

Religious Styles of Architecture in Chinatown

By Dana Logan

Walking along Mott St. in Chinatown NYC, the storefront temple and the old Catholic church distinguish themselves as religious space that is unified by architectural form and yet distinctive in its religious use. The casual observers stop and stare at the strangeness of the phenomena and the long-term residents walk by with disregard. This variance in experience is happening because Chinatown is truly a mixed-use development, in the sense that tourism, industry, immigration, and gentrification are all happening right now in the same space. The Church of Grace for Fujianese, the Church of Transfiguration, and the Sung Tak Buddhist Association are examples of the type of religious space this paper will touch on. They are part of the multi-layered experience of Chinatown because they are unified by a vernacular style that is dependent on the reworking of downtown immigrant institutions into Chinese religious buildings. This style is due not only to the Chinese community that built them, but also the interaction with the texture and history of New York. The vernacular form is also, as this paper will show, a product of contrast and disruption within the gaze of New York City tourism. The web of religious buildings and facades in Chinatown, when analyzed as a unified discourse, show the parameters and creativity of religious material expression.

The framework for this paper relies on the use of several key terms and ideas that I use in reference to the work of Dell Upton and Henry Glassie. Vernacular architecture is more of a disciplinary method than it is a stable category of buildings. Upton writes, “When pressed, my preference is to define vernacular architecture not as a category into which some buildings may be fit and others not, but as an approach to architectural studies that

complements more traditional architectural historical inquiries.”¹ This “complement” is in part the inclusion of a category of buildings that have been unnoticed and under analyzed, as Glassie writes, “When we isolate from the world a neglected architectural variety and name it vernacular, we have prepared it for analysis. The term marks the transition from the unknown to the known. The study of vernacular architecture is a way that we expand the record, bit by bit.”² This type of project, embraced by earlier historians like Norman M. Isham and Albert F. Brown³, has been more explicitly used by Dell Upton and Henry Glassie as method of revealing structures of power and class that are built into the landscape through architecture. The study of “vernacular architecture” rests on the premise that buildings that are so woven into our daily experience as to be “unnoticeable” hold their own secrets and cultural significance.

There is no one method of exploration in the field of “vernacular architecture” studies, and the framework chosen has ramifications for the nature of one’s conclusions. The method used in this exploration of Chinatown’s religious buildings will be a “culturally” oriented study, as opposed to an object oriented, socially oriented, or symbolically oriented study⁴. The focus of the project will be on the “architectural competence”, or the vocabulary that builders work with, and its actual performance in various buildings. Upton concludes that the value of this type of analysis is that “Tradition is revealed not as dull mimicry of previous examples but as a shared body of knowledge in which choices arise out of the tension between individual inclinations and social context.”⁵ There is also a complication and futility in this method that must be acknowledged, which comes from

¹ Dell Upton, “The power of things: recent studies in American vernacular architecture” *American Quarterly* 35, no. 3. (1983), 262-279.

² Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 24.

³ See Norman M. Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses: a Historical and Architectural Study* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1895).

⁴ See Dell Upton “The power of things: recent studies in American vernacular architecture” *American Quarterly* 35, no. 3. (1983), 262-279.

⁵ Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture*, 274. This type of analysis relies heavily on structuralism. Glassie demonstrates the use of structuralism in vernacular architecture studies in his essay “Structure and function, folklore and the artifact,” *Semiotica*, 7 (1973), 313-51.

the highly varied social contexts and traditions that contribute to the enclave of Chinatown, thus expanding the “architectural competence” exponentially. In this complicated system I hope to locate a few threads of an architectural tradition through the limited scope of the façade and its relationship to the street. This paper will first try to locate major historical trends that are the foreground for the contemporary buildings, then use those historical implications to analyze the relationship of the building to the neighborhood.

