

# Redefining Urban Spaces in New York City's Chinatown Through the Creation of Gateways

In the fall of 2012, New York City College of Technology (City Tech) was approached by Wellington Chen, Executive Director of the Chinatown Partnership and a Trustee of The City University of New York, to develop gateway design proposals to revitalize New York City's Chinatown. Starting from "The Chinatown Partnership Master Plan," created in collaboration with the Department of Transportation (DOT), and Chinatown community members, City Tech started to work on transforming Chinatown.

## INTRODUCTION

Around the world and in the United States Chinatown's are defined by gateways created to mark their various entry points. These gates are of great importance to the community, marking the entrance to each Chinatown with an iconic structure. Although gates vary in design from traditional Chinese architecture to contemporary architecture, each design plays the same role of defining the boundaries of the area. These colorful gates known in Mandarin as paifang are one of the key structures which attract tourist.<sup>1</sup> Upon crossing these boundaries, residents, tourists and visitors are transported into a different culture. The experience is no different in New York City's Chinatown, which attracts millions of tourists every year. However, in NYC, the gates of entry into Chinatown are not so clearly delineated. Unless one knows its location, it's not easily found. One could be around the corner but wouldn't know it. Chinatown is a cultural gem hidden in the city and would benefit greatly from an increase in tourist activity. This can be accomplished by activating key entrances to the area with iconic structures.

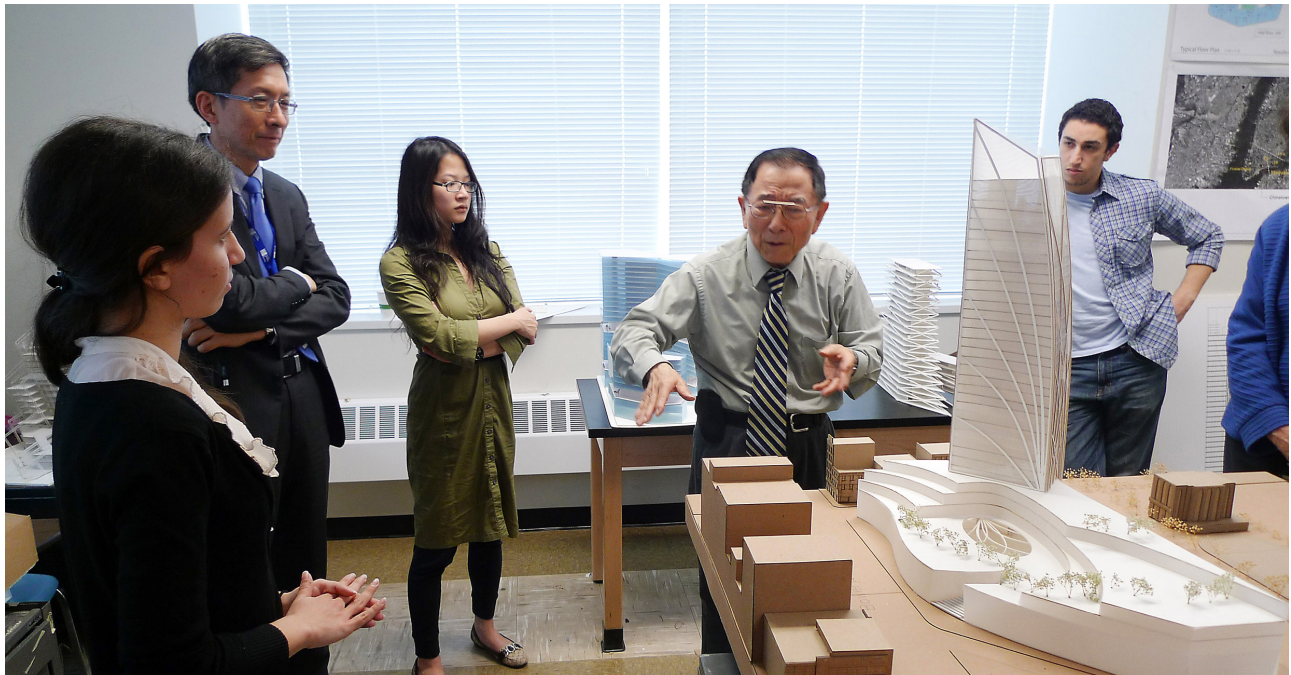
Chinatown, Manhattan is home to the largest enclave of Chinese people in the Western Hemisphere. With an estimated population of 150,000 people, Manhattan's Chinatown is also one of the oldest ethnic Chinese enclaves outside of Asia.<sup>2</sup> It is an active economic center for its population, from the streets lined with greengrocers and stores featuring Chinese merchandise, to the Chinese jewelry district, to the many banks in the neighborhood. In addition, tourism and restaurants are major industries. The district boasts many historical and cultural attractions, and it is a destination for tour companies. Thus, it is paradoxical that, unlike so many other U.S. Chinatowns, it lacks gateways representing the population and welcoming people to the area.

