

# Chinatown Reimagined: Towards a National Strategy

Jessica Chen . Parker Mah . Melissa Lengies  
National Trust Conference - Halifax - October 2025



*The **JIA Foundation** is a non-profit organization in Québec with a mandate to **protect and promote the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Montréal's Chinatown** through education, space activation and community-driven approaches to real estate.*



# January 2022

## Montreal's Chinatown wins Heritage Designation & Protection



### Activists cheer as Quebec, Montreal set to protect Chinatown heritage

Montreal city council will adopt new zoning limiting building heights and densities in the historic district



### REIMAGINED: A FUTURE FOR CHINATOWNS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA

Karen Cho, Documentary Filmmaker  
Jessica Chen, JIA Foundation

October 2023: National Trust Conference



### CHINATOWN IS NOT A MUSEUM!

Investing in Living Communities  
as a means of Heritage Conservation

Karen Cho, Documentary Filmmaker  
Jessica Chen, JIA Foundation



# Chinatown Reimagined Forum (2023)

A snapshot of **Chinatown Movement** at the time, JIA organized the Forum with 5 online panels, 25 speakers from 10 cities to discuss tools for **“Heritage Reset”** (ie. **investing in living communities** as a means for heritage conservation)

1. Chinatown is Not a Museum: Issues of Housing, Services and Quality of Life
2. Strengthening Social Fabric and Coalition Building Beyond Chinatown
3. From Ownership to Stewardship: Tools and Opportunities to Build Civic Commons
4. Evolutive Futures: Alternative Modes of Cultural and Economic Revitalisation
5. Storytelling and Place-keeping in Chinatowns



*Note:*  
Coast to Coast Chinatowns Against Displacement, a coalition of US/Canada grassroots community organizers was formed in 2019. Another Chinatown US-Canada conference took place in the same year in Vancouver (2023) with different approach & focus.

# Investing in Living Communities as a means of Heritage Conservation: **community infrastructure**

- Clark Street Reimagined: a mixed use social housing project on city-owned land
- Chinatown Action Plan: policy & resources advocacy to support community-led projects
- Building Infrastructure for Social Change with Brique par Brique in Quebec



JIA Foundation presented the community-led plans to the City of Montreal during Chinatown Day 2025.



**BRIQUE** x **BRIQUE**

**Construire des infrastructures pour le changement social**

# Investing in Living Communities as a means of Heritage Conservation: **community stewardship**

- Community Land Trust Movement across Canada
- JIA community collective real estate tools research
- From ownership to stewardship through inclusive planning (fragmented property ownership)
- Increased community equity: space activation, long-term leases and land trust



*Photo with members of JIA Foundation (Montreal), Toronto Chinatown Land Trust / Kensington Market Land Trust / Circle Community Land Trust (Toronto), DTES Land Trust / Hogan's Alley Society / Powell Street Festival Society (Vancouver) in Halifax 2025 Gaining Ground Summit.*

# Investing in Living Communities as a means of Heritage Conservation: storytelling + placekeeping

- **Power of Storytelling** that helped shape the Chinatown movement across Canada
  - Big Fight in Little Chinatown (A documentary film by Karen Cho)
  - Paper Trail to 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act (an exhibition and a book by Catherine Clement)
  - Chinatowns . Ton Yan Gai (a photography project and book by Morris Lum)
- JIA's dynamic storytelling programs to help **place-keeping of our Chinatown** with many Montreal artists and collaboration with other Chinatowns' initiatives
  - Made in Chinatown: photo storytelling (Toronto Chinatown, Long Time No See Collective)
  - Chinatown Records: music storytelling (NYC Chinatown, Rochelle Kwan)
  - Sit Eat and Chew: dance storytelling (Montreal collective)
  - Paifang: Chinatown Queer Festival (Montreal collective)
  - Film screening, book launches & exhibitions



# Sharing our experiences through two major JIA initiatives



1. **Chinatown House:** a space where we have cultural exchange, community meetings and exploration of equitable development in Montreal's Chinatown.
1. **Wing's Conservation Strategy:** an initiative to conserve the legacy of Wing Noodles and its iconic heritage building in Montreal's Chinatown.

