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URBAN CHARACTERISTICS, IDENTITIES, AND CONSERVATION OF CHINATOWN MELBOURNE

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Abstract. Many unique ethnic enclaves have been established in Australia due to the country's rich and diverse immigration history. Chinatown Melbourne is one of the oldest and most iconic examples that date back to the gold rush period in the 1850s. Previous studies have examined many aspects of the precinct, such as its architectural styles and demography shifts. However, there is a lack of research investigating the enclave's urban characteristics and the consequent urban identity. This knowledge gap can lead to unfeasible heritage conservation decisions with a lack of emphasis on the precinct's unique identity. Hence, this study aims to scrutinize the precinct's past urban evolution and its present characteristics to better understand its heritage value and enhance future urban policies. Qualitative data are collected using archival and literature review, map analysis, and field observation. Overall, by elucidating Chinatown Melbourne's urban characteristics and key urban movements, the study depicts the precinct's identity, addressing elements like the main, laneway, gateway, and public space. The output of the research provides insights into how future heritage policies and initiatives can benefit from the case study in enhancing heritage protection and sustaining its urban identity. Further research is recommended to incorporate quantitative research methods and compare results with this study's findings.

Keywords: urban heritage, heritage conservation, urban identity, Chinatown, migration.

Introduction

Like many countries with rich immigration histories, Australia is home to many unique ethnic enclaves, which have become critical heritage focal points, especially after the end of the White Australian policy (Anderson, 1990; Jones, 2005). As one of the oldest among these precincts, Chinatown Melbourne is a well-known ethnic enclave in the city center, initially occupied by Chinese immigrants as a lodging cluster during the 1850s gold rush period (Cannon, 1993; Yeen, 1986). In the past 170 years of Chinatown Melbourne's establishment, due to radical changes in the political spectrum, racial acceptance, population composition, and economic and cultural perception, the key functionality and character of this precinct have gone through many phases (Anderson, 1990; Chau et al., 2016; Yeen, 1986). According to Chau et al. (2016), the precinct has evolved from the inferior lodging center of "worthless" Chinese men coupled with "sinister and illegal activities," furniture production hub, wholesale fruit center to a well-celebrated multicultural enclave offering Chinese cuisines and cultural tourism for both the locals and the visitors. William Howitt criticized Chinese immigrants as "a very worthless class of immigrants" (Howitt, 1858). The functional progression of this area links to the changes in its architectural and urban characteristics and targeted planning conservation policies. Most of the buildings in Chinatown are now considered to have heritage significance to the local area. On the local level, the local government engages Heritage Overlay to protect buildings and urban precincts with local heritage significance, where renovations must comply with the council's requirements through a planning permit. On the state level, buildings highlighted in green in Figure 1 are listed in the State's Heritage Inventory, a list of all known historical archaeology sites in Victoria, which are prohibited from modification (Victoria State Government [VSG], 2022a). Seven buildings on the Heritage Inventory list are listed on the Victoria Heritage Register as the state's most significant heritage places with the highest recognition. Three of the seven buildings, facing the main street, have a direct connection to the ethnic enclave, as they inhabit Chinese-related functionalities.

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Many existing studies address heritage issues in Chinatown Melbourne concerning only individual buildings (Byrne, 2016, 2020; Chau, 2016). However, there is a lack of research providing summaries on the overall identity of Melbourne Chinatown and what constitutes the place from an urban planning point of view. Without a holistic understanding of this question and the precinct's identity, heritage concerns such as misinterpretation and misrepresentation of architectural styles, planning traditions, and decorations can occur. According to Lynch (1960), districts are "the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extents, where the users mentally enter inside of" and are recognizable as having common, identifying characters. Always discernible from the inside, these characters are also used for external reference if visible from the outside. The common yet distinguishing characteristics are its physical and functional dimensions. This study focuses on the urban identity of Chinatown Melbourne by examining its physical settings and urban plans (Erdoğan & Ayataç, 2015; Relph, 1976). Such identity can also be found in the social and functional dimensions, including activities that traditionally happen in the area (Zhang, 2006). Hence, it is essential to explicate how the precinct has been used and viewed by locals and the general public. Based on these dimensions, to unveil the past and present identity of Chinatown Melbourne and inform future heritage policies and initiatives, this study seeks to answer three research questions:

- how have Chinatown Melbourne's identities and urban characteristics developed, and what are the driving forces of these developments?
- what are the current identity and urban characteristics of the precinct?
- how can future heritage policies and initiatives benefit from learning the history of the precinct's characteristics and identity shifts?

1. Methods

According to the research aim and questions, the first two objectives are to summarize the precinct's historical urban evolution and examine its current identity. This combination of historical records and contemporary analyses can help fathom the precinct's identity and heritage value and thereby enhance future heritage policies and initiatives bearing on it. Along with the milestone of Chinatown's redevelopment, the 1985 Chinatown Action Plan proposes planning principles (Melbourne City Council and Victorian Tourism Commission [MCC & VTC], 1985). To define the aspects of urban characteristics in this study, authors adopt the elements listed in the Action Plan, which recognizes the main street, major streets, side lanes, open space, parking, building, height, and decorative features as critical attributes of the precinct's urban identity.

Firstly, relying on methods of archival research, correlation with concurrent policies, and cultural movements, this study examines several vital historical phases of Chinatown Melbourne. Then, maps from these different historical stages are compared to analyze the precinct's distinct urban characteristics and identities during these stages, aligning with the cultural turns. To provide qualitative data, archival materials such as migration records, historical photos, maps, and existing literature are obtained from the Museum of Chinese Australian History, the National Library of Australia, the State Library Victoria, and the University of Melbourne. Secondly, as new developments have been erected in the past 36 years after the Action Plan, the characteristics of the precinct have unavoidable modifications. To examine the precinct's current characteristics and reveal changes from the Action Plan guideline, the authors conduct field observation with references to the key elements listed in the original 1985 blueprint (Lucas, 2016). Field notes and photos are analyzed and compared with the findings from archival and map analyses. Drawing from the data and results of the research, the last objective of the study is to address the third research question further and expand into discussions on the following three aspects to inform future decision makings in the precinct:

- the intended urban characteristics and the actual use of space;
- top-down approaches and bottom-up needs of the local communities;
- the relationship between changes in urban characters and heritage preservation.

Overall, this study engenders new insights into the precinct's heritage value and identity building, as these discussions have remained marginalized in existing research.

