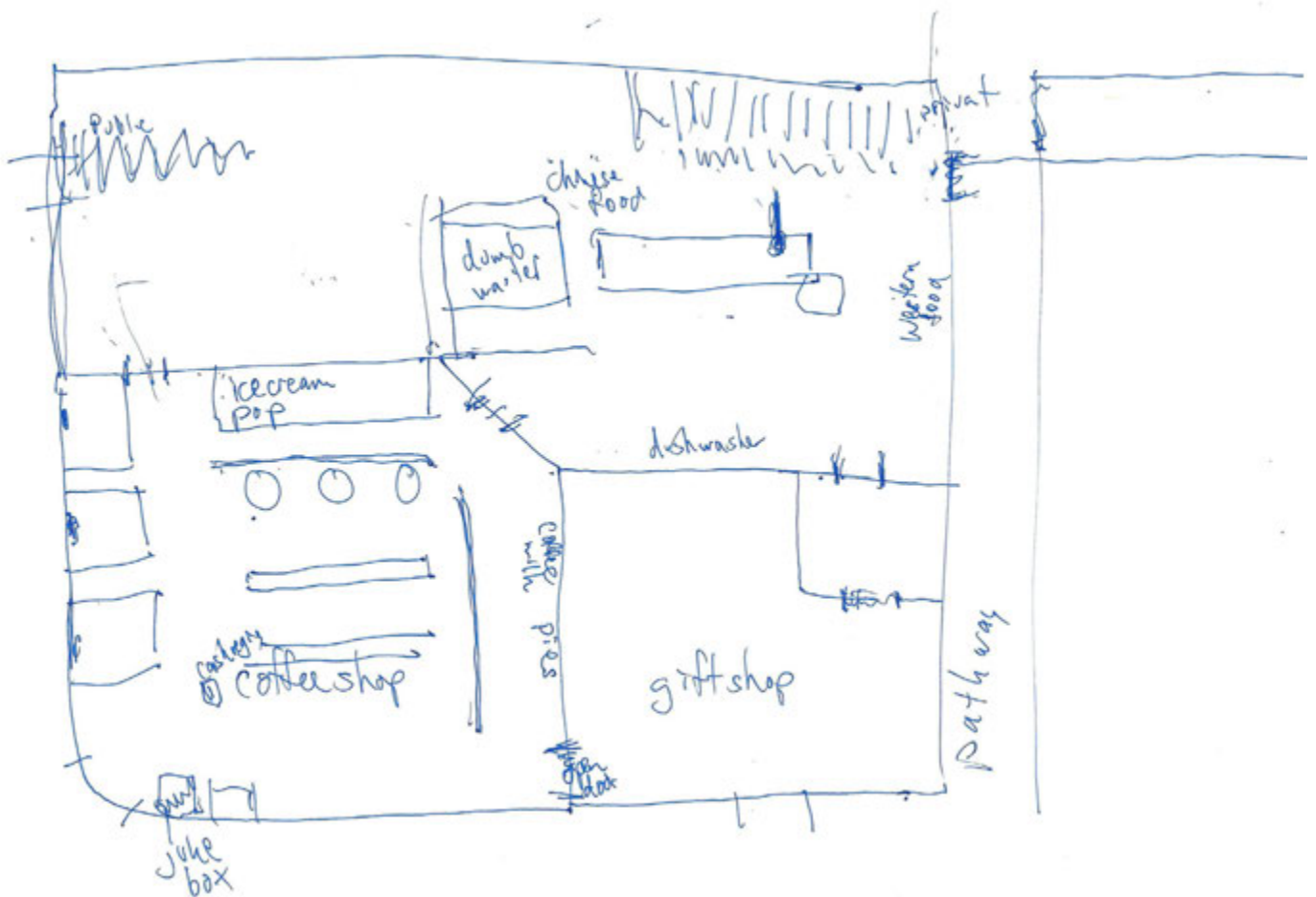


Linda Mae's: An Architectural Past Life



Carol Poon, a loose floor plan of the ground floor cafe and gift shop, sketched from memory, 2020, ink drawing, 30 cm x 21 cm

