTA's successful strategies. These communities banded together to oppose land speculation, densification through rezonings, massive transportation

corridors and a whole series of planners' follies during the 1960s and 70s. Local area planning initiatives became standard. SPOTA's efforts and later role as an active developer also helped create models for urban planning, social housing, and community lobbying that have become the norm today, such as Strata Title, Co-Op Housing, public consultation, and community resource boards. SPOTA's hybridized political strategies of *guanxi* were shared and copied elsewhere and used to influence politicians.

Vancouver's taken for granted and much celebrated cosmopolitan streetscapes and neighbourhoods should not be seen as organic, a "natural" result of migration from non-British and non-European sources, but as the result of hard won battles by disempowered citizens, especially ethnic minority, working class women, who fought for the right to place and territory, and to raise families in neighbourhoods where they had historical and cultural connections.

The story of Strathcona continues to unfold. Communities do not stay static, they continue to change and new battles continue to be fought as new actors become engaged. Yet the early stigma of the neighbourhood as a place of moral decay continues to play out even as the narrative of physical decay has passed. As in earlier times, this characterization is largely socially produced through official and popular discourse, and state intervention. The core neighbourhoods of Vancouver retain their earlier working class, ethnically mixed, and non-normative sexual characteristics, what today we would call "queer", although middle-class pockets have also emerged. Yet city bureaucrats and elites persist in viewing Vancouver's inner city as its "intestines," places for industry and production, places for single workers and not families, places to pass through enroute to the downtown financial and business center, and places for conducting activities that are not deemed respectable for middle-class, familial sensibilities. The stigma of otherness persists, as do struggles for self-representation and determination. As researchers continue to investigate the struggles and transformations of ethnic

neighbourhoods, we hope they look to the margins, incorporate first hand accounts, incorporate an intersectional race, class, gender and sexuality analysis, and rethink what counts as municipal or urban politics.

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<sup>i</sup> David Ley refers to “the articulate external allies with a more determined style of protest,” that ultimately secured SPOTA’s success in stopping urban renewal, Schlomo Hasson and David Ley, *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 116.

<sup>ii</sup> Lai largely attributes SPOTA’s success in stopping urban renewal to a recently arrived elite class of Chinese residents, what he refers to as “a new type of educated Chinese immigrant.” David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 130.

<sup>iii</sup> Hayne Wai, *Vancouver Chinatown 1960-1980: A community perspective* (New Scholars—New Visions in Canadian Studies, 1. Seattle, Wash: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington), 8-10. Wai documents the persistence of the traffic and engineering department to push through their transportation plans despite local community resistance. The Vancouver Transportation Study that laid out the City’s transportation plan was developed concurrently with the preparation of the Vancouver Redevelopment Study. Indeed, the Vancouver Redevelopment Study plans were intended to prepare the way for the implementation of the Vancouver Transportation plan as outlined in this report. While SPOTA was negotiating for urban rehabilitation of the neighbourhood, it found itself battling against freeway corridors through its neighbourhood with the very same politicians and planning officials.

<sup>iv</sup> Jill Wade, *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-50*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 48.

<sup>v</sup> Norbert MacDonald, *Distant Neighbours: A Comparative History of Seattle and Vancouver*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987), 177.

<sup>vi</sup> City of Vancouver, *Five Year Plan 1959- 1963*, n.d., 2.

<sup>vii</sup> The 1957 *Vancouver Redevelopment Study* notes, that roughly 60 per cent of the families in the area were of “British, European, or North American origin,” and that the Chinese population made up “nearly one half” of the population, in a survey district which included Chinatown. City of Vancouver Planning Department, *Vancouver Redevelopment Study*, (December 1957), 49.

Strathcona itself did not have a majority of Chinese residents until the late 1960s,<sup>vii</sup> over 10 years after the *Vancouver Redevelopment Study* recommended urban renewal. The most significant increases in the area’s Chinese population came only after Canadian Immigration laws were amended in 1947 to eliminate racial preference, and then again in 1967 with the introduction of the points system. While the level of increase and the large amount of Chinese participation in SPOTA are hugely significant, it needs to be stressed that Strathcona was not historically a “Chinese neighborhood,” and as a community it was much more diverse and complex.

<sup>viii</sup> *Vancouver Redevelopment Study*, 76.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Bocoock, “The Cultural Formations of Modern Society” in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 225.