New York before Chinatown

The expression of Chinese religious architecture in the landscape of New York was influenced by a tradition of New York orientalism that predated the arrival of an actual Chinese community in the 1800s. The three waves of New York orientalism⁶ were typified first by the association of Oriental goods with high social status, followed by the interest in all things Oriental by the mass culture, and finally ending in an association of Oriental race with disease, drugs, and uncleanness. All of these stages were closely intertwined with various business ventures at the heart of New York City’s economy, but the last had the most enduring hold on views of Chinatown up to the present.

The impact of popular views of the Orient on the idea of Chinese religion can be seen in the use of Chinese architectural motif in “The Great Chinese Museum”. Opened in 1849 by John Peters Jr. The historian John Kuo Wie Tchen explains that when John Peters Jr. showed the objects from his ventures in China as an American diplomat “The exhibition itself must have been a singular visual experience.”⁷ This spectacle introduced audiences

⁶ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: orientalism and the shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore, Md: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 195.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 114

to the experience of the Chinese facade. “The entrance featured Chinese calligraphy flanking richly carved gold leaf and lacquered panels, as if the visitor were entering a Chinese temple. The Chinese couplet was translated “Words may deceive, but eyes cannot play the rouge.” which describes well the way that American audiences were asked to read and enjoy the colorful facades and foreign symbols of Chinese buildings.

The advent of an actual community of Chinese, mostly sailors, in the heart of Downtown Manhattan created a new array of buildings for white Americans to contend with and Chinese to relate to. Wo Kee, an “enterprising Hong Kong merchant” moved his store to 34 Mott St. in 1873. The move above Chatham Square was to be quickly followed by the first set of businesses and organizations to constitute “Chinatown”. The Mutual Aid Association at 12 Baxter Street provided a social space for eating, gambling, and hearing news from abroad. It was also the home of the first community shrine. The New York Times and Harpers both reported on these spaces which they described as “a badly lighted, musty room, some 20 feet long by 12 wide,”⁸ From the street could be seen a high altar between a pair of large lanterns suspended from the ceiling. Brass censers burning incense, a pair of stuffed birds, and a kerosene lamp were observed on the alter table in front of a portrait described as “Buddha, his son, and the evil one” by the New York Times. Whether or not the description of the space was accurate, it reveals the interest that the New York journalists assumed their audience had for the Chinese religious curiosities. Like the “Great Chinese Museum” the first storefronts of the real Chinatown were exciting and interesting as minor entertainment for all New Yorkers, no longer reserving the exotic Orient for parlors of the upper class.

Chinatown also found religious space in the missions and churches of lower Manhattan. These organizations founded in Chinatown were optimistic about their ability to

⁸ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: orientalism and the shaping of American Culture 1776-1882*, 114.

accomplish two main goals with Chinese in New York: the reform and conversion of downtown immigrants, and the use of Chinese New Yorkers in the conversion of Chinese in China. English language classes were a useful tool in this task as the Chinese, unlike other immigrants, were mostly unable to speak with their fellow New Yorkers and were hungry for language instruction. The Five Points Mission was built in 1853 by the Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church to represent “an outpost dedicated to the moral cleansing of the polyglot port-culture district”⁹ reached out to the Chinese population by hosting annual Chinese New Years celebrations. These celebrations were soon replaced with a “Christmas Reunion”, in 1870 in which Chinese foods and Christmas tree decorations were both present. For uptown society, the visibility of Christian Chinese in New York increased rapidly as members of churches easily found work as house servants in Christian households¹⁰.

The implications of this history for the future styles of religious architecture in Chinatown are two-fold. First, the trappings of Chinese religion were established as visually exotic and worthy of voyeurism during the foundation laying years of Chinatown. Second, because of missionary relations with Chinatown the presence of Christianity was an important element of both internal religious practice in Chinatown and non-resident understanding of morality in Chinatown.

Chinatown architecture

The built environment of Chinatowns all over the United States followed a generalized form.