A building's facade is how a structure faces the city, how it represents itself to the world. It also holds a series of architectural past lives, narrating changes in social and political eras, ownership, and technology through construction details. While fire insurance maps and archival documents give a glimpse of a building's recorded history and physical presence, they leave out the voices of residents, building stewards, and owners. Calgary Chinatown, like many North American Chinatowns, is an ethnic enclave born out of a history of anti-Asian racism and exclusion. Founded on generations of community resilience, the façades of the buildings are markers of the past lives of those who helped to shape the area and sustain it over time.

One of the most iconic buildings in Calgary Chinatown is the Linda Mae Block, a two-storey concrete structure with a rounded corner and a three-sided pagoda roof-top sign. Today, the building could easily go unnoticed, overshadowed by neighbouring residential towers. In old photographs from the '50s and '60s, it's surrounded by low-rise buildings on the main strip, a precursor to the housing boom of the late '70s. Carol Poon remembers:

"Walking home from school, I could always see the bright red sign that said, 'LINDA MAE'S.' It was almost like a beacon; the other buildings weren't as big or bright. You could see it from blocks away."

Previously an old boarding house, the residential property was purchased by Arline and Chong Him Poon, community leaders in Chinatown, who redeveloped it into a commercial block in 1950. They named the structure Linda Mae's after one of their beloved daughters, and it housed a coffee shop, a gift shop, and offices. The Poons continued to transform the building, reflecting their savvy approach to changing trends and their growing economic mobility. To expand their business, they converted the offices into Linda Mae's Lotus Gardens Restaurant, and in the late '50s, they added the building's iconic red slatted crown to the upper level of the façade.

In the '60s, the City announced construction plans for the Downtown East-West Penetrator—a freeway through Calgary's downtown—which would have demolished the bulk of Chinatown. Community organizers, including the Poons, mobilized to successfully block the expropriation for the proposed freeway.

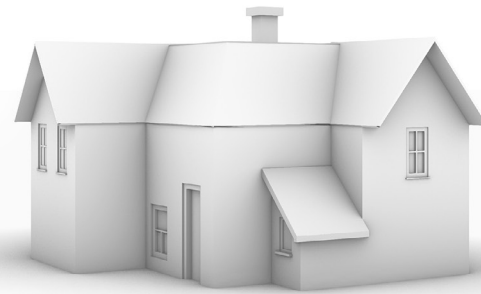
"Chinatown was a close-knit residential community. Families and friends all knew one another and kept a watch out for each other."

A native Calgarian, Carol Poon grew up with the family at the Linda Mae's building and lived with Chong Him and Arline in their fourplex next door. As their great-niece, she considered them *Po Po* and *Ye Ye*, her grandmother and grandfather. The household was multi-generational, with extended family stretched without boundary across the adjacent buildings.

"It was never dull or boring. We used to slide down the banister of the stairs. Some evenings, Po Po would play hymns on the piano, and we would sing and dance. Po Po had a flower garden in front of the house. In the summer, we would sit outside on the patio or the steps and watch people and cars go by. When we were really little, we rode our tricycles up and down Centre Street in front of the house and Linda Mae's."

In the '50s and '60s, Chinatowns became illuminated by a sea of neon lights, reflecting the trend of more colourful signage and unabashed self-advertisement, a nod to growing nightlife. In the mid-'60s, the Poons installed the tall, three-faced pagoda-shaped sign on the top of the building.

"I remember going into Linda Mae's cafe to make root beer floats. I remember Po Po sitting in her office. In the lounge, all of us grandkids had a non-alcoholic drink named after us—mine was called Carol's Cooler, a lime-flavoured drink! There was an ice-cream ma-



1940s



Early 1950s



1960s



1989

chine and booths with jukeboxes, where '50s and '60s music played. We served egg foo young, wonton soup, chicken noodle soup, beef noodle soup... egg rolls... and deep fried shrimp in rings like a donut. There were sweet and sour ribs, dried ribs and chicken wings, chicken with mushroom, beef and broccoli, chop suey and chow mein... My dad made lots of pies, like banana and coconut cream pie, cherry pie, apple pie..."