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The task of designing gateways to Chinatown was given to our Urban Design students, completed in fulfillment of a final project requirement for graduation. The project brought a lot of excitement to the students, who were motivated by the prospect of working on a “real” project that would potentially be built. And, reflective of the diversity at City Tech, the Urban Design students brought an international perspective to the project; the design team had students from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Japan, Egypt, China, Russia, Thailand, India, Ecuador, Bangladesh, Iraq, Pakistan, Brazil, Ukraine, Canada, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua, Grenada, Belize and the West Indies.

Very few restrictions were placed on the project, allowing the students’ creativity and imagination free reign. They were only instructed to create a structure that was functional, in addition to being “iconic.” The concept was not limited to or limited by traditional Chinese architecture. Instead, the design needed only be aesthetically captivating and able to serve as a marker that would be seen day or night to define key entrances into Chinatown. Due to this collaboration with the Chinatown Partnership and the Department of Transportation, hundreds of students have had the opportunity to transform their ideas into proposals presented to New York City Agencies.



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Figure 1: Final presentation with members of the Chinatown community and Chinatown Partnership.

#### DESIGN THROUGH COLLABORATION

City Tech’s Architecture Technology Department has a long history of collaborating and working on real-life projects and actually getting them built. Since the eighties, when Metro Tech was in the early construction stages, at the request of the local BID, City Tech students prepared comprehensive studies to transform the area. Metro Tech is one of the nation’s largest urban university-industry science and Technology Park. JPMorgan Chase and Brooklyn Union Gas exhibited the proposal, including models and detailed drawings, in their headquarters. During this time, students were able to present their proposals to key member of JPMorgan chase and Brooklyn Union Gas and local BID. This collaboration

resulted in the students designing a new façade for one of the building under renovation in the Metro Tech Center. Since then, the department has continued its strong commitment to the college's campus in downtown Brooklyn.

Through the years, the main focus of the urban design studio has been to keep the class as realistic as possible, many times working with design criteria's provided by local city agencies. Regarding urban design issues, The Department of transportation (DOT) has the biggest influence in shaping new proposal affecting the city. Whether it's the design of a new park, closing of streets or changing bus routes, the DOT plays a key part in the design process of urban space. This makes our studios collaboration with them important in keeping our proposals are realistic as possible. However, this doesn't just include faculty meetings with them, but encourages interaction with the students. For this reason, key member from DOT's urban design division are invited to midterm and final presentation. This provides a new aspect to the studio, as students are able to interact with city agencies and present in a similar way to the real world. Typically an urban design jury is made up of local city agencies, local BID members and government figures that are involved in the approval process of their designs. Many times, after finishing the urban design studio, we are contacted by the DOT to provide them with some of the proposal created by our students as a means of generating ideas. This collaboration creates a unique atmosphere and experience for the students, as they are able to ask and receive comments similar to the real world. Working with the DOT and Chinatown Partnership has been a great experience and success, and throughout the entire design studio they have both been crucial in developing our students work.