2. Results

2.1. The urban evolution of Chinatown Melbourne

It is fundamental to look at the precinct's history to recognize urban characteristics and the urban identity of Chinatown Melbourne. With the original Hoddle Grid marked out in 1837 by surveyor Robert Hoddle, the orthogonal major grid, accompanied by subdivided plots with narrow laneways, divides most of Melbourne city's blocks, including Chinatown (Mundell, 2019). On an urban scale, Chinatown Melbourne has been modified several times since the 1850s due to different political climates and functional needs, which made it a highly adaptable precinct in terms of its functionality (Beynon, 2019; Jakubowicz & Moustafine, 2010; Jones, 2005). These functional changes are often not self-managed but affected by political decisions, and planning strategies made compulsively by the government. To help visualize this precinct's urban history and its current heritage protection levels, a list of heritage buildings and a timeline of Chinatown Melbourne's functional changes are provided in Tables 1 and 2, and a series of maps in Figures 1 to 6. These changes are inevitable consequences of the migration policy, discrimination acts, and the shifting dynamics of Chinese demographics, contributing to planning and conservation decisions

Table 1. Buildings in the Victorian Heritage Register

No.	Address
1	200-202 Little Bourke Street, Num Pon Soon Society Building
2	112-114 Little Bourke Street, Sum Kum Lee Little Bourke Street
3	119-227 Exhibition Street, 84-98 Little Bourke Street, Her Majesty's Theatre
4	190-192 Bourke Street, Former Bank of New South Wales
5	196 Little Bourke Street, Chinese Methodist Mission Church
6	180 Russell Street, Total House
7	134-144 Little Bourke Street, Former Hoyts Cinema

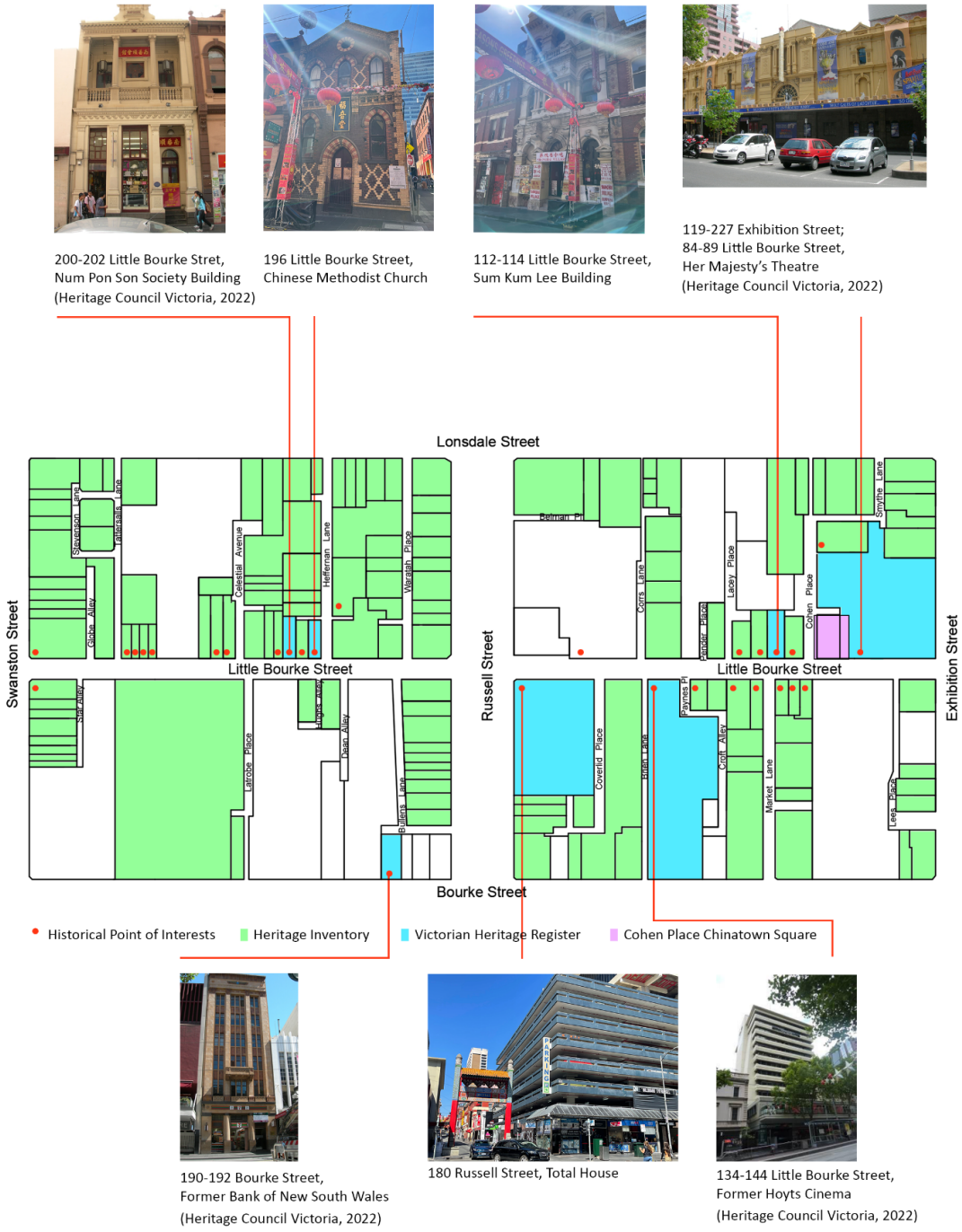

Figure 1. 2022 heritage inventory and heritage register in Victoria (source: authors)

Table 2. A timeline of Melbourne Chinatown's functional changes

Time period	Boundary of the precinct	Major planning and policy influences	Main functions of the area	Perception from the public
Phase One Mid 1850s	Around the interaction of Bourke and Swanson Street	Influenced by the Hoddle Grid; Self-formed and managed	Lodging house, provision stores, candle and opium factories	A fearful slum (McConville, 1985; Anderson, 1990 and Chau et al., 2015) Not a slum but a community in Cohen Place (Young, 2000)
Phase Two 1860s–1910s	In between La Trobe Street, Bourke Street, Spring Street and Swanston Street	Decline of demand in Mining	Fruit wholesale market and furniture factories	'Chinese quarter'; a notorious district; a threat (McConville, 1985 and Anderson, 1990)
Phase Three 1920s–1930s	Occupying the block formed by Lonsdale Street, Bourke Street, Spring Street and Swanston Street	Influenced by the Anti-Chinese sentiment; the Great Depression in the 1930s	Reduction of shops, shrinkage of area and function	Doomed to extinction (The Melbourne City Council and The Victorian Tourism Commission, 1985 and Anderson, 1990)
Phase Four 1940s–1960s	Occupying the block formed by Lonsdale Street, Bourke Street, Spring Street and Swanston Street; Little Bourke Street as the centre	Influenced by reform of the discriminatory migration and nationality laws	Restaurants and cafes	A place to dine for the westerners (Chau et al., 2016)
Phase Five 1972–1976	Officially occupying the block formed by Lonsdale Street, Bourke Street, Spring Street and Swanston Street; Little Bourke Street as the centre; Formal establishment of Chinatown	Removal of White Australian Policy; Stage One of Chinatown redevelopment	Restaurants and cafes; Marked as a place for tourists	The city's first attempt in developing an ethnic quarter with injections of 'Chinese' characters; a place for tourist (Anderson, 1990)
Phase Six 1983–1988	Chinatown redevelopment continues with a focus on laneways in the area	Stage Two of Chinatown redevelopment; The Chinatown Historic Precinct Act in 1984; The Chinatown Action Plan 1985	Multicultural historic precinct; restaurants and cafes; museum; ethnic activities	An urban symbol of Multiculturalism; a celebrated cultural heritage; ethnic enclave with cultural significance
Phase Seven 1988–Current	Settled with four plots shown in Figure 1; laneways mostly facilitate south-north movement; consolidated	Non-specific strategies; mostly follow the general city planning and heritage protection strategies such as heritage overlay and heritage registration	Multicultural ethnic enclave	Occasional mis-cultural interpretations (Yang & Fang, 2020)