⁹John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: orientalism and the shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore, Md: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 239.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Chinatowns tended to be composed of standard American commercial and tenement buildings altered to suit a male community—mainly multiple storied commercial buildings containing residential hotels for single men as well as commercial and institutional spaces. They were usually located at the edge of the central business district, where cheap housing was available close to employment opportunities. During most of the 19th century little effort was made to make these buildings look like buildings in China because the structures, overall shapes, settings and social situations were so different in the United States. Shops would occupy the ground floors, with storage, clubrooms and gambling establishments squeezed into the basements.¹¹

The resistance of those tenement and multi-storied commercial buildings to Chinese-style renovation became, however, the very formula for a Chinatown vernacular style. With the inability to shift two major aspects of a building in the Chinese tradition, the frame and the foundation (add footnote), the roof became the malleable aspect for renovation in pre-existing buildings. While the distinctive overhangs and brackets of Chinese roof design were originally aspects of a holistic design of a buildings frame, they are easily attached as superficial (in the sense of non-structural) elements. The combination of these details on distinctive downtown cheap buildings would become a signature style for Chinatown.

As Chinatown grew after WWII, with the lifting of the exclusion act that had separated so many Chinese American families, this distinctive style began to characterize buildings and institutions in the enclave. More religious spaces were created and many lower east side churches received an influx of Chinese members. This shift foregrounds certain conditions, like the continuing immigration of Chinese, which would continue to formulate the “look” of Chinatown’s religious architecture into the present. The image of Chinatown in the 1940’s through 1990’s, including the secular and religious architectural forms of Chinatown, created a standard that is already becoming contested and reworked by new generations of immigrants and New York Chinese-Americans, into a new vernacular form.

¹¹Chris Yip, *America’s architectural roots: ethnic groups that built America* Dell Upton Ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1995), 106.

Community, city, and private design initiatives in Chinatown have changed in response to the self-image and economy of the enclave. The tension that has sparked the various changes has been between the need to attract tourists with an appealing Chinese culture and the need to respect the authenticity of a working class neighborhood. Miniature pagodas appeared on the phone booths in the 1960's as a marketing scheme of the phone booth company. The pagoda phone booths fit into the scheme already standardized by Chinatown's McDonald's, which was decorated with gold ornament and pagoda roof details. The pagoda facades on phone booths, fast food chains, and banks, with the distinctive gold and red roofs, have come to signify Chinatown over the past forty years to tourists. These attempts to market a Chinatown aesthetic were not however taken up by community and city planners who saw the use of Chinese facade design as unauthentic. The pagoda phone booths came down in 1995 when the company responded to the Chinatown History Museum's opinion that "you can't just reduce an entire culture to a symbol"¹².

The most telling sign of community ambivalence to tourist-oriented Chinese symbolism might be the absence of a Chinatown welcoming arch. Most Chinatowns in the United States, despite dwindling enclave culture have erected and maintained an Arch with Chinese writing and bold Chinese detailing that signifies the beginning of the Chinese quarter. The effects of 9/11 on the economy of Chinatown changed the community opinion on this kind of visual reference. In response to the lack of tourism and business after the terrorism, the City of New York and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association embarked on plans to revitalize Chinatown and draw non-residents back to the enclave.¹³ The plan included the building of visual references that would seem exotic

¹² "So long, it's been good pagoda" Village Voice. September 5th, 1995.

¹³ Chinatown seeking a rebirth. Newsday, Monday, August 22, 2005. LMDC Calls for Help to Remagnetize Chinatown. The New York Sun. Wed. August 20 2003

and appealing to tourists. A 1.5 million arch was designed pro-bono by Tieh-Chi Ho to be built across Park Row at Chatham Square. The design, in comparison to the highly ornate Philadelphia and Washington D.C. gates, is very simple but is larger than any other city's Chinatown arch at 45 feet high and 80 feet wide¹⁴.