# Chinatown House Montreal

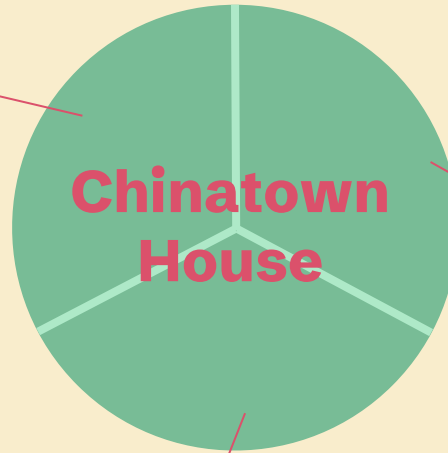
From art exhibitions to public consultations to mahjong nights, Chinatown House has activated key spaces in and around Chinatown to create **venues for intergenerational and cross-cultural connections.**



## Cultural Programming

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- Curation and exhibition space
- Educational lecture and workshops
- Socio-cultural programs
- School visits



## Space Activation

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- **Activate underutilized community spaces through partnerships**
- Reappropriation of public space
- Adaptive reuse of existing buildings
- Alternative development vision for Chinatown as a whole

## Community Organizing

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- Partner building
- Community hub (meetings and social events)
- Facilitate access to community space
- Community capacity-building around property management issues
- Youth leadership

# Activating Space in a Transforming Neighbourhood

- Historical loss of community, business, and public spaces.
- Chinatown is at risk from external development, leading to gentrification
- Efforts to preserve current community spaces and preserve Chinatown's cultural heritage



## 3 Phases

*Launching*

*Piloting*

*Anchoring*

### 1088 Clark St

Partnership with Chinese Family Service  
Sep 2023 - March 2024

### 116 De la Gauchetière St W

Partnership with Jean-Philippe Riopel  
February 2025 - present

Chinatown  
House Concept  
proposed by the  
JIA Foundation  
July 2023

### Multi-Location Programming

Partnerships with Family Associations, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO), University of Montréal, the Montréal Chinese Hospital, Borough of Ville-Marie  
April 2024 - ongoing

\* Through Chinatown House, JIA Foundation has developed many strong partnerships in and around Chinatown through community mobilization, networking and event collaboration.



**Clockwise from top left:** Mahjong at Sun Yat-Sen Park; Paper Trail Exhibit at 1088 rue Clark; Visioning of Big Fight in Little Chinatown at 1088 rue Clark.



# Maison Yep-Riopel

*116 De la Gauchetière St W*

- Built heritage symbolic of the layered history of Chinatown
- Long history with Chinese community - former Chinese Freemasons building and later residence of the Yep family
- Purchased by developers in 2021 - saved by local resident, Jean-Philippe Riopel in 2024
- JIA partnered with Jean-Philippe to occupy ground floor as anchor tenant