(Jakubowicz & Moustafine, 2010; Wang et al., 2018). The changes can deliver an overlook of how the precinct was perceived and its subsequent urban identity. According to the sequence of Chinatown Melbourne's development maps (Figures 2 to 6), such linkages are evident (Table 2). The boundary of the precinct once peaked in the 1910s before declining to the current boundary (Figure 3). Before the impact of the anti-Chinese sentiment and the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s, the urban layout of the enclave was established mostly under self-management (Bowen, 2011; Chau et al., 2016).

Studies point out that the location selection of the first lodging house and the early development of the enclave along Little Bourke Street was highly organic, which resulted from the close family and tribe ties possessed by the first group of migrants, who were often from the Sze Yap region in Guangdong, China. Chau et al. (2016) state that once a Chinese person had settled in Little Bourke Street, others wished to live in proximity for social bonding. Soon after the low-rent lodging house started to appear on the street, shops, gambling houses, opium shops, and brothels also emerged. Although these functions in the enclave do not justify the government's racially discriminatory attitudes, they added to Chinatown Melbourne's overall negative image at the time (Fitzgerald, 2007). In the book the Outcasts of Melbourne, McConville describes Chinatown as a "slum" (Davison et al., 1985). However, there have been ongoing debates on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the "slum" statement about the precinct at the time (Young, 2000). Soon after the 1880s, with the decline of gold mining, Chinese migrants established furniture-making factories and wholesale fruit markets in the precinct, which peaked around the 1910s in terms of the precinct's size (Bowen, 2011).

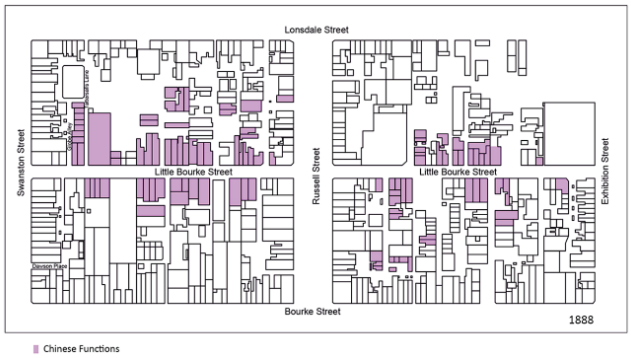

Figure 2. Map of Chinatown 1888 with Chinese functions annotated (source: authors)

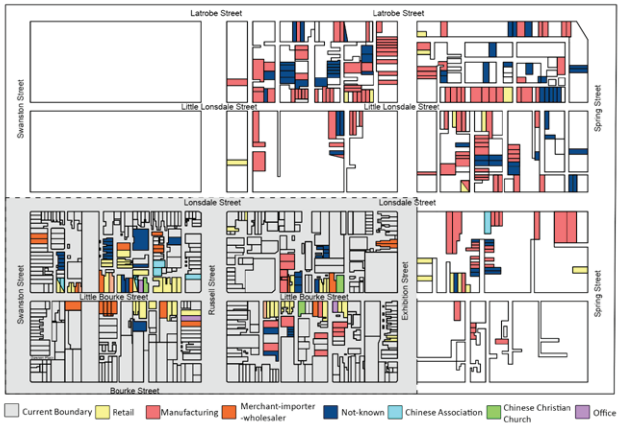

Figure 3. Map of Chinatown 1910 with Chinese functions annotated in comparison with the current precinct boundary (source: authors)

Figure 4. Map of Chinatown 1948 with Chinese functions annotated (source: authors)

Figure 5. Map of Chinatown 2015 with Chinese functions annotated (source: authors)

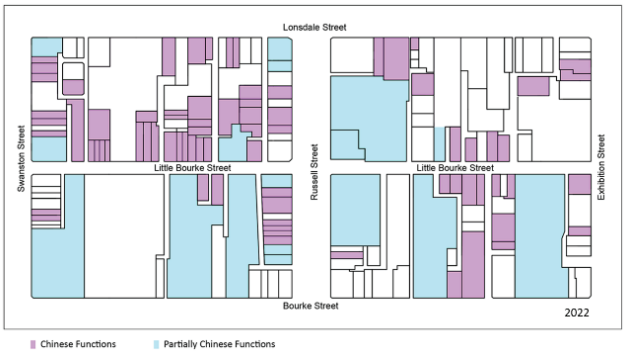

Figure 6. Map of Chinatown 2022 with Chinese functions annotated (source: authors)

Due to the passing of an Immigration Restriction Act that legalized the anti-Chinese sentiment, the Chinese population in Melbourne decreased dramatically after 1901 (Anderson, 1990). Consequently, by the 1930s, together with the Great Depression, Chinatown Melbourne had shrunk to only a few shops along Little Bourke Street. Various studies reveal that along with the declination of the precinct's physical size, both the government and the public had highly negative perceptions of the precinct at the time (Beynon, 2019; Blake, 1975; Davison et al., 1985). Business owners in Chinatown, particularly restaurant owners, also began to branch out to suburban areas during the 1930s (Nichol, 2002). The discriminatory migration law and municipal regulations ceased in the 1940s. Shortly after, with reformed work practices and trade union rules, Chinatown Melbourne slowly grew back again. The enclave soon regained its livelihood by providing dining services with authentic Chinese cuisine to westerners and tourists (Chau et al., 2016; Mak, 2009). To help visualize the changes, the Mahlsteft maps, VicPlan, and maps produced by Chau et al. (2016) were utilized to mark the typologies of "passing overlays when buildings were built, altered, and demolished" in Figures 2 to 6. According to the mapping analysis, an extensive number of small plots were amalgamated to form blocks occupied by new buildings with large footprints during this period. Blake (1975) also indicates that before the reform in the 1940s, Chinatown Melbourne also partially occupied the two blocks north of its current location. As a result of the block consolidation and shrinking of the area, the present boundary of Melbourne Chinatown rendered slowly occupying the block formed by Lonsdale, Bourke, Exhibition, and Swanston Street, with Little Bourke Street being the central vein. The abolition of the discriminatory White Australia policy in 1972 and the notion of cultural pluralism marked a critical turning point in the history of Chinatown Melbourne (Anderson, 1990; Ang, 2014; Satzewich, 1989; Seitz & Foster, 1985). As a result, the government selected Chinatown as a symbol of ethnic diversity and an object of civic pride, which planners celebrated as they brought cultural pluralism on board. Wong (2018) denotes that despite the unsupportive opinion held by some cultural activities and local Chinatown residents, the city council established the Chinatown Special Advisory Committee to help "enrich and revitalize" the area.