Another visual response to the lack of post-9/11 business is the plum blossom lighting plan. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association has installed “year-round festive lighting on most of Chinatown's main streets to make the area more visitor friendly”. The press release explained, “The key design element in Winter Lights is the plum blossom, a flower that blooms in the winter months. In addition to its natural beauty, the plum blossom symbolizes strength and perseverance in adversity. Since the plum blossom blooms the earliest of any flower, even braving patches of snow, it also symbolizes optimism and renewal.”¹⁵ This new type of visual and verbal advertising has been an attempt to sell Chinatown as a place to come for cultural enrichment. Other than restaurants, the community lacks much activity for tourists, leaving the process of taking in an atmosphere as the prime draw.

With the declining interest in going to a “slum”, as orientalism manifested itself in Chinatown for most of the 20th century, the effort to “clean up” the streets for tourists has been parallel to a growing visual representation of Chinese culture in what the Museum for Chinese Americans deems as “essentialized”. The inclusion of religious sites as the new main attraction in the post-9/11 efforts links Chinatown with a feeling of “culture” that is moral, colorful, and festive.

¹⁴ Chinatown finally gets its arch lift. Daily News Wednesday, April 6th 2005

¹⁵ Plum Blossom Lighting to Illuminate Streets of Chinatown. Daily News Thursday, December 12 2002

Religious Buildings in Chinatown

Foremost on the publicized tours of Chinatown is the Catholic Church of the Transfiguration on Mott St. The Church was originally home to the Zion English Lutheran Church, and later an Anglican parish. Bought by the Roman Catholics from the Anglican parish, the church was run by a highly influential Cuban priest who framed the church as the “Church of Immigrants”.¹⁶ The church served a mostly Italian community but also ministered to Chinese. In the wake of the massive 1950's immigration of Chinese to New York the church began to offer sermons in Chinese. Today the church is used mostly by Chinese and holds services in Mandarin and Cantonese. Chinese children from all different religions, including Buddhism, attend the school attached to the church.

The church is in the design of its original English Lutheran parish with elegant tall windows and a green copper steeple (see image 1). Exemplary of the historical styles that the city has made a point of preserving, it is untouched by Chinese motif and decoration. Color in Chinatown is a prime mode of announcement, and in the case of the church, the lack of color is just as effective. The brown stone pulls the building back from the action of the street giving it a sense of heavy disengagement. Color also plays a part in the sense of antiquity that the building exudes. The use of copper in the steeple, which has since become green, is a sign of its prestige and age. These details refer to a more ambiguous monumentality: that of the government and its style of building, which is easily referenced in the near by City Hall district. The English church architecture contrasts and negates the style of Chinatown and in doing so creates a specific type of spectacle that is rooted in the illusion of immunity from change, which the church presents in the context of colorful Mott St. Although the façade of the original building is stable, the school attached to it instantly integrates the community (see image 2). Through Chinese script

¹⁶ David Dunlap Legacy, *Glory in Gotham: Manhattan's houses of worship: a guide to their history, and architecture* (New York City: City and Co., 2001), 44.

on its sign and its intermediary style of white cement, the style is reminiscent of the stonework of the church but softer and more functionally akin to the brick tenements next door.

In the framework of New York orientalism, which sees Chinatown as a site of contagion and uncleanness, the church is a symbol of an intervening force. The architecture is a testament to the inability of Chinatown motif to transform all that is in its parameters. This however is an illusion, of use to the tourism industry and those who are nostalgic for the Lower East Side before Chinatown radically spread to overtake the traditional boundaries. It is a building that is still described as a “Latin Immigrant” church by popular guides to the city¹⁷ despite its overwhelming use as a Chinese community center.

In contrast to the unchanged structure of the Church of Transfiguration, the True Light Lutheran Church is exemplary of the vernacular style that transforms American motif through the use of Chinese motif. The tall building is an urban space that has been adapted from a narrow tenement to a provocative Lutheran church (see image 3). The roof of the building is softened and annulled by the superficial overhang motif from the Chinese tradition of *tailiang*¹⁸ framework. The tall brick front exterior is the frame for a large reveal of a cross, which hovers above the red doors of the church. Both the cross reveal and the doors are of particular stylistic heritage, leading to a beautiful synthesis of traditions, context, and imagination.