*"It has been very gratifying over the past year and a half to collaborate with City Tech and the Chinatown Partnership in formulating visions for Chinatown's gateways. The creative and informed work generated in the urban design studios builds on and fortifies DOT's ongoing efforts with the Partnership to develop a comprehensive, consensus-built master plan for Manhattan's burgeoning Chinatown of the 21st Century. While the design proposals vary widely in their responses to site, context and function, the architectural and spatial manifestations are consistently informed by multimedia, art, environmental action and private and public ritual. Each design seeks to inscribe a space of exchange conducive to meaning and identity; collectively, the interventions set the stage for urban transformation and connectedness. I look forward to the continued design discourse and collaboration aimed at fostering streetscapes and open spaces befitting the prismatic vitality of Chinatown."<sup>3</sup> - Neil Gagliardi, Director of Urban Design, NYC DOT*

In recent years we have focus our urban design class on addressing local design issues affecting our neighborhood, as well as nearby sites. This is where Chinatown comes into the picture, as their push for creating Traditional Chinese gateways has gathered a lot attention in the news. This push has involved a close collaboration with the DOT, as they have the final say if the gates can be built. Wellington Chen, executive director of the Chinatown Partnership has been leading the push for the creation of multiple gateways to highlight key entrances into Chinatown. Although this initiative has gather attention lately, the push for the creation of gateways has been going on for more than 50 years.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Chen mentioned that in 2005 the City Council set aside \$250,000 for the creation of a gateway, however, the effort for its creation slowed down due to complicated city regulation and in 2009 the Council completely cut the funding from the budget.

However, for the purpose of the urban design studio, we gave the class the same budget requirements to keep with the City councils original estimate.

Since Wellington Chen is also a Trustee of the City University of New York, as well as an architect, he approached our school to collaborate and generate ideas for designing gateways to Chinatown. This collaboration started by gathering members of DOT, Chinatown Council members, Chinatown Partnership, Chinatown BID, Chinatown local residents and City Tech Urban Design Faculty for several meeting to discuss what were the goals of the gates and how our college could assist in generating interest for the effort, while still providing our students with a learning experience. One of the main things that were discussed, especially by the local residents, was that they wanted a traditional Chinese gateway, like the many found around the United States and the world. Although this is what may eventually get built, for the purposes of our design class, it would be very limiting. For this reason, we suggested that our students should focus on designing contemporary style gateways that addressed important Chinese elements. This also gave the students more freedom to design more unique gateways. Overall, the collaboration undertaken between our college and Chinatown lasted for three semesters, at which point we will once again focus the urban design studio at another issue affecting our community. This collaboration was a unique experience for each student, as they were able to meet, present and talk to city agency members working on similar issues, as well as gaining valuable experience for after graduation.

#### **CHINATOWN GATEWAY SITES**

During the initial meetings with the Chinatown Partnership, we were provided with the “Chinatown Partnership Master Plan”, created in 2007. This plan created in collaboration with the Chinatown Partnership and Department of Transportation established five sites that would serve as important entry points into Chinatown and where a gateway could be located. Each site was selected because of their capability to link to other important parts of the city, as well as having a visual impact for tourist. Unlike other parts of the city, Chinatown is surrounded by tall buildings, making finding it very difficult. Recently, the amount of tourist coming into Chinatown has also decreased and through the design of gateways, it would be one way to once again attract and gather interest towards Chinatown.

After reviewing the five sites from the “Chinatown Partnership Master Plan”, we decided to use four sites from their map (A,B,D,E) and added two more that were selected by our students (C,F). The six sites were then divided among four urban design classes to increase the diversity of projects created.

**Site A:** This triangular traffic island, bounded by Canal, Baxter and Walker Streets, is a key intersection in Chinatown. It is highly visible to motorists crossing Canal Street from the Manhattan Bridge or from the Holland Tunnel. Although a potential major gateway to the courthouses in lower Manhattan and to the beehive of commercial activity in this area, the site fails to capitalize on its wonderful location.