The Redevelopment of Melbourne Chinatown is divided into two stages; Stage One commenced from 1972 to 1976, while Stage Two began in 1983 and lasted until 1988. In Stage One of the redevelopment, according to the Melbourne City Town Clerk, the key goal was to "inject Chinese characters" into the area and generate a "characteristic Chinatown atmosphere" (Anderson, 1990). To realize this vision of "Chineseness," four archways and clusters of Chinese-style lantern lights were erected across Little Bourke Street. City Mayor Walker sent project architects to China to learn from the original materials and styles to create the most original gateways and decorations. Ironically, later in the modification proposal of gateways in Melbourne's Chinatown, Guo et al. (2008) affirm that the original gateways styles share some characteristics of the tomb gateways in the Ming-Qing dynasty. As the local council and planners were unaware of the unsuitable gateway styles at the time, Stage One of the revitalizations had already been criticized for embracing cultural inclusion through exclusive planning strategies that reminded the local Chinese of their turbulent past of racial and cultural discrimination (Wong, 2018). The government developed special committees, such as the Victorian Chinatown Project Study Committee to fight against the redevelopment plan and the second stage in the making. Despite all the opposing voices, Stage one was completed in 1976. However, the Stage Two of this development proposal, led by Mayor Walker, was terminated.

In 1983, the issue of renovating and upgrading Chinatown reappeared. Stage Two of the redevelopment was proposed again, but to sensitively dignify the Chinese's contribution while adding to the Australian ideal of "multi-culturalism." Anderson (1990) criticized the project as still subtly carrying the concept of incorporating some essential "Chineseness" and marking the clear boundary of space. Ang (2016) also criticized the term "Chineseness" by suggesting the term as an object of commodification, where ethnic identities are alleged sources of exchange value through cultural branding. Similarly, using Chinatown Brisbane as an example, Ip (2005) expresses his negative opinion by arguing that the term is used to sell Chinatown as a cultural landmark to non-Chinese with its' exotic and ethnic characteristics in western society. In February 1985, the Chinatown Historic Precinct Act 1984 came into effect, which specified Chinatown's physical existence and boundaries and empowered the City Council to issue direction to owners on the external appearance of heritage buildings on-site to ensure the precinct's character stays coherent (Anderson, 1990; Jones, 2005). Along with the Victorian heritage registration and heritage overlay, the long-term impact of this legislation seems positive, as most of the heritage facades are being well-protected. Then in the Chinatown Action Plan 1985, prepared by the Melbourne City Council Victorian Tourism Commission, essential principles to revitalize the precinct included:

– activating small laneways along Little Bourke Street;
– promoting incidental open spaces;
– establishing the Museum of Chinese Australian History and further exploring Chinese-style decorative elements.

The 1985 Action Plan plays a vital role in the current planning of Chinatown Melbourne, as most of the proposed principles were realized from 1985 to 1988 while still being practiced today (MCC & VTC, 1985). Post the changes made to the precinct according to the Action Plan, Chau et al. (2016) later comment that the value of Melbourne Chinatown's existence is now not merely a way of historical preservation or a marketing strategy for city branding. It is a genuine contribution to cultural pluralism in Australia against discrimination and segregation in the past and the homogenized and globalized cityscape in the present. Although still being a symbolic center to the Chinese community, in the minds of the council, the tourist dimension came to dominate Chinatown's identity. Mak (2009) asserts that the precinct has increasingly become a creature of the council and commercial interests, and it has not regained its function as a cultural center or as the expression of Australian-Chinese identities that it could have been. Before the pandemic, the precinct once prospered with a mix of Chinese and non-Chinese functions that attracted numerous visitors from muti-cultural backgrounds (Figure 6). However, due to the pandemic and the precinct's focus on being a tourist destination, a decline in Chinatown Melbourne's occupancy and business has occurred since 2020 (Yang & Fang, 2020). According to the field observation, the pandemic affects both Chinese and non-Chinese-related businesses. Some have closed down, leaving some empty shopfronts waiting for new rentals along the street. Now, like many other Chinatowns post-pandemic, Chinatown Melbourne is experiencing an "identity crisis," as it is unclear whether the tourist attraction is a sustainable strategy (Dansie, 2022; Hartke, 2022). For many planning authorities, the context of such ethnic enclaves is less about the precinct being a cultural center or a tourist attraction but about what form this attraction should take. After the end of the pandemic, the city council has initiated many strategies to revitalize the city area, including dining and entertainment discounts and art exhibitions (VSG, 2022b). However, the precinct's "identity crisis" is yet to be deciphered.

2.2. Current urban features and principles

2.2.1. Main Street: desirable congestion

Long before Chinatown Melbourne received any catered urban planning strategies, the Hoddle Grid was laid out in Melbourne and is still in use today (Freeman & Pukk, 2013; Mundell, 2019). Major streets, including Swanston Street, Russell Street, Exhibition Street, Bourke Street, and Lonsdale Street, which form the boundaries of Chinatown, are all designed to be around 30 meters wide. Intersecting streets such as Little Bourke Street are approximately 10 meters wide. These streets divide Melbourne Chinatown into four major blocks, each around 100 meters by

200 meters, with Little Bourke Street as the central street (Dovey et al., 2018; Freestone, 2010). In the 1985 Chinatown Action Plan, under the key urban principles for Little Bourke Street, one statement highlights that the building forms and streetscape should be like a "valley form," with its central axis being Little Bourke Street. When viewing the precinct from a sectional perspective, the main street and the buildings along the streets create a "valley form." With such a "valley form," the laneways direct pedestrians into the main street, while the main street holds most of the pedestrian and traffic flow and creates a "desirable congestion."