The reveal, as an exterior motif, is a development of modern architecture that solves the problem of ornamentation without using classical western images and shapes that draw a building towards traditionalism. In the United States, congregations building churches

¹⁷ Legacy, *Glory in Gotham*, 44.

¹⁸ Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Traditional Chinese Architecture* (New York City: China Institute in America, 1984), 11. The *Tailiang* framework is utilitarian response to the need to carry rainwater off eaves. The style has developed into a highly ornamental affair that distinguishes classical Chinese architecture through its use.

after the Second World War often choose the modernist aesthetic and the use of reveal in those churches was very prominent, as symbols such as the cross were integrated through brickwork or concrete. The use of reveal in this Chinatown church shows some of the same instincts as it solves the problem of remodeling the exterior of a brick tenement into a religious space with minimal effort¹⁹ while utilizing the material of brick as a sculptural form.

The red doors of the church are slightly disconcerting in their use of color and detail as they are juxtaposed against the very urban American motif of the brick reveal. Like the motif on the roof of the eaves, they announce the church as undeniably Chinese. In this church we can see the layering of styles absent in the stable Church of the Transfiguration. The layers of style: brick, red paint, green eaves, do not imitate or inspire American public buildings as so many churches did in the dawn of American cities²⁰. Instead the layers refer to residential, commercial, and tourist oriented buildings that crowd together new immigrants and titillate outsiders. The True Light Lutheran Church stylistically does not recede from the streetscape as historical churches like the Church of the Transfiguration do.

The Sung Tak Buddhist Association stylistically is akin to the True Light Lutheran Church in its use of layering and transformation of materials. Originally a Jewish synagogue, the building at 13 Pike St. near East Broadway was the home of B'nai Israel Kalwarie (Sons of Israel) and was designed by Alfred E. Badt in 1904. The building was in the style of a handful of other New York synagogues built before it. "Known as the Kalvarier Schul, or Pike St. Schul, its façade is dominated by tall slender Romanesque arched windows recalling the synagogues of Shaaray Tefila, 160 West 82nd St, and

¹⁹ The façade of a brick tenement can be transformed at minimal cost by putting another thin layer of brickwork on top of the original. The new layer may then be manipulated to make reveals of symbols.

²⁰ Craig Zabel and Susan Scott ed., *American Public Architecture: European roots and native expressions* (University Park, PA: Penn State University, 1989), 10.

Kehilath Jeshuran, 117 East 85th St.” The congregation became increasingly smaller until in the 1970’s the synagogue was abandoned, and the building became derelict in its disuse (though it also was a designated landmark and thus safe from demolition).

In 1994 the Sung Tak Buddhist Association bought the building and transformed it into one of Chinatown’s most prominent temples and architectural gems. The Romanesque façade is made further imposing by a double stairway leading to a front balcony that then leads into the building (see image 4). Creating three layers of the building’s form, a street level door and windows sits under the balcony, while the main level is separated from the top by a separate set of windows. The changes that the Buddhists have made to the outside of the building have utilized all these existing features by transforming the top level into residential quarters, transforming the bottom level into a commercial area with a little shop, and using the balcony as the setting for a large incense burner. A large statue of the Buddhist goddess Quanyin has been placed along side the door on the wide balcony. These changes have made the building a bustling center of activity as people visit, shop and gawk at the well displayed rituals performed on the balcony which looks over one of the busiest streets coming off of East Broadway.

Like the True Light Lutheran, the Sung Tak Buddhist association is notable for a juxtaposition of styles, tradition, and usage. The easy melding of commercial, residential, and religious space transforms the synagogue that was once so stylistically isolated from its neighboring buildings, more akin to the nature of the neighboring tenements in its basic structure of living space above retail space. The remodeled building also plays on the Romanesque grandeur of the original façade by making the Quanyin in the same stone material and placing her within the symmetry of the buildings existing ornament. The stairways leading up the balcony become almost processional as people ascend and descend from the ritual incense burner.