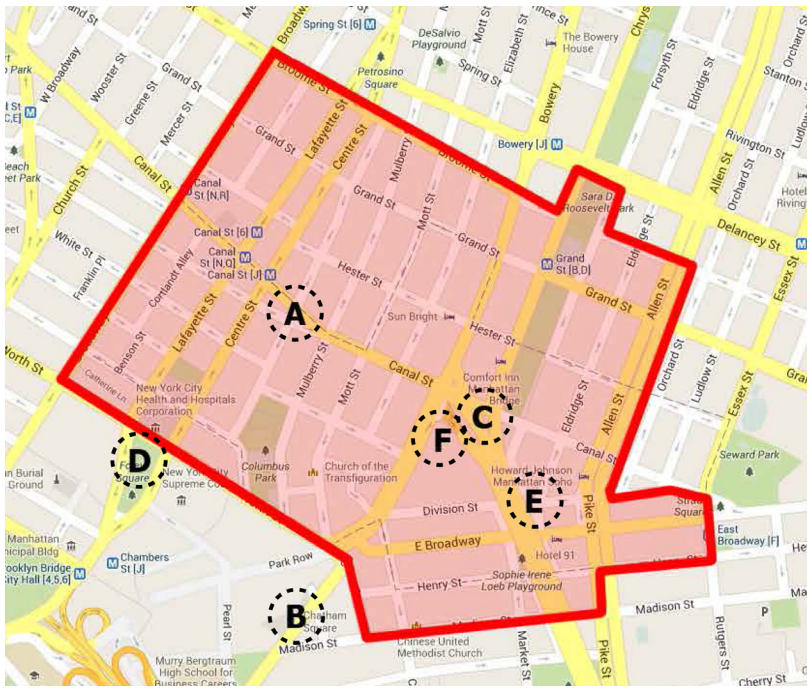
**Site B:** Chatham Square is located at the intersection of Bowery, St. James Place, and East Broadway. The present design of the plaza has conflicting architecture and does not create a welcoming environment. It is also directly across the street from the newly established security zone and its rather forbidding appearance. This location is being considered for a subway entrance to the new Second Avenue subway, offering extraordinary design opportunities.

**Site C:** As one enters Chinatown from the Manhattan Bridge, this is the first impression the visitor receives. Located at the junction of Canal Street and Bowery, this traffic triangle is unfriendly, uninviting and confusing to the pedestrian. The site also fails to take any advantage of the majestic gateways leading into the bridge.

**Site D:** Surrounded by stately courthouses and used by thousands of pedestrians crossing it on a daily basis, Foley Square is an example of a missed opportunity to create an exciting, stimulating environment and an urban oasis. The existing subway station and the central fountain fail to capitalize on the extraordinary opportunities afforded by this site.

**Site E:** Tucked away under the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, this site is located at the junctions of East Broadway, Division and Eldridge Streets. It is a very busy intersection and serves as a terminal for long distance busses departing from Chinatown. Its heavy pedestrian population makes it an ideal location for active shopping and cultural activities.

**Site F:** Located adjacent to the entrance of the Manhattan Bridge and its magnificent portal, this sunken area at the base of Confucius Plaza is presently used



as a service area for garbage collection and for deliveries to the massive structure above. By creating a raised platform above it, which will not interfere with its present practical functions, an inviting, exciting plaza can be created that will serve multiple purposes while creating a new gateway to Chinatown. The storefronts at the base of Confucius Plaza would gain much greater visibility, pedestrian traffic to and from the Manhattan Bridge would have a welcoming entrance and much needed green space would be gained. This area could be used by the local residents for recreation, for playgrounds and to practice Tai Chi. It would also be the ideal location for local residents to welcome the Chinese New Year, with the magnificent backdrop of the bridge behind it. The cultural, economic and recreational possibilities are endless.

Figure 2: Boundaries of Chinatown showing six selected sites.

The selection of the two new sites (C, F) was a rigorous process that began with research. Students spent hours in Chinatown walking up and down streets documenting various hotspots that would be suited for a gateway. They also visited each site, including the ones selected by the Chinatown Partnership (A,B,D,E) during various times of the day, morning, midday and evenings, in order to better understand the positive and negative aspects of each site. The students quickly realized that visibility was a key factor for each site. As a result of the tall buildings and narrow streets, Chinatown fails to capture the attention of its surrounding areas to attract more visitors. For this reason, many of the student proposals have elements that rise above local buildings. Finally, when looking at all the sites, students also focus on how each site addressed issues of public spaces.