Based on the supporting principles, the 1985 Action Plan also implies that the buildings facing Little Bourke Street need to be strictly controlled regarding their height and external appearance to retain the original scale and character assets (MCC & VTC, 1985). The existing low-medium building height, the main street width, the narrow laneways, and the ratio between them are key attributes of such a "valley form" streetscape proposed in the Action Plan. The guide does not depict the main street as a grandeur central street for only pedestrians and sightseeing. Instead, it argues that the apparent congestion created by pedestrians and vehicles constitutes the intrinsic and essential character of the street.

Before the 1984 Chinatown Historic Precinct Act and its subsequent 1985 Action Plan, buildings on Little Bourke Street had to be set back by around 1.4 meters from the original alignment in response to the Melbourne Widening of Streets Act 1940 to widen certain footways in the city area. However, to maintain the "desired congestion" and heritage features of buildings along the street, the 1940 Act was repealed by the Chinatown Historic Precinct Act 1984, which ceased the setback of buildings. The "desired congestion" also needs to maintain the comfort and safety of pedestrians and balance the needs of traffic, deliveries, shops, and restaurants. To achieve such balanced congestion, instead of setting back buildings, one of the principles of treatment to the main street entails that reducing the carriageway, on-street parking, and non-essential traffic can facilitate the footpath widening.

There are many widened pavement segments on Little Bourke Street from the Swanston Street entrance to the Exhibition Street entrance (Figure 7). Such widening creates a narrow main street with compacted functions. However, the widening is not continuous along the main street, with occasional widened segments. Permanent widening of the pavements creates mostly walkways for pedestrians (Figure 8), entrance areas for shopfronts, and on-street parking (Figure 9). Some temporary widenings are used as outdoor seating areas for restaurants in response to pandemic-related actions with no patterns (Figure 7). As the irregular footpath expansion pattern forms, the carriageway width changes, causing traffic congestion on the main street. Despite the narrow main street and its sporadic width, the provision of on-street parking and seating area, the wider walkable footpath, and the one-way carriageway have contributed to the congestion of the main street (Matan & Newman, 2012; Whitfield, 2015). As the Action Plan proposes, congestion is maintained on Little Bourke Street. However, whether the current congestion level is "desirable" for carriageway traffic is undetermined (Ellis et al., 2016; Wang & Yang, 2019).

Figure 7. Widening of the pedestrian walkway on Little Bourke St (source: authors)

Figure 8. Widening for pedestrians only (source: authors)

Figure 9. On-street parking zone (source: authors)

2.2.2. Side lanes and consolidation of parcels: laneway culture

Laneway culture is unique to the urban landscape of Melbourne city; Chinatown necessitates the same urban character with no exception (Mundell, 2019). Laneways in Melbourne work as a network that navigates pedestrians and serves as a critical contributor to the city's overall iden-

tity (Bate, 1994). Like elsewhere in the city, Chinatown's latent circulation pattern facilities mainly the north/south pedestrian movement and the east/west traffic. The Chinatown Action Plan 1985 highlights that "a shift in the perception of Chinatown" marked the retreat from delineating Little Bourke Street as the key strip and the laneways as subsidiary spaces. Chinatown is not the only topic that received a change of perception by the public; laneways in Melbourne and the graffiti art attached also went from being considered a sign of depravity to hidden treasures to a part of the city's identity (Dovey et al., 2012; Mundell, 2019; Poulton, 2011). Graffiti forms a part of Melbourne city's place identity and its unique laneway culture. Dovey et al. (2012) argue that graffiti in Melbourne's laneways takes both positive and negative symbolic meanings, resembling both street art and vandalism. The relation of graffiti to place identity affirms Lefebvre's theory on the reciprocity between sociality and spatiality (Lefebvre, 1991; Dovey et al., 2012). In the case of Melbourne, the laneway culture and the embedded graffiti are intertwined with both the urban morphology and cultural identities. Graffiti is often engendered from intersecting and conflicting intents to protect urban character and place identity. It may seem disruptive and pollutant to the coherence of streetscape and buildings. However, with such an urban spatial practice, neighborhoods and the locals can express their identity characteristics freely, forming a new "sense of place" and resulting in new place identities. Nowadays, the inner city's graffiti-covered laneways act as one of the city's premier tourist attractions and a part of the laneway culture, which is essential to the city's identity.

The occupancy of laneways has a prolonged history in Chinatown Melbourne (Dovey et al., 2018). A study by Nichol (2002) uncovers the history of Chinese restaurants in Melbourne, including the former Wing Ching restaurant, which was constructed in 1891 with a few other cafes and restaurants in Heffernan Lane. Despite the planning principles of Melbourne CBD's Hoddle Grid, block consolidation and heritage control also play a role in forming the current laneway layout of the precinct (see Figures 2 to 6). A Nolli map analysis of the enclave by Chau et al. (2016) showcases the sequential laneway reduction by consolidating small plots as the land value increased while laying a foundation for the mapping analysis in this study. The mapping analysis also illustrates that more east/west laneways with close ends had been erased than the north/south ones in Chinatown, as the permeability of the east/west movement relies mainly on Little Bourke Street. Chau et al. (2016) and Moreau (2015) assert that these close-ended laneways cease traffic flow but increase privacy. Reducing the amount of these east/west laneways also echoes the area's functionality change. Using Cohen Place as an example, Young (2000) points out that three families living in the area as long-term residents formed a close-net community between 1880 to 1900 (Young, 2000). However, as the second phase of Melbourne Chinatown's redevelopment emphasis, Cohen Place is now presented as a major cultural hub, where a heritage precinct with a cultural museum is located. Parts of the Cohen Place plot and east/west close-ended laneways have been amalgamated to form a square that marks the Cohen Place precinct's entrance (Figure 10). The function of Chinatown was a residential area with lodge hubs where those close-end laneways secured intimacy and privacy (Moreau, 2015). As commercial-focused zones require loading bays, the close-end laneways no longer fit the area's adapted functional needs.

From the Action Plan and current maps of Chinatown Melbourne, 24 laneways are identified, including twelve open-end and twelve close-end laneways (Table 3 and Figure 11). According to the Action Plan, seven laneways, all running in the north/south direction, are labeled as laneways that prioritize pedestrian movement (MCC & VTC, 1985). Twelve laneways provide services priority for businesses in the precinct, including mostly loading bays, back gates, and services; meanwhile, four other laneways are mixed-function laneways that fulfill demands by both pedestrians and services. According to the field observation, Chinatown laneways' current functional usage aligns with the 1985 Action Plan. However, a contrast was observed between the livelihood and condition in laneways with different functions. Laneways that prioritize only pedestrians, such as Tattersalls Lane, Market Lane, Heffernan Lane, Corrs Lane, and Cohen Place, accommodate a range of functionalities, such as the museum, restaurant, and bar. On top of serving the pedestrians, these laneways often accommodate outdoor seating for restaurants, provide a visual connection between main streets, and form decorated pathways to key attractions such as the Chinese Museum in Cohen Place. Contrasting to the vibrancy of those laneways that prioritize pedestrians, laneways for services in Chinatown mostly do not have any crowd or decorative features and design. Most service laneways present no visual content despite some graffiti, such as Stevenson Lane (Figures 12 and 13) and Hughs Alley (Figure 14). Rubbish bins, exposed buildings services, and parking with low-level pedestrians take up most of the service lanes.