The Sung Tak Buddhist Temple is part of the constant expansion of Chinatown into the Lower East Side, and the use of traditional Jewish and Italian spaces has become distinguished in a very specific stylistic overlay. Whether it is tenements, synagogues, municipal or private business buildings, the religious spaces of Chinatown have managed to integrate distinctively European immigrant structures into temples and churches. The Lower East Side has not completely turned into the new annex of Chinatown however, and the specific aesthetic of this intermediary neighborhood is also distinguished by the contrast of remaining European immigrant institutions and emerging Chinese ones. Many synagogues in the neighborhood, for instance, have remained in use and are actively preserved by strong Lower East Side initiatives. These synagogues, like the Eldridge St. Synagogue, stand in striking contrast to the Fuzhounese restaurants and shops that now dominate the neighborhood.

The Church of Grace for Fuzhounese congregation is made up of people from the province of Fuzhou in Southwest China who have been immigrating to Chinatown in mass numbers since the 1980's and continues to arrive today. They have recently surpassed the Cantonese as Chinatowns' leading ethnic group.²¹ Most come from rural areas and journeyed to Chinatown to join a community of relatives and friends who have already migrated from their village in Southeast China. The link between certain villages in Fuzhou and Chinatown are very strong and the wages earned in America are fueling the migration of more relatives everyday. Fuzhounese immigrants face considerable obstacles in their transition to American life. The cultural and economic divide is large between Chinatown residents who have lived in Chinatown since the 1940's and 50's, and have developed strong businesses and organizations in the neighborhood, and the newly immigrated Fuzhounese. Language is one of those obstacles as the Fujianese dialect is

²¹ Kenneth Guest, *Laminas Youth among Fuzhou Chinese* Tony Carnes ed., *Asian American Religion: the making and remaking of borders and boundaries* (New York City: New York University Press, 2004), 57.

not largely known in Chinatown and most Fuzhounese speak neither English nor Cantonese.²²

The architecture in which this tradition of Chinese Protestantism grew up is important in understanding the way that it has manifested in Chinatown today. Early missionaries in China along with other administrative powers brought with them western architects to create the western outposts. Within the treaty ports and other foreign concessions and missions, foreign architects designed mostly in an eclectic variety of the revivalist styles fashionable in the West and elsewhere during the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, strongly reflecting the architectural ambitions of their colonial patrons and providing architectural familiarity²³.

As conversion became more successful with the outreach of Chinese missionaries who could convert their kinfolk and speak Chinese certain aspects of Christianity became

²² Protestantism is part of the cultural heritage that most Fuzhounese bring to Chinatown. After China's defeat in the Opium wars (1839-1842), Fuzhou was among the first five ports opened to trade by the British. The missionaries soon came to China for the first time and Fuzhou was one of their first inroads. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign missionaries, sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) arrived in Fuzhou in 1847. They were quickly followed by the U.S. Methodist Episcopal Mission and the British Anglicans in 1850 and lastly by the YMCA in 1905 (John King Fairbanks, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985*) Missionary work was not a wild success in China in general due in part to the unflattering association of the churches with imperialist foreign policy and the inability of missionaries to learn Chinese.

The success of Christianity in Fuzhou came through the indigenous development of Protestantism by Chinese evangelists who created their own denominations. John Sung founded the Home of Grace, the denomination of the Church of Grace in Chinatown. Sung was educated at Ohio Wesleyan University but returned to China to stage revivals and preach a very personal devotion to God. After the Communist Revolution the church found its self in a precarious position with the government. Resistant to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement backed by the Communist government, the House of God and Little Flock churches were closed and the congregations became under-ground and met in residences. In 1978 the Communist party restored the policy of freedom of religious belief and by 1979 four of the thirteen churches to first be reopened were in Fujian Province.