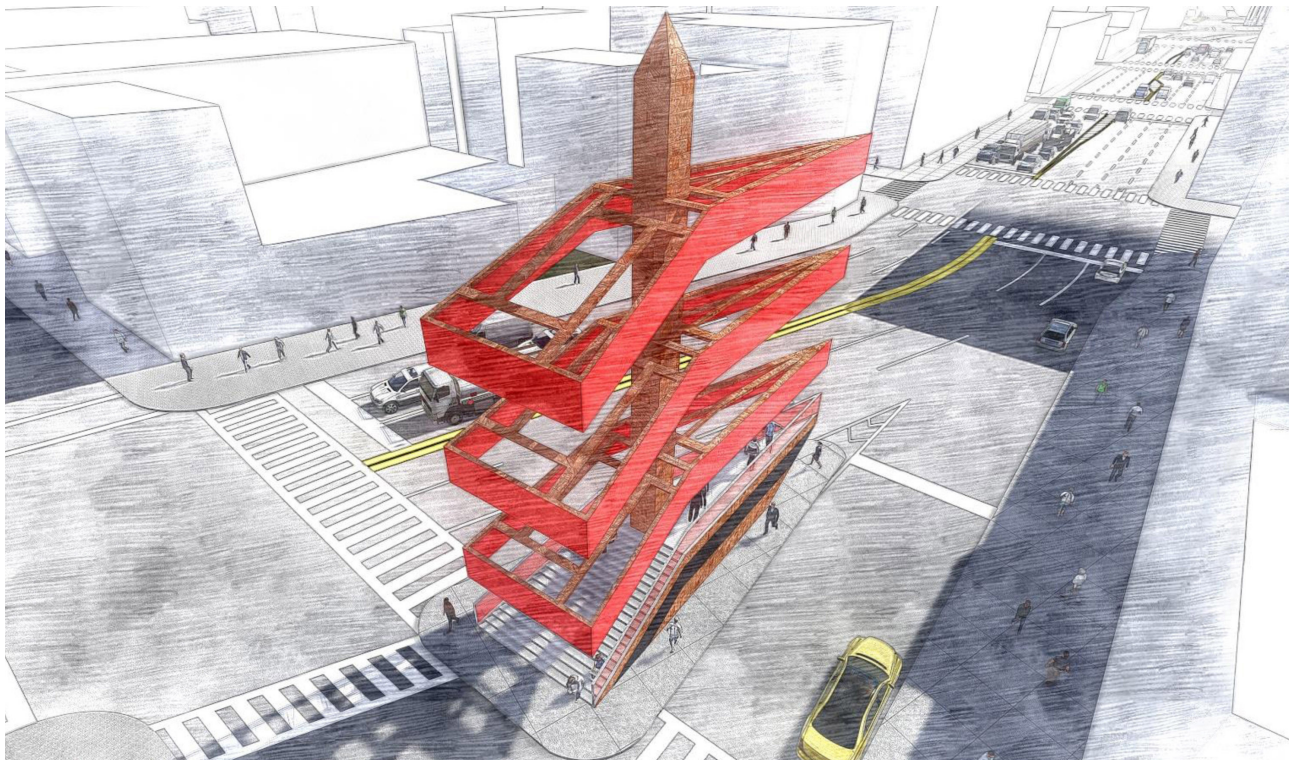
#### **WHAT IS A GATEWAY?**

What is a gateway? That is the first question we asked our students to research. Throughout their architecture education they have worked on a variety of large and small projects, but this would be their first time designing a gateway and one that could possibly be built.

During the first step of this research, students started by looking at Chinatown gateways around the United States and the world. What they quickly found was that most if not all the Chinatown gateways are designed in a traditional Chinese theme. Since our students are not experts in traditional Chinese architecture, it wouldn't be beneficial to focus too much on this detail; instead the urban design studio would have to propose contemporary expressions of gateways. Because the students are part of a design course, expressing their creativity is essential, which would otherwise be limited if they had to create a traditional Chinese gateway. During the early stages of design, students made several presentations where they analyzed precedents that related to gateways. Some of these included existing Chinese gateways, pavilions, iconic structures and even public gathering spaces. This was done in order to get the students thinking outside the box, as most were very strict when defining what a gateway is.

Having previously lived in Tokyo, I frequently visited the Chinatown in Yokohama, which welcomed visitors through beautiful traditional Chinese Gateways. Standing before these immense gates, ornately decorated with dragons, intricate architectural details and bright colors, was always an impressive experience. Whether seen in daylight or lit up at night, the Yokohama Gateways play an important part in defining the boundaries of the area and establishing a beacon for tourists to visit. As a result, the area around it becomes a magnet for tourists, while also serving as a meeting spot. This idea of creating a recognizable meeting spot becomes very powerful when establishing the presence of an area. People might not know the exact address, or location, but they can still arrive there simply by giving the name of an iconic object. This object could be a Chinatown Gateway, an iconic structure, a gathering area, or a simple sculpture, which would eventually be recognizable to New York City residents and people around the world because of its unique presence in the area.