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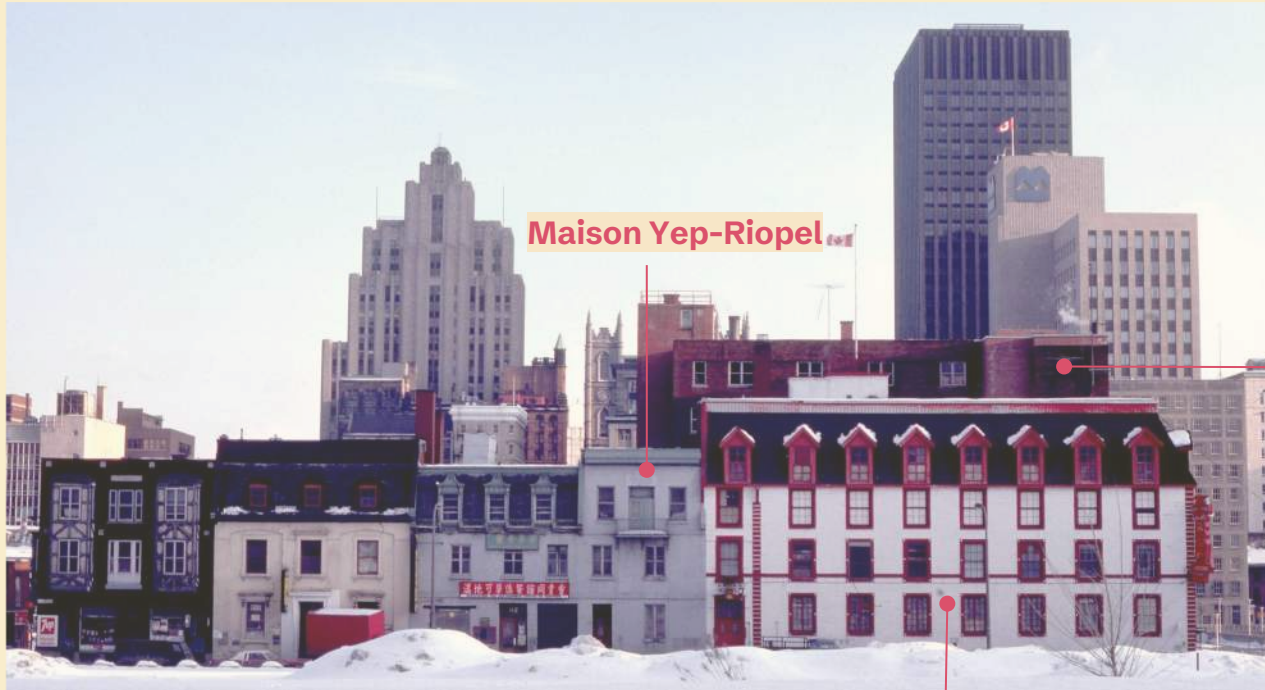
# Maison Yep-Riopel

*116 De la Gauchetière St W*

- Continuing with cross-cultural educational experience through tours, lectures, and events at, and beyond location
- Maintaining a semi-permanent physical space allows JIA + Chinatown house to anchor its presence in Chinatown and move towards its work of planning and equitable development.