As children, Carol and her sister Jasmin spent weekends and afternoons after school at the family businesses. To them, Linda Mae's Gift Shop was a place of wonder.

"We would stand or sit on the steps outside the store and peer inside the big glass windows. The gift shop was full of stuff, lots of knick knacks. It was Toy Land with all sorts of neat things. They sold fireworks, jewellery, and Chinese clothing... vases, pottery, slippers... and incense. It was packed and the back [of the shop] was Po Po's office, which led to the restaurant kitchen."

They helped the staff prepare food in the rear kitchen for the coffee shop and restaurant, which served Chinese and Western dishes. Linda Mae's was their anchor to home in Chinatown.

"There was a dumb-waiter... that we all rode in! Downstairs, there was a big walk-in fridge, a huge prep kitchen and a big noodle machine. There was a cooking area to make egg roll and wonton wrappers, where the potatoes were peeled, the shrimp were peeled, where the French fries were made... On the main floor was the kitchen. Women worked in the front of house and the waiters were mostly men. People smoked indoors."

Linda Mae's was more than just a service establishment, or Carol's childhood stomping grounds. It was also a community hub; the Poons helped locals translate documents, facilitate immigration paperwork, and interface with doctors. Carol considers them instrumental to the life, and resilience, of Chinatown.

"Regardless of if they were new immigrants or Canadian-born, many people had their first jobs there. The Linda Mae's Lotus Gardens Restaurant and the gift shop were the places many non-Chinese people had their first experience with Chinese food and culture. Most of Chinatown and the greater Calgary community knew Chong Him and Arline Poon because of the Linda Mae's, New China, and Imperial Palace restaurants, and strong community involvement."

In the early and mid-'70s, the Poons passed away. The iconic Linda Mae's, as Calgarians knew it, closed in 1976. After 25 years, the restaurant finally changed hands. The new owner reappropriated the same building structure but changed the restaurant name to Mandarin Village.

"In the '50s and '60s, there was still a lot of discrimination and racism was quite rampant. Non-Chinese would come down to Chinatown and pick fights at the end of the night... [but] Linda Mae's brought an elevated level to Chinatown... People knew of The Linda Mae's and the Poons played a big part in preserving Chinatown. What did this mean for me? It meant that we were a part of all of this. This was home."



Jasmin and Carol Poon, and their cousin Dana Lee, at the front door of Linda Mae's gift shop in the mid-1960s
COURTESY OF THE POON FAMILY

In the early '80s, Mandarin Village shuttered, and the building remained vacant until the late '80s, when it was renovated by Calgary Chinatown architect Clem Lau. Linda Mae's was given a minimalist makeover, stripping away the slatted crown on the façade and restoring the windows on the second floor. The iconic rooftop signage structure still stands, reminding us of the '60s heyday when Centre Street was a frenzy of glowing signs, though the red lettering has been replaced multiple times with the logo of new tenants who occupy the building.

Today, the building houses an optometry office, clad with masonry and tan-painted stucco. A branded teal awning extends along the perimeter of the building, a faint reminder of the iconic slatted crown that used to envelop the second storey of Linda Mae's façade. An eye-care centre's name and logo now wrap across the three-sided rooftop signage structure in English and Chinese, the paint on the decorative pagoda chipped and fading. While the building has changed over time, the legacy of Linda Mae's lives on; it was once the epicentre of Chinatown, inviting those inside and outside the community to come in.

"I have deep memories of my family's history with the building. The structure represented Chinatown and I know it made an impact even now, you still hear people mentioning Linda Mae's, this many years after it not being in existence."

Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong is an artist and trained architect based out of New York City. Her creative practice lies at the intersection of art, architecture, and the public realm. Through site-specific architectural interventions, she creates experiences that activate forgotten or unused spaces, and that can spark people to encounter each other in unexpected ways.