In Japan, every citizen knows the story of Hachiko, the faithful dog who waited every day in the same spot for the return of his owner until his death. In the city of Shibuya, a small statue of Hachiko was erected in 1948 and has since become the main meeting spot in Shibuya. Although it is small in scale and without any elaborate decorations, the meaning behind the statue has made it an iconic element, which draws residents and visitors. The reason I mention this is because



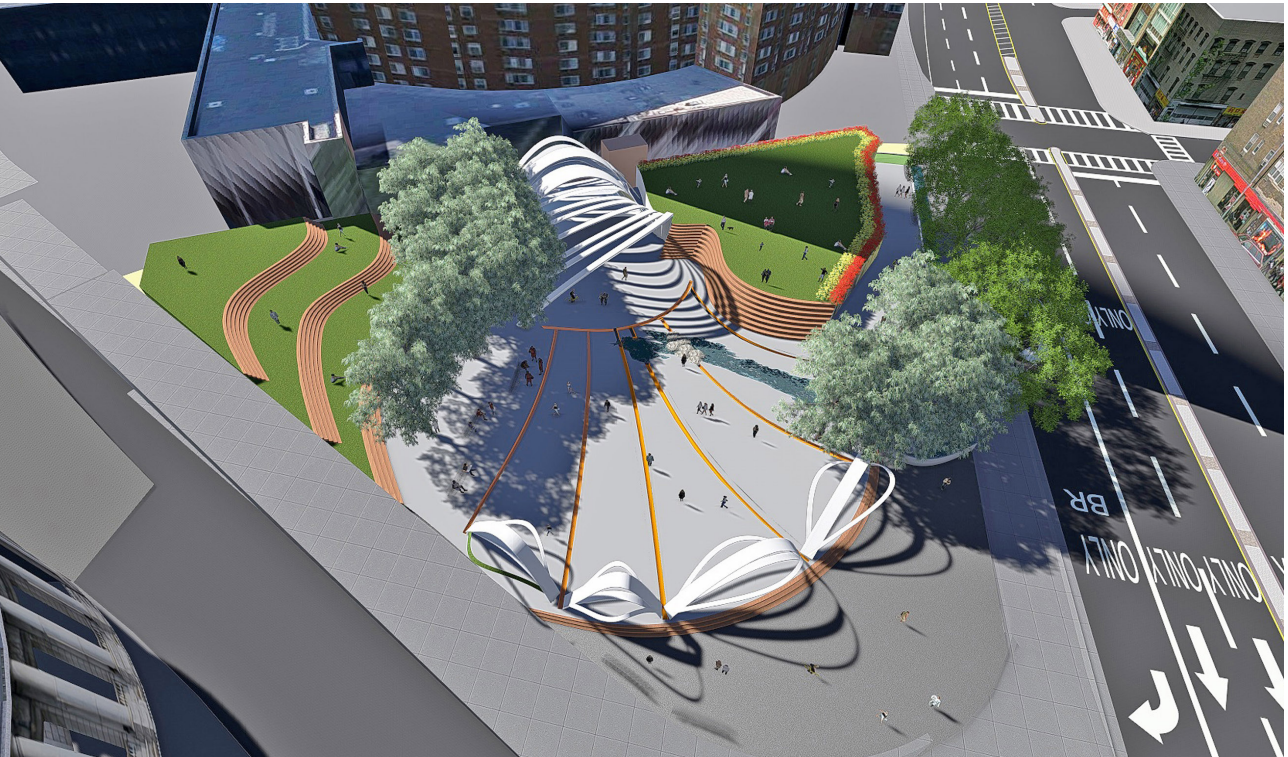
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a gateway doesn't have to be a structure that one must cross under. It can be any object that marks the entrance to an area. In the case of Manhattan's Chinatown, our students were asked to design a gateway which would establish an iconic presence in the area, create a meeting spot and provide a service to visitors, while at the same time be representative of local Chinese culture. At the moment, the only structure within Chinatown which meets most of the design qualities given to our students is the NYC Information Kiosk located on Walker, Canal and Baxter Streets. Designed and built as part of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's revitalization after 9/11, the kiosk incorporates traditional Chinese and contemporary design to create an iconic structure. It also provides visitors with a large map of the area, information on local restaurants and space for two attendants inside. The design takes its inspiration from a Chinese pagoda, with an exposed frame structure housing a gold dragon. This kiosk has been successful in creating an iconic space that establishes a presence during the day and night. Unfortunately, the location of the kiosk offers very limited space for visitors to sit or gather. However, it made a great starting point for our students, as it meets many of the required design points.