# “Wing’s Block”



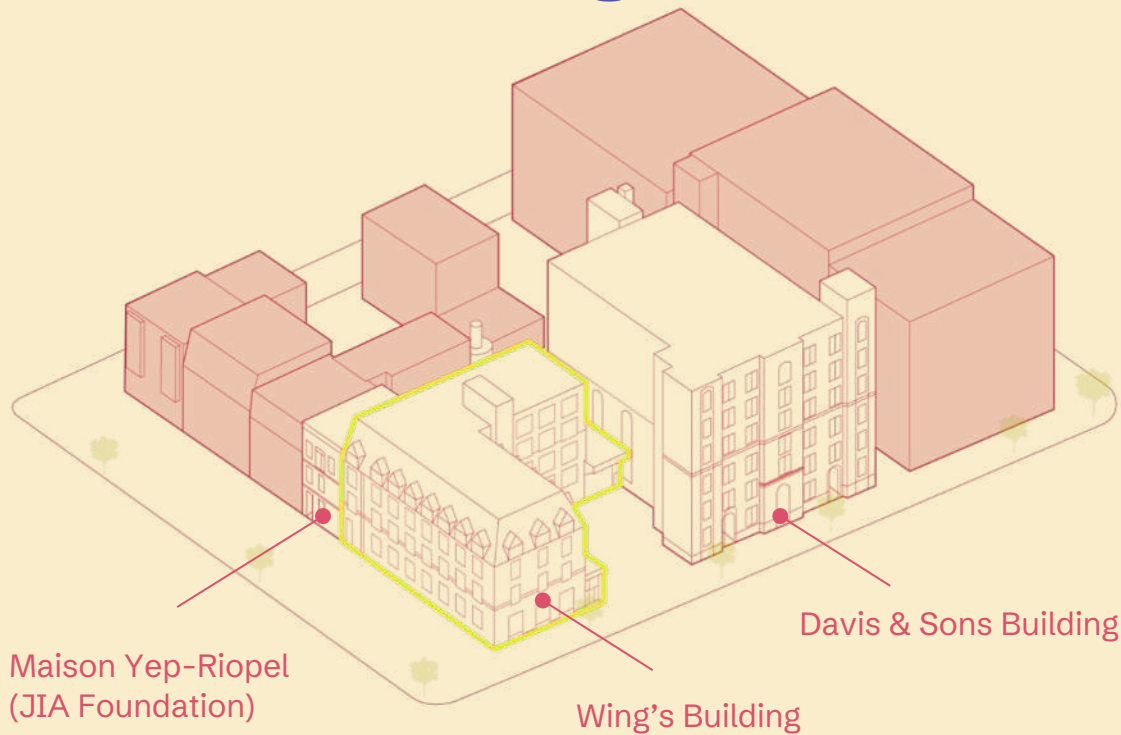
Maison Yep-Riopel

Davis & Sons Building

Wing’s Building

Wing’s Block along Rue de la Gauchetière O.  
Credits: Daniel Heikalo, 1978

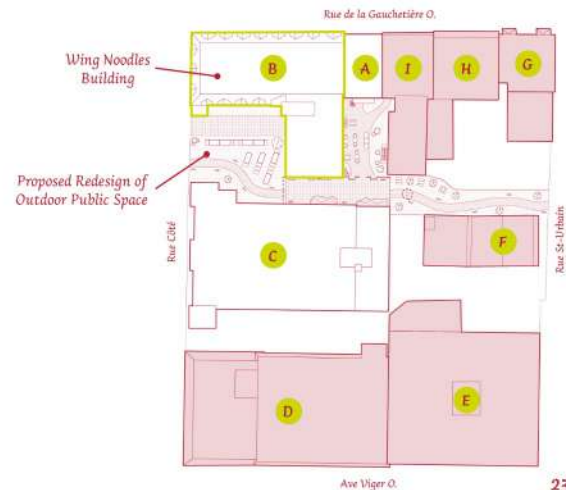
# Wing's Building + Chinatown's Cultural Heritage Hub



## A Piece of the Puzzle

A Block with Strong Potential

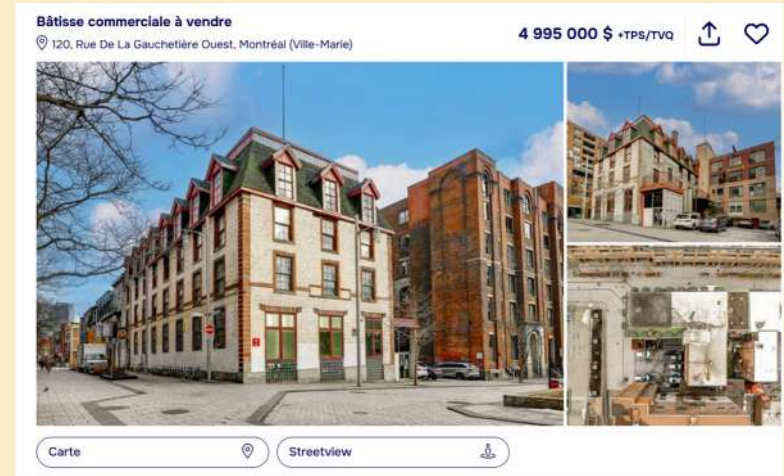
- D** Chinese Catholic Community Centre  
Existing institutional
- E** Bo Ai Lou  
Existing residential & commercial
- F** Maison Catherine-Smith-Perry  
(Former China Empire Reform Association) Existing commercial
- G** Roméo-Caillé Building  
Existing residential & commercial
- H** Maison Joseph-Barsalou  
(Former Chinese School) Vacant & on-market
- I** Chinese Association of Montréal  
(Former Chinese Hospital) Existing institutional & commercial



# Current Context

## Responding to Growing Uncertainty

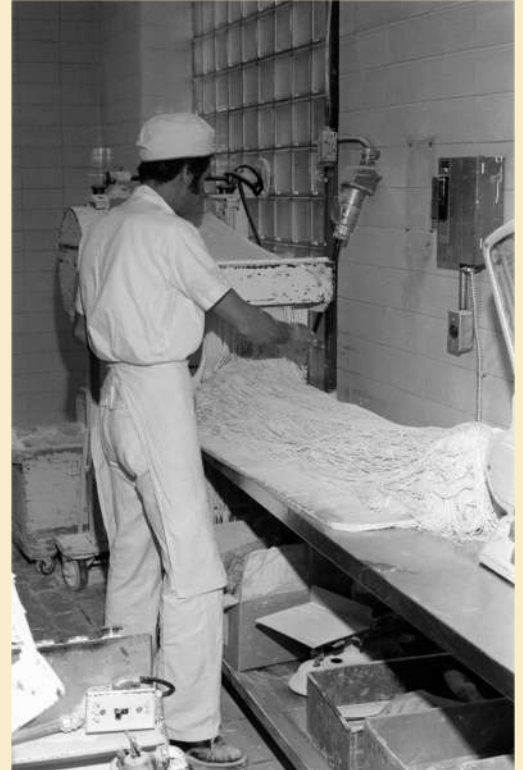
- With **the business set to close** and the **property on the market**, the future of the enterprise and its building are uncertain.
- Without efforts to ensure that its legacy continues to be honoured and upheld, the **impact** will be grave for the whole Chinatown.
- We need **a coherent strategy** to bring the whole Chinatown community together.



# Wing Noodles, a Legacy Enterprise

## A Legacy to Conserve

- With a history going back over 125 years, Wing Noodles has played a **pillar role in supporting Chinatown's social economy** and the Chinese community in Montréal more broadly
- Thus, Wing Noodles has an **important story to tell** as part of Chinese-Canadian history and in the development of Montréal's Chinatown



# Challenges

- Develop an articulated vision which translates community sentiments into a tangible community project
- Reconcile private interests of property owners with a community-oriented vision



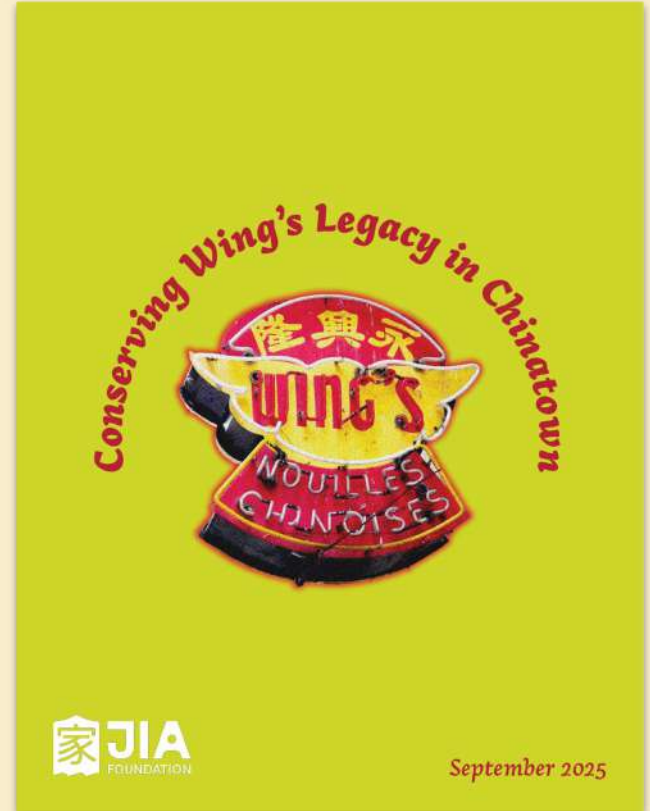
# The Strategy

**The Wing's Conservation Strategy** is an initiative proposed by the JIA Foundation to preserve, honour, and celebrate the legacy of Wing Noodles in Chinatown for generations to come.

Our approach aims to seize the opportunity to understand and promote Wing's intangible heritage, connecting it with the building's adaptation and the future of the block provincially designated as the "Noyau-Institutionnel-du-Quartier-chinois".

The Strategy will include:

- 1) **A storytelling exhibition** on Wing's legacy at Chinatown House
- 2) **A community vision** with a plan to establish the "Wing's Block" as Montréal Chinatown's Cultural Heritage Node that is anchored by a community project for the iconic Wing's building.



# A Storytelling Exhibition:

*A unique made in Québec and made in Chinatown story*

As part of a larger community vision for Chinatown's quickly evolving development, the JIA Foundation is producing a storytelling exhibition of photos, videos and objects to connect the 128 years of Wing Noodles' intergenerational work to past, current, and future neighbourhood activism.

With this exhibition, we aim to:

- Conserve Wing's legacy: the enterprise and the heritage building
- Showcase relationships at the heart of Wing's
- Understand Wing's history in the context of Chinatown activism.



# A Community Vision

The JIA Foundation has recently received funding from the City of Montréal to support us in developing a community vision with a plan to establish the “Wing’s Block” as Montréal **Chinatown’s Cultural Heritage Hub.**

## Objectives

- Create and consolidate partnerships with relevant parties
- Foster a strong heritage identity for the block to support the revitalization of the sector
- Develop a community vision to guide future development in the neighbourhood
- Establish the context and assess the feasible scope of a potential community project aimed at preserving Wing's tangible and intangible heritage



# Launch of the Strategy

As the JIA Foundation launches this Strategy, we hope to bring the community together to share our memories, build our relationships, and create a concerted course of action together to conserve Wing's legacy in Chinatown, right where it belongs.

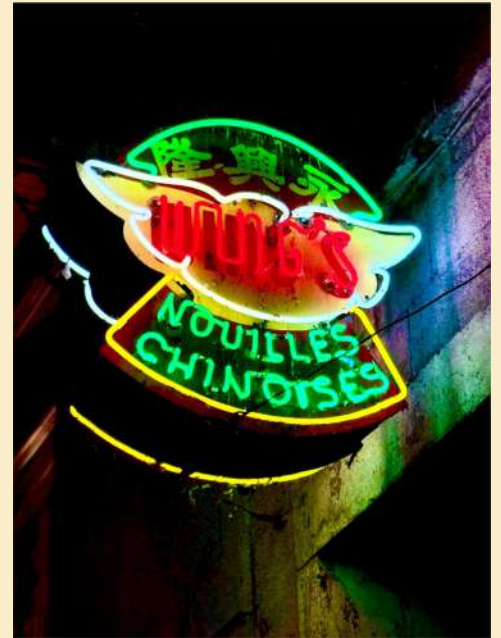
## Visit JIA Foundation Website:

<https://jiafoundationmtl.org/wings-strategy/>

<http://jiafoundation.mtl.org/fr/strategie-wing/>

## How to Support:

Please sign up to JIA's newsletter to receive regular updates of this initiative and find out how you can be part of this campaign. Please also consider donating to the JIA Foundation to support our efforts.



# **From Grassroot Chinatown Movements to a National Strategy (for Chinatowns)?**

# Stay connected!

*Jessica Chen*

*Parker Mah*

*Melissa Lengies*

## **JIA Foundation**

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