<sup>x</sup> MayFair Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The art of social relationships in China*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Publishing, 1994), and Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>xi</sup> The SPOTA memorandum, written to Joe Wai and unsigned, but likely by Hayne Wai, is dated 26 June 1974. The first part of the memo details the answers that SPOTA wants from the various officials attending, including Mayor Art Phillips, Alderman Michael Harcourt, Minister Basford, Michael Audain and BC Minister of Housing Lorne Nicholson, as well as suggesting that questions be formulated for the other special guests. The second half of the memo is a tongue-in-cheek reminder that such VIPs as Bruce Lee, Andy Capp, Sun Yet San, and Charles Lindberg “cannot attend because they are out of town, others because they are dead, and two because they are cartoon characters.” Others, the memo finishes, are distinctly NOT invited, notable Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Vice Marshall Ky. CVA SPOTA Files, Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-B-1 f.4, 1974 Banquet Files.

<sup>xii</sup> CVA SPOTA Files, Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-B-1 f.4, 1974 Banquet Files.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Yan, 1996, 4-10.

<sup>xiv</sup> In later years, tours of Strathcona were expanded to the community at large. From 1974 to 1976 dozens of walking tours were given to east side high school students, local and visiting groups of university students, and to conference participants visiting Vancouver. Tours were of varying length and usually included tea at SPOTA's offices or at the Strathcona Community Centre. In 1976 Strathcona began running joint tours with the Britannia Community Centre. Tours escorted up to 50 people at a time and were 5 hours long with 2 ½ hours spent in each neighbourhood, including tea served in Strathcona. From 1975 SPOTA Report to the CMHC on Community Development Activities. SPOTA Executive meeting minutes, 27 April 1976. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-B-1 f.2.

<sup>xv</sup> These memberships were first awarded in 1970 to SPOTA consultants Richard Nan and Robert Kennedy, who had assisted with the effort to stop the freeway and Urban Renewal Scheme III. In 1973 an honorary membership was awarded to Lorne Nicholson, the newly appointed provincial Minister of Municipal Affairs. A few weeks later, honorary memberships were announced for a cattle-call of SPOTA's traditional allies, including Ministers Andras and Basford, Nicholson's predecessor Dan Campbell and his deputy J.E. Brown, MLAs Herb Capozzi and Evan Wolfe, and Paul Hellyer. SPOTA General Meeting minutes, 12 April 1970. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-B-4 f.1. and SPOTA Executive Meeting Minutes, 6 September 1973. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-A-5 f.10. SPOTA General Meeting Minutes, 16 September 1973. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-A-5 f.4.

<sup>xvi</sup> Interview, April 2003.

<sup>xvii</sup> SPOTA often rented busses to transport residents to City Hall, either for protests against specific measures, often as a show of support for particular motions or pieces of legislation, and even occasionally to disrupt Council proceedings, an example of which is the large group of residents who successfully protested at a Council meeting in February 1970 to stop a City Plan to widen Prior and Union Streets into a freeway access road. Council unanimously rejected the freeway plan. SPOTA Executive Meeting minutes, April 5 1970. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-C-6 f.1, and 583-B-4 f.1.

<sup>xviii</sup> Interview, May 2003.

<sup>xix</sup> SPOTA began producing regular newsletters in 1969 to inform residents about upcoming protests, meetings, rallies, and to inform them of the result of those activities. In 1972, SPOTA began to write a regular monthly newsletter, published in both English and Chinese and distributed to all residents, and sent to SPOTA's external allies throughout the city, as well as in Victoria and Ottawa. CVA SPOTA Files. Finding Aid 124, Loc. 583-B-3, 583-B-4, 583-B-7.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxii</sup> Wai.

<sup>xxiii</sup> These were some of the young university students who became involved in the fight against locating the main Firehall Station in the heart of Strathcona. See Li Xiao Ping, forthcoming UBC Press.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 1985).

<sup>xxv</sup> See Nancy A. Naples, "Women's Community Activism: Exploring the Dynamics of Politicization and Diversity," in Nancy A. Naples, ed. *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 343-345 and Martha Ackelsberg, "'Re-Conceiving Politics? Women's Activism and Democracy in a Time of Retrenchment,'" *Feminist Studies* 27:2 (2001), 407.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Naples, 331 and Ackelsberg, 394.