Figure 10. Cohen Place Square – Gate 5 (source: authors)

Table 3. Laneways in Melbourne Chinatown according to Chinatown Action Plan and Field Observation

No.	Name	Open-end or close-end	Main function priority	Treatment mentioned in the Action Plan
1	Stevenson Lane	Open	Mixed	No
2	Globe Alley	Close	Service	No
3	Tattersalls Lane	Open	Pedestrian	Yes
4	Celestial Avenue	Close	Mainly pedestrian; partly service	Yes
5	Heffernan Lane	Open	Pedestrian	Yes
6	Waratah Place	Open	Mixed	Yes
7	Belman Place	Close	Not Mentioned	Yes
8	Corrs Lane	Open	Pedestrian	Yes
9	Pender Place	Close	Service	No
10	Lacey Place	Close	Service	Yes
11	Cohen Place	Open	Pedestrian	Yes
12	Smythe Lane	Open	Service	No
13	Star Alley	Close	Service	No
14	Latrobe Place	Open	Mixed	Yes
15	Hughs Alley	Close	Service	No
16	Dean Alley	Close	Service	Yes
17	Bullens Lane	Open	Service	No
18	Golden Fleece Alley	Close	Service	No
19	Coverlid Place	Close	Mixed	Yes
20	Brien Lane	Open	Mainly pedestrian; partly service	Yes
21	Paynes Place	Close	Service	No
22	Croft Alley	Close	Service	No
23	Market Lane	Open	Mainly pedestrian; partly service	Yes
24	Lees Place	Open	Service	Yes

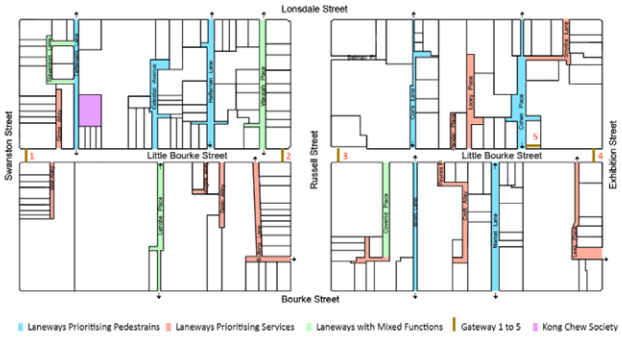

Figure 11. Map of Chinatown 2022 with laneways and gateways annotated (source: authors)

Despite the occasional graffiti and pavement painting, no other visual treatments or designs were observed in these service lanes above. Mixed-use laneways such as Celestial Avenue and La Trobe Lane are decorated with temporary signages to harmonize service use and pedestrian engagement (Cartiere & Tan, 2020). Restaurants in these lanes utilize eye-catching Chinese-style signages to energize the streetscape.

Laneways have been a feasible solution for building a coherent dialogue between commercial pressure and historic preservation (Freeman & Pukk, 2013; McCartney et al., 2019; Mundell, 2019; Poulton, 2011). The 1985 Action Plan states that the "Chinese uses" of buildings and

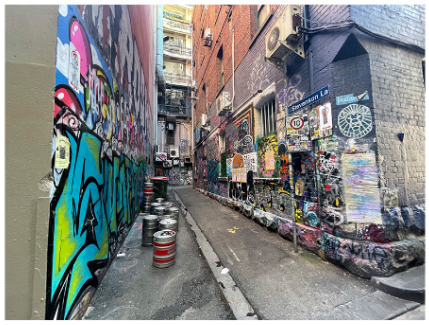

Figure 12. Stevenson Lane 1 Graffiti (source: authors)

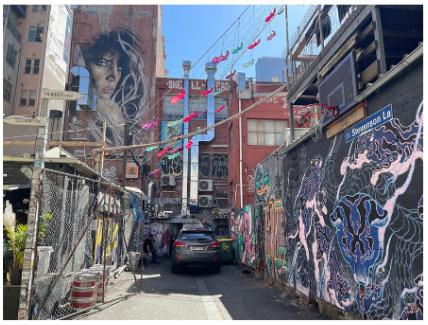

Figure 13. Stevenson Lane 2 mixed usage (source: authors)

Figure 14. Hugh Alley Graffiti (source: authors)

the "Victorian fabric" make the area distinct. The term "Chinese uses" describes the traditional use and the functional zoning of shopfront houses in Guangdong Province, particularly the Sep Yep region, the hometown of many early migrants (Byrne, 2020). Commercial use and heritage preservation are in harmony with shops or restaurants occupying the ground level, while the upper floors remain intact. At the same time, laneways offer space for services and delivery to these shops.

2.2.3. Gateway

Unlike some previous approaches used to suppress the cultural identity of Chinatown Melbourne in the past stages, Chinese-style gateways are the results of incorporating and celebrating its cultural background for the precinct branding and identity development in a top-down manner (Hudson et al., 2017). Along Little Bourke Street, four gateways were erected in 1976 (Figure 11), redesigned in 1985, and modified in 2008, marking the intersections of Little Bourke Street (Figure 15 to Figure 18), Swanston Street, Russell Street, and Exhibition Street (Anderson, 1990). Upon consultation with experts in traditional Chinese gateways, the local government modifies these four gateways from having a Ming-Qing dynasty tomb gateways appearance to having more vibrant and festive colors. It is worth noting that the modifications of the gateways in 2008 utilized removable metal sheets with color prints resembling a temporary nature. Guo et al. (2008) conclude that the functions of these newly modified gateways include urban decoration and cultural symbols, a local landmark for festival occasions, and attraction for tourists nationally and internationally. These sheets are still in use today, as the locals and the experts view the decorated gateways as a cultural representation of more prosperity compared with the original tomb-style gateways (Guo et al., 2008). Another gateway locates parallelly to Little Bourke Street (Figure 10), highlighting Cohen Place and the museum's entry (Figure 11). This gateway was a gift from Jiangsu Province to the State of Victoria in 1979, celebrating the sister-states relationship. Unlike the four gateways sectioning Little Bourke Street, the Gateway (Lingxing gateway) outside Cohen Place is a replica of the Chaotian Palace gateway in Nanjing. The Palace was initially built in the Ming dynasty for cultural ceremonies, so its gateway was selected as the model with cultural meaning for the replicated gift (Wang, 1987). Today, these permanent gateways are essential to the precinct's identity. They not only act as decorations but also resonate with the precinct's spatial layout and cultural background. Geng et al. (2022) argue that the gateways stand at key intersections of the precinct to enhance a sense of continuity along the main street. For instance, at the intersection of Russell Street and Little Bourke Street, the two gateways mark the extension of the precinct beyond Russell Street with four lanes, which sections the precinct in half (Geng et al., 2022). These gateways serve as spatial signages for pedestrians to identify the boundary of the precinct.