²³Peter G Rowe and Seng Kuan, *Architectural encounters w/ essence and form in modern China* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 30.

more popular, including the formality of ritual and the idea of transcendence. For Protestant Chinese, architecture was one of the traditions introduced by the missionaries that seemed to stick.

As congregations acquired their own chapels, however, there was a trend toward more formal ritual and an emphasis on religious decorum. Men and women had their separate entrances to the chapel and there was segregated seating with a screen separating the sexes. Among certain Christians there eventually developed a deep attachment to traditional rituals and even Western church architecture.²⁴

In churches, this impulse resulted in buildings almost indistinguishable from their western counterparts when American architects drew up plans for Chinese churches of many denominations without even traveling to the region. For example, the gothic revival style Xujiahui Catholic church in Shanghai follows this pattern of implanted church architecture with little alteration for its regional situation. Even when western church architects came to China to live and practice full time, little about their work changed or responded to their new environment.²⁵ This trend was less closely followed in the Fuzhou province where Protestantism blossomed at the turn of the century. In 1915 rural churches like the Methodist church built in a village south of Fuzhou, through the financial investment of the Chinese congregation and the foreign mission, demonstrated a new style. Elegant plain brickwork set off three main features: the windows, the door, and the sign. This simple equation highlighted the Chinese script of the sign and the delicate brickwork around the windows and sign that were a product of the congregation's own design.²⁶

The Church of Grace for Fuzhounese is an interesting extension of that architectural moment in 1915 Fuzhou Province. Inhabiting and effectively transforming a Municipal

²⁴ Ku Wei-Ying and Koen De Ridder ed. *Authentic Chinese Christianity: preludes to its development (19th and 20th centuries)* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2001), 72.

²⁵ Rowe and Seng, *Architectural encounters with essence and form in modern China*, 33.

²⁶ Ryan Dunch, *Fuscou Protestantism and the Making of a Modern China 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 151.

Bath house on the edge of “Chinatown” proper in the Lower East Side, the Church of Grace is a white building with lattice bars over the windows, a skinny cross on the ridge of the flat roof, and a Bible over the door (see image 5). The Church of Grace utilizes an aesthetic of minimalism that is at once congruent with the simple protestant aesthetic developed in the villages of the Fuzhou Province and divergent in its ability to transform an urban space. The original Municipal Bathhouse invokes social authority through the elegant urban municipal form that was used as a place for immigrants to bath and connect with social welfare programs in the late 19th century.

Like the previous religious spaces of Chinatown mentioned, the Church of Grace is part of a tradition of exterior transformation, but it is also an exception to some of those buildings trends. The Church of Grace, like the others, has extended the materials of the building into new ornament to make the space its own, but in this case the extension is the shared aesthetic of previous and current users. The style of the original building is equivalent to Fuzhou protestant architecture in material, spatial configuration, and exterior detail. More specifically, the original building and the Fuzhou protestant style both use unornamented brick work with gentle detailing around the front windows and door, a prominent sign above the door in plain script and the promise of an unbroken large space in the interior that is instantly accessible from the street. The similarities are not coincidental. Fuzhou protestant architecture was rooted in the tradition of the YMCA mission, which worked hard to promote the ideal of a religious space as an unornamented “social” space that catered to the whole citizen through sports, youth and senior activities, and education. The Church of Grace serves very similar purposes in New York for its Fuhzounese members who need social services only the church is equipped to provide. Function, shared history, and aesthetic compatibility combine to make a natural home for this growing Chinatown institution.

The Church of Grace, the True Light Lutheran Church, the Sung Tak Buddhist Association, and the Church of the Transformation are connected by the architectural overlay manifested in their facades. While representing different religious aesthetics, different levels of public visibility, and different moments in Chinatown's history, these buildings create a broader visual experience that shows the enduring importance of "overlay" to the creation of broader categories of American vernacular architecture.

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