**DESIGN PROCESS**

Architecture is a multi-disciplinary profession that includes aesthetic, technical, and human considerations in the design and construction of our built environment. So even before starting the design process, students were asked to consider the existing conditions in Chinatown and how their designs could improve them. To make the project as realistic as possible, the "Chinatown Partnership Master Plan" was used to establish six site conditions to consider in each design. These conditions included streetscapes, architecture, iconography, open spaces, commerce and culture. Each of these site conditions plays an important part in defining the identity of Chinatown, intended to be reinforced through the creation of gateways.

Figure 3: Gateway proposal for site (A) using a tall structure to create a point of transition and attention.



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In the early stages of design the students spend time researching current site conditions. This included visiting the site at various times of the day to document changes from day and night. This was an important step in determining positive and negative conditions of each site. Through these steps students were able to focus on what aspects needed to be addressed in their designs. Some of these conditions included providing more seating areas, increasing lighting and creating safer pedestrian crossings. Also, although not required, many students considered traditional Chinese architecture and culture as an inspiration for their designs.

One key element in the design process involved creating a program structure that established real design characteristics of working with the local community, DOT and the Chinatown Partnership. Using this approach ensured that students understood the complexity of working with multiple groups. The collaboration with the Chinatown Partnership and Wellington Chen, its Executive Director, was crucial in providing our students with all the information necessary to start working on a “real” project. Through multiple meetings we were able to establish a program and vision for the gateways that would benefit Chinatown and its community. At the same time, we also collaborated with the New York City Department of Transportation, including Neil Gagliardi, Director of Design Review in the Urban Design and Art Unit and Suchi Sanagavarapu, senior project manager at NYC DOT. The DOT’s feedback further helped to keep the student designs unique, yet realistic. Their feedback was crucial in determining the possibility of building each design, as well as recommendations for possible street closings. Equally important was the community’s feedback, including their vision for Chinatown and its proposed gateways. The collaboration with The Chinatown Partnership, DOT and the Chinatown community allowed our students to design gateways with the potential of being built.

#### CONCLUSION

After dedicating three semesters to collaborating with several city agencies, our students were able to generate hundreds of designs for the creation of gateways in

Figure 4: Gateway as a gathering area, site (F) proposal.





Chinatown. As with every design class, motivation is a key element in a successful outcome. The students' energy remained high during the entire semester and they were excited knowing that something they were designing could be built and have an impact on the Chinatown community. Also, since members of the Chinatown Partnership, DOT and Chinatown community were invited to be part of their final jury, the students were motivated to work harder on their designs. During the final jury presentations, students presented their work in a setting similar to the real world, gaining valuable professional experience useful after they graduate.

We had such a success with this collaboration that soon after completing the final semester, our department was approached by the Brooklyn Tech Triangle to collaborate on generating design ideas for the improvement and development DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) and surrounding areas. The Brooklyn Tech Triangle is made up of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Industrial Park, Downtown Brooklyn, and the DUMBO Improvement District. This continued collaboration between our college and city agencies has resulted in exposing our students to areas of urban design not typically experienced in school. The students have been able to interact with key decision making individuals and better understand the complexities involved with urban design issues. Although building a gateway in Chinatown might seem very simple, the involvement of so many city agencies makes the process very difficult. This was an important part of the course that students were able to better understand. When working on urban design issues many factors have to be considered, including local community groups, local agencies and citywide agencies. All of these have a tremendous impact on the design process, as one must meet the expectations and regulations of each agency. Towards the end of the semester, the students understood these issues better, and were excited with the collaboration process.

Figure 5: Gateway proposal for site (A), interactive open structure.

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