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RELOCATION OF VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN RESIDENTS
UNDER URBAN RENEWAL

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Introduction. This is a study of the relocation patterns of Chinese-Canadian residents in an area undergoing urban renewal in Vancouver in the late 1960's. The study shows the inadequacies of simplistic social planning. The study indicates the need to understand the variety of responses to forced relocation, based on social class, the stage in the family life cycle and ethnicity. The study points out the different ways various families view the old neighborhood and the Chinese community as a whole, and, as part of this, how they view urban renewal. The study shows how housing and residential preferences relate to these factors.

We have found some important differences in the way in which the groups of families reacted to the relocation experience. By aggregating the information from our findings, a profile of a "typical" family in each of the relocation groups can be illustrated; showing the characteristics likely to be found in each group.

(A) PROFILE OF FAMILY THAT LEFT THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

The chances are that this is a three-generational household containing five or six persons. Both parents are present together with their children and a member of the older generation. The children are mainly of school age - although one child may have already finished school and is working.

The head of the family is likely to be foreign-born; emigrating to this country from Hong Kong at the time when he was between 12 to 18 years of age. Before leaving the home country, the family received some Chinese language schooling; sufficient to enable him to speak and read the ethnic language. He has a fairly good command of the English language having also received some schooling after coming to Canada. In the home, we would expect to find the Chinese language used much of the time; but English is spoken as well. It is likely that the family head is married to a person who is also from China. His closest friends are primarily from the same ethnic group.

The family head is in his 40's, and probably employed in a fairly high status type of occupation (relative to the occupational status found in the other relocation groups). He might be a proprietor of a small family business or engaged in work requiring some degree of skill such as a salesman or a head chef in a restaurant. His place of employment is likely to be located outside of the Chinese community, serving a clientele which is mainly non-Chinese. A second member of the family is probably employed - either the spouse or an older child who has finished school. The amount of income into the home at time of displacement was between \$6,000 to \$7,500 per year.

Public housing has no appeal to this family as it is seen as an appro-

private resource only for those with no other relocation alternative (that is, for families with limited income or for elderly persons). A chief motivation for leaving the Chinese community and the urban renewal area is the attraction of what the family considers to be better neighborhoods and homes in other residential districts. However, the family is influenced in its choice of a new home by the presence of other Chinese families already living in a given neighborhood. In relocating, this family has moved either to the eastern or southern part of the city rather than to the upper-middle class areas located in the western and southwestern sections (where fewer Chinese families are found).

At the time of the displacement, the family received no help in relocating and encountered some difficulty in finding a new home. Chinese real estate agencies were used as the primary resource in relocation. The family might have been tenants prior to urban renewal but has now decided to buy a home. If the family had previously owned their home, the amount received from urban renewal home acquisition did not cover the cost of purchasing their new quarters. In either case, the family likely found it necessary to take out a new mortgage; and also found the cost of maintaining the new home considerably greater than were housing costs before relocation.

With respect to urban renewal, the family head is not entirely certain whether the "real" motive behind the urban renewal (Strathcona) scheme was to upgrade housing for families in the area or to displace Chinese families from valuable real estate. He feels more or less detached and resigned from the whole thing; having made the decision to leave this part of his life behind. The continuity of the Chinese community, however, remains important to him. He sees Chinatown as a centre for shopping and commerce; for socialization on special occasions; and as a place where others of his own ethnic background should have the opportunity to live if they so choose.

(B) PROFILE OF FAMILY THAT MOVED INTO PUBLIC HOUSING

There are two sub-types of families here. One comprises elderly couples with no children; the other is made up of nuclear families. (There are few three-generational households, and families with children may be headed by a parent who is widowed. Both of the foregoing factors contribute to the relatively smaller size of the Public Housing family, in contrast to the size of households found in the other relocation groups). Where children are present in Public Housing families, the chances are that they will be of school age (between 6 and 17).

If the head of the family is a pensioner, he is unlikely to be employed. Otherwise, the family head is a wage earner engaged in a semi-skilled or unskilled job such as janitor work, dishwasher in a restaurant, or a chef's aid. The average income of the Public Housing family is the lowest amongst the relocation groups - around \$3,000 per year at time of displacement.

The family head and his spouse (if present) are probably both from China. Prior to emigrating, the family head received schooling in the old country enabling him to speak, read, and possibly write the ethnic language. His command of English is limited. The family head came to Canada around the

age of 18, which obviated the opportunity for any lengthy schooling in this country. The language used in the home is mainly Chinese. The family head's closest friends are mainly from his own ethnic group.

At the time of displacement, the Public Housing family had little difficulty in relocating as the urban renewal authorities took care of this. Following relocation, older couples probably found public housing well suited to their basic requirements. The cost for warm and clean shelter was reasonably inexpensive. The Chinese community, representing a familiar world of friends and cronies and social outlets, remained within comfortable walking distance. The goal of older couples is to live out the remaining years according to an uncomplicated style of living which has existed for some time before the appearance of urban renewal. Relocation does not disrupt this well-conditioned pattern of life.

Younger family heads with children probably saw little immediate alternative to public housing at the time they became displaced. Public housing provided improved physical facilities within their limited means, and allowed them to remain in the general vicinity of their previous homes. However, public housing has some major disadvantages for this sub-group of families. Because of a sliding scale of rent pegged to one's income, increases in the pay cheque are cancelled out by subsequent increases in rent. The social environment in the large Vancouver public housing projects, which often includes neighbours who have never before lived close to Chinese families, is less stable than was life in the Chinese community. The younger Public Housing family seems to be "marking time". Given the opportunity, some would probably return to live in the Chinese community. Others show evidence of wishing eventually to join the families who left.