2.2.4. Public and green space

As narrow laneways with the desired congestion are core to the precinct's identity, Cohen Square complexifies the spatial layout and the subsequent identity. The 1985 Action Plan advocates that public space is required in Chinatown, and it seems fitting to have the only one close to the museum in Cohen Place (MCC & VTC, 1985). On top of the usual functionality of open spaces, the proposed open space in Chinatown is also set to be responsible for cultural events, being a welcome gateway for the museum and signifying the location of the Cohen Place cultural hub. This proposed square is designed to be a central focus of Chinatown. The Action Plan asserts that open space should be kept small and compact in the context of laneway networks. The Plan outlines that small node-like public spaces should complement the desired pattern for Chinatown Melbourne with narrow laneways. The Action Plan indicates that the assertion was based on empirical evidence, but there is a lack of references provided. Although there is no clear numerical ratio given, the assertion made in the Action Plan has been widely supported by various urban theorists (Gehl, 2013). Using a laneway in Perth as an example, Gehl (2013) points out that small spaces and short distances resemble a warm and intense city environment, where buildings, landscapes,

Figure 15. Gateway 1 – Swanston Street entry (source: authors)

Figure 16. Gateway 2 – Russell Street west entry (source: authors)

Figure 17. Gateway 3 – Russell Street east entry (source: authors)

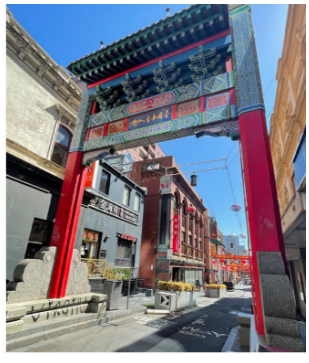

Figure 18. Gateway 4 – Exhibition Street entry (source: authors)

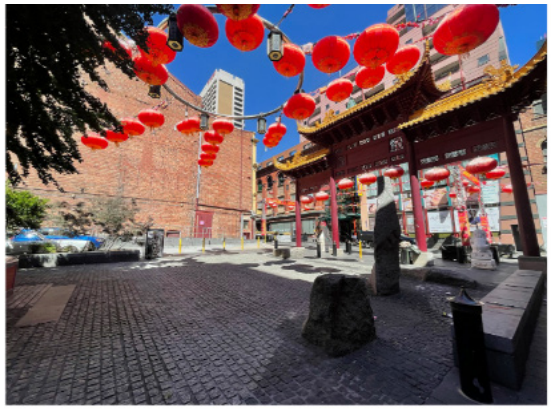

Figure 19. Cohen Place square during festivals with decorations in Jan 2020 (source: authors)

and activities can be experienced with great intimacy. On the contrary, city areas with large built-ups that are widely spread can convey coldness, impersonality, and formality. To achieve warmth and intimacy between people and the space, proposing a compact square that does not disturb the current streetscape with low-medium-rise buildings and narrow laneways that still provides some different spatial experiences is a desirable solution (Matan & Newman, 2012). Next to the entry point of Cohen Place, a traditional Chinese gateway marks a small square, which creates a cultural complex rather than a laneway with a uniform width (Figure 19). Chau (2016) suggests that this square is a key gathering point when celebrating Chinese festivals. Having Cohen Place serving as the only public space in the already tightly arranged space can accommodate the occasional festival needs. During the field observation, only hospitality workers occupied the square during their break in a non-festive period. Aligning with the Action Plan, green space is not the focus of the precinct's identity development; limited green spaces exist in the area. Similarly, the emphasis on public amenities in the precinct was set to focus on those with a decorative nature, mostly addressing the signage design with Chinese characters and visual elements. Under such guidance, erecting more public amenities and green spaces in the precinct will transform the urban identity instead of preserving its current form.

3. Discussion

By examining Chinatown Melbourne's urban evolvement, this study argues that the precinct's urban characters lay the foundation of its identity. Radical changes in the precinct's functionality, public perception, and planning strategies occurred due to various factors, such as migration policy, economic recession, and multicultural movement, which led to subsequent identity changes. Such shifts in Chinatown Melbourne have mostly been non-organic but consequential from the abovementioned factors. The top-down decision model and its results in a heritage precinct led to the discussion on the reciprocity between identity shifts and urban characteristics (Plevoets & Sowinska-Heim, 2018). Although the scale of Chinatown Melbourne has decreased to the current four plots from a much greater area, the surviving precinct has gradually gained recognition of its heritage value (Blake, 1975). This study finds that most of Chinatown Melbourne's urban characters still follow the strategies listed in the Chinatown Action Plan 1985, part of the second redevelopment stage (MCC & VTC, 1985). In the post-pandemic era, revisiting the precinct brings insight into the intended urban characteristics and the actual use of space. Although the area is mainly recognized and protected as a heritage precinct, most strategies are based on prohibiting renovations at a building scale. Limited strategies on an urban scale, such as those suggested in the 1985 Chinatown Action Plan, are currently provided by Heritage Victoria. Drawing from the data and the analysis, the following discussion provides some insights into developing heritage strategies for the urban scale enclave, focusing on three key aspects.

3.1. The intended urban identity, characteristics, and the actual use of the precinct

As the main street of Chinatown Melbourne, Little Bourke Street has been planned to accommodate the high demands of pedestrians and traffic while maintaining the "desirable" congestion (MCC & VTC, 1985). Its narrow street width, set back of buildings, and extension of footpaths have been executed to help sustain such congestion. With these strategies, the main street width presents no pattern but irregular segments of offset. In the post-pandemic era, the street is often congested with a prospered streetscape, high traffic, and pedestrian flow. However, with the high traffic level in Melbourne, the line between "desirable" and "non-desirable" congestion in the precinct is blurry with no clear guidance. This raises a discussion between the intended and the actual use of the precinct. An updated guide on the planning and identity of the precinct is needed to redefine goals set in the 1985 Action Plan to meet the adaptative demands. More empirical parameters in the heritage guideline can help better define these goals, particularly those related to transportation and traffic congestion (García et al., 2012). Studies have suggested that sensory technologies and empirical measures can enable close monitoring of traffic flow and walkability (Chiang & Deng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2019). Another example of such a phenomenon is Cohen Place square; the lack of occupancy of Cohen Place square presents a mismatch between the intended use and the actual use. The Action Plan proposes that Cohen Place square is the only public place in the precinct for gathering and cultural activities. While serving as a key landmark and an occasional gathering space during festival celebrations, the Cohen Place square does not seem occupied during the field observation. To harmonize between heritage preservation and spatial practicality, heritage and identity-related strategies should derive from a collaborative dialogue, including its stakeholders and policymakers (Li & Qian, 2017; Plevoets & Sowinska-Heim, 2018). As the demography of Chinatown's visitors went through radical changes after the

1985 Action Plan, these strategies are also facing undeniable shifts. With the proximity of two universities to the precinct, international students and tourists are rejuvenating the precinct in the post-pandemic era (Barraclough, 2022; Saunokonoko, 2022). However, the characteristics and identity set in the 1985 Action Plan are outdated in the sense that the ongoing shifts in demography and needs are not actively being addressed. Such rigidness in the guideline results in a mismatch between the intended and actual use of the space and the current demand of its users.

3.2. Top-down approaches and bottom-up needs of the local communities

Whether the existing top-down decision-making model results in obsolete planning and heritage strategies is questionable. Gateways in the precinct are a vital part of the area's urban identity from the 1985 Action Plan and the observation (Guo et al., 2008). They help direct visitors and symbolize the area while making it stand out among the nearby concrete built-ups. These gateways and many other approaches implemented during the precinct's development are examples of how cultural and political influences can indeed determine a precinct's identity development. As seen in the urban evolution of the precinct and the current temporary decorations, the authors of this study find that the direction of the precinct's identity building is constantly shifting due to the political and cultural environment in a top-down decision model (García et al., 2012; Ruzzier & Petek, 2012; Murillo, 2017). Unlike the permanent gateways, some decisions can be culturally unsuitable due to the singularity of such a decision model. For instance, as part of a cultural celebration event for the full moon's rise (RISING Melbourne) in May 2021, blue and white lanterns (Figure 20) were installed in Chinatown. In Chinese culture, blue and white lanterns are usually installed in mourning halls during funerals to express grief over one's death, which is culturally interpreted as a lack of prosperity and festive meanings (Wolf, 1970; White & Leung, 2015). The installation in Chinatown received numerous complaints from local business owners, declaring that the city council was ignorant of Chinese cultural traditions and caused damage to the precinct's Fengshui (Yang, 2021). Although these installations are only temporary and not a part of the urban characteristics of preserving nature, they reflect the potential adverse outcome of the top-down decision model in building the precinct's identity. Engaging the local business owners and the greater Chinatown community may minimize the potential singular effect of a top-down identity development model (Hudson et al., 2017; Ruiz Pulpón & Cañizares Ruiz, 2020). The local business owners also argue that the local council should consult the local community in future events related to identity development (Yang, 2021). A bottom-up model may assist the authorities in implementing more customized planning and decorating strategies for the precinct with a better understanding of the embedded cultural background.

Figure 20. Blue and white lantern – temporary decorations for RISING events in May 2021 (source: authors)

3.3. The relationship between changes and heritage preservation in the precinct

Although the top-down approaches lay the foundation of the identity and planning decisions made to the precinct, the results reflect that some spontaneous alterations to Chinatown Melbourne still occurred. For instance, laneways have been crucial for the urban identity of Melbourne city, which Chinatown is an unneglectable part of (Mundell, 2019). Although possessing the same laneway culture, Chinatown's laneway set-up is unique as many functional priorities are intertwined, including those for pedestrians, services, and mix-use. Most pedestrian laneways have open ends and present high visual quality with eye-catching signage, minor services exposure, and some outdoor seating. These laneways also facilitate south-north movements of the precinct and are packed with restaurants, bars, and cultural activities. Mix-use laneways showcase an opportunity for service laneways' adaptations. With the effective use of graffiti and Chinese-style signage design as decorations, the mix-use laneways present a cohesive balance between pedestrians and services. Such spontaneous changes in the laneways have led to a positive perception by the visitors and the local community. Looking at the gateway decorations, the adaptation of laneways, and other temporary features that have been widely accepted by the local community, both top-down and bottom-up decision models lead to changes in the urban characteristics and identity of the precinct (Hudson et al., 2017; Ruiz Pulpón & Cañizares Ruiz, 2020). As the precinct is constantly evolving with its user profile, the pattern of use, and identity pursues, changes in its urban characteristics are unavoidable consequences. Apart from fathoming the precinct's past and current urban characteristics, which this study provides, forming an adaptive guideline that can facilitate multi-dimensional changes in the precinct's future identity is equally important (Gertner, 2011; García et al., 2012; Ruzzier & Petek, 2012). As seen in Chinatown Melbourne, the line between what is to be preserved and what is to be adapted in an urban heritage precinct should be drawn from the collaborative input of the authorities and the local communities.

Conclusions

Chinatown Melbourne's urban identity has undergone numerous radical changes due to non-organic cultural and identity shifts set by the authorities. By exploring the precinct's urban history, this study scrutinizes the evolution of the precinct's urban identity through seven key phases, ranging from the "slum" lounging house area and fruit wholesale market to the current heritage ethnic enclave. With these urban characters, the "valley-like" precinct genuinely contributes to Australia's cultural pluralism and functions as an iconic urban heritage zone in harmony with the busy cityscape. The current urban identity of the precinct is primarily built upon the pursuit of the original Chinatown Action Plan 1985 with some modifications. Such characteristics that form a major part of the urban identity include a narrow main street with "desired" congestion, a "valley-like" precinct with strong laneway culture, four major plots sectioned by Chinese-style gateways, and a small public space. With its unique urban characters, the precinct is now a multicultural enclave with various functionalities, including entertainment, hospitality, and some cultural activities that suit visitors and locals. Recently, lockdowns during the pandemic impacted the precinct, and now it is revitalizing with the incoming flux of visitors and international students. During this critical moment, a framework for the precinct's identity development is essential to lessen the potential adverse effect of an "identity crisis", evident in Chinatowns around the world. Changes in urban characteristics mostly result from the council's top-down decisions, aligning with the shifts in the precinct's set identity. However, the government implemented some unsuitable decorations and character changes without thoroughly understanding the local community's cultural background and demands. Drawing from the history of the precinct, changes are unavoidable to the precinct's future. An adaptive guideline that acknowledges the heritage value and characteristics while incorporating the stakeholder's demands in a bottom-up manner and cultural background is necessary for the precinct's future development.

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