

San Francisco Chronicle

Reaching for the American Dream: Chinatown renters unite to own homes

by Vanessa Hua, *San Francisco Chronicle*

July 25, 2006

For a decade, Ji Jian-guang and his wife feared losing their cramped, two-bedroom Chinatown apartment.

Their home, where their adult sons share a bunk bed and thick tape holds a bathroom window inside its rotting wood frame, is typical of other apartments in the neighborhood, but families like the Jis have few housing options. Ji says he couldn't live outside this neighborhood where community groups and businesses cater to more than 18,000 residents -- many monolingual immigrants like him.

So this spring, Ji, his wife, Ru Mei Peng, and a dozen other families joined a land trust designed to improve living conditions for the poor and make home ownership a financial possibility.

In May, the San Francisco Community Land Trust purchased the dilapidated building where the Jis live. To help make ownership affordable, the trust will own the land beneath the building and each of the 21 households will pay \$10,000 to own a unit at 53 Columbus Ave..

The Chinatown project is the first project for the San Francisco Community Land Trust, founded in 2001. The trust is also talking with tenants in other San Francisco neighborhoods about adding other projects.

"When you're living in someone's home, your life is dependent on other people. When you have your own home, you have autonomy," said Ji, 62, a retired restaurant cook.

Housing land trusts have been around since the 1970s but became increasingly popular in California during the recent housing boom. Of more than 200 housing-oriented land trusts that exist in the country, the first large-scale one started in Burlington, Vt., in 1982. Others have started in Florida, Alaska, New York, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

"The first land trusts were commune-kind of people, experimenting with different forms of ownership. Then they started to do it in urban areas with serious housing problems, run-down places no one wanted to invest in," said Rick Jacobus, a Bay Area land trust consultant working on projects from Point Reyes to Irvine. "It shifted from being a counterculture land-reform movement to being a housing strategy."

The land trust, with help from city-funded programs and private financing, is cobbling together \$4.5 million to \$5 million for the necessary renovations and seismic upgrades at

the Chinatown building. The Asian Law Caucus, which also helped organize residents, will contribute more than \$850,000 for renovations and help pay down the property's mortgage. The organization also plans to move into the building's ground-floor office space.

"The idea is to create a community-owned and -used building," said Malcolm Yeung, a staff attorney.

The residents will own a limited-equity stake and will not be allowed to sell for market rate, which in Chinatown currently runs up to \$500,000 for two-bedroom tenancies-in-common. The resale price will be tied to inflation and the cost of living to keep the units permanently affordable.

The co-op will be run by an elected group of resident-owners, whom the trust will train this fall to manage the property. The project is slated for completion by the beginning of 2008.

Over the past decade or so, other San Francisco neighborhoods have been redeveloped and renovated, driving up rents. That gentrification largely bypassed Chinatown -- keeping rents comparably affordable but also failing to improve most of the housing. About 60 percent of all Chinatown rental units are single rooms without bathrooms or kitchens; very few people own their homes.

Affordable-housing experts say several factors have kept away new development. Chinatown is unattractive to developers because many of the lots are small, forcing them to broker multiple deals to buy enough property.

And the neighborhood has dozens of fraternal and other benevolent associations that own roughly a third of the property in Chinatown, collecting rents on buildings paid off long ago.

The old guard has the mentality that "it's good enough," said Warner Wong, 50, a retired architect who advises on real estate issues for Wong Family Benevolent Association, which owns Chinatown buildings. "A leaking toilet is no big deal. 'Hell, I lived without a toilet.' "

Many of those community leaders are also wary of incurring debt, said Gordon Chin, executive director of the Chinatown Community Development Corp., which advocates for and manages affordable housing.

"Chinese are very debt-averse," Chin said. "Also, they are making money downstairs and upstairs. Any time you remodel, you relocate people and you lose rent."

The Chinatown tenants were organized and committed, said James Tracy, the land trust board president. "They really wanted to go for broke and fight for affordable housing on

principle. They were not interested in fighting for a better relocation deal. They wanted to take a stand for the community."

The residents at 53 Columbus have fought to stay for the past decade. City College of San Francisco bought their building with plans to build a new Chinatown-North Beach campus. In 2003, the residents sued the college, arguing that the proposed campus would push them out, violating previous assurances and state law. School officials eventually decided against making costly earthquake-retrofit repairs and sold the building to the land trust for \$1.5 million.

After emigrating from China as a boy, tenant Larry Lee toiled in laundries and restaurants in Chinatown and the Central Valley. Lee, 82, has lived in the building since 1992.

"Most of my life I work during the day and sleep at night. It's a nonstop cycle. I was so tired, I slept most of my free time," said Lee, 82, now confined to his bed. A portrait of his mother and framed scrolls of Chinese calligraphy hang in his tiny living room. "I don't know of any other place I could call home."

Over the years, he watched Chinatown shrink as housing disappeared under the Financial District. He became a tenant leader back when the battle began with City College.

"The Chinese are like a pan of loose sand. They never stick together. No one in Chinatown likes to stick their head out," Lee said. "I try to show the Chinese do have complaints. If I do something, maybe someone else will follow."

Tenant partnership

In May, the San Francisco Community Land Trust purchased the building at 53 Columbus Ave.; each of the 21 households there will pay \$10,000 to join a co-op. The land trust is now cobbling together \$4.5 to \$5 million for the renovations and seismic upgrades with city-funded programs and private financing.

E-mail Vanessa Hua at vahua@sfchronicle.com.