(C) PROFILE OF THE FAMILY THAT STAYED IN THE CHINESE COMMUNITY

The families that stayed also fall into two sub-groups - elderly couples with no children; and families with children. In the latter case, one is likely to find fairly large households (over five persons) which include a member of the older generation. The chances are that both parents are in the home and children, where present, are either of pre-school age or in their older teens.

The family head and his spouse were both born in China; the former coming to this country after he was beyond the age of 18. He may have had no schooling in Canada and may be limited to speaking a little English. But he is not illiterate. His schooling prior to emigrating to Canada has given him a good command of the ethnic language. The Chinese language is used in the home almost exclusively; and the closest friends of the family are probably restricted to members of his own ethnic group.

The family head is a wage-earner - even if he receives an old age pension. (In the latter case, employment is seasonal.) Like his counterpart in Public Housing, the head of the family that stayed is probably employed in semi-skilled and unskilled work. His place of employment is not necessarily located in the Chinese community itself. Chances are that a second person in the home, probably the spouse, is also employed (perhaps in seasonal work such as farm labour). The family income at the time of displacement was

between \$4,000 to \$6,000 per year.

In relocation choice, public housing is not seen as an appropriate alternative. Like the family who left, there is the view that public housing is suitable only for those with limited incomes.

While acknowledging that something must be done to improve housing in the Chinese community, the family who stayed views the neighborhood itself as a desirable place in which to live. Indeed, the desire to remain is such that the family chooses to stay here in the face of an urban renewal program that is geared for total clearance of the neighborhood.

The family that stayed encountered the greatest difficulty in relocating; having to depend upon friends and relatives for information regarding available space in the Chinese community. The family received no help from urban renewal authorities in moving. Furthermore, following relocation, this family finds itself paying more than it previously did for housing in the same community. Available accommodation in the Chinese community is scarce, and the price of housing has sky-rocketed due to a shrinkage in supply and to a general price inflation throughout the metropolitan area. The family head may have formerly owned a home which took him many years of hard work to acquire. As the amount he received from urban renewal home acquisition was pegged to a pre-inflation market, he now finds it next to impossible to purchase another home. But even worse, while cost of housing has gone up, the physical quality of available housing has gone down. Owners, understandably, are loathe to spend money on structures which may be bull-dozed at any time. The children become a generation growing up in a deteriorating physical environment brought about inadvertently by an urban renewal program which was ostensibly meant to upgrade the quality of their lives. Not surprisingly, the family who stayed views urban renewal with anger, bitterness, and frustration.

CONCLUSIONS

In this Vancouver study we have examined the relocation experiences of families from a Chinese-Canadian community undergoing urban renewal. Despite the fact that these families share a common background and, to a greater or lesser extent, are still tied to a common sub-culture, we have found some distinct differences in the way various families responded to displacement and relocation.

Our findings show that relocation served to crystallize housing goals for many of the families who left the Chinese community, and to direct these families along pathways consonant with their aspirations. For older couples who moved into Public Housing, relocation brought improved shelter without seriously disrupting a well-conditioned style of life. However, for many of the younger families who moved into Public Housing, and particularly for the families who chose to stay in the Chinese community, relocation meant great distress and hardship.

The negative consequences of the relocation program can be attributed to a failure on the part of urban renewal planners to understand the forces

which held many of the families to their ethnic community. In all fairness, planners seemed generally aware at the outset of the program that differences in relocation requirements existed amongst the families, although knowledge about specific requirements was not available. For example, public housing was intended for some but not for all; and ultimate relocation plans were intended to provide a stock of privately developed housing for families who wished to live in a "rebuilt" Chinese community. However, these plans were based on the expectation that some families would first move into public housing or live temporarily outside the ethnic community before returning at a time when privately developed housing became available. Given what we have learned about the characteristics of the group of families who stayed, it is unrealistic to expect that these families would take such intervening steps and then return to pick up their lives in the ethnic community. Inasmuch as the urban renewal program was ostensibly designed, in part, to upgrade housing for those in the Chinese community, the fact that the family who stayed became an unexpected or an "unplanned for" element emerges as an ironic inconsistency and a central weakness in the entire scheme.

An Alternative to Relocation

Due to organized protest by householders still living in the target neighborhood the urban renewal program in question has been suspended. Attention is currently turning to the possibility of rehabilitating, where possible, existing homes by the families themselves with government aid. Our findings would support such an alternative scheme.

A comprehensive analysis of the pros and cons of rehabilitation versus redevelopment would obviously require study beyond the scope of the present report. However, on the face of it, a self-help rehabilitation scheme would allow families who so wish to stay right where they are, and thus avoid many of the pitfalls brought about by relocation. Most certainly, a rehabilitation scheme would avoid placing those who wish to remain in the ethnic community in the position of becoming "deviant" cases. Such a plan could furthermore still provide help to families with limited means; and could still provide options for those who wish to leave. In this respect, the actual relocation program made leaving the ethnic community a part of the "normal" consequences, while staying in the ethnic community became the "special" case. The alternative scheme for rehabilitation would turn this around; which would seem to make greater sense in light of the evidence pointing to the importance of the ethnic community in the minds of all of the families.

Persistence of Ethnic Group Identification

This study was not designed to resolve the theoretical issues of persistence of ethnic group identification insofar as the Chinese community families are concerned. However, we should point out the evidence, in fact, would seem to indicate that some of the families desire residential assimilation while others do not. But even in the former case, we found that a strong ethnic group identification persists.

An important finding in our study is that the residential patterns of

one ethnic minority group can be distinguished by elements or indicators derived from three social science constructs - namely social class, ethnicity, and the notion of a family life cycle. To what extent this finding can be generalized to the cases of other ethnic groups, or even to other Chinese communities in North America remains a question requiring further study.