

Rancho Cucamonga's Chinatown House

Posted on October 6, 2022

Introduction

The property selected for this paper is Chinatown House, located in Rancho Cucamonga, California. It was built in 1919, serving as a home for over fifty Chinese American labourers who helped in the construction of Rancho Cucamonga. In 1985, it was labelled as the city's landmark; however, in 2013, the city's officials made plans to demolish the property. Efforts were made to save the property. In the same year, Chinatown House was placed on the list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Chinatown House was initially a residence for Chinese workers, then it served as a store, and currently, it is privately owned^[1]. The property is being protected from further damage, and for this reason, it has been sectioned off.

Background

The China House is a part of Chinese American history as it is a symbol of their toil in the construction of the valley. During the development of the agricultural economy of Cucamonga, many Chinese immigrants resided in the valley. In the 1880s, to provide accommodation for them, houses were constructed using wood as a primary material. This small settlement was named Chinatown. The Chinese labourers would leave in the morning to work at vineyards, farms, and construction sites and then return to their humble homes at night. They had formed a community that gave them the sense of home that they had left behind to find a better life. In 1919, an unfortunate incident took place when a fire broke out and burned down several houses, leaving many Chinese people homeless. In the same year, construction started for a two-story brick house to accommodate the people who had lost their homes. This house was named China House^[2].

After all, the agricultural jobs ended; the Chinese workers left with China House remaining as the only witness of their settlement. In 1944, the house was bought by a local family called the Nvarettes, then passed hands again in 1988, when the Cucamonga Valley Water District bought it. The house was left empty, which led to its deterioration; the state of the house led the city authorities to take notice, which led to its demolition plans in 2013.

Current State

China House is in an extreme state of dilapidation due to the use of sub-standard material. Then, it was left vacant for almost fifty years, and the neglect that it suffered during this time led to its structural integrity becoming compromised. Environmental factors like rain also contributed

negatively to its condition.

Architectural Significance

The building does not have any architectural significance as it was made for Chinese workers with only utilitarian purposes in mind. The Chinese workers were not permanent residents of Cucamonga, as they used to leave whenever their work was done to find more work. For this purpose, the initial residences were made of wood, and when those houses burned down, China House was made using cheap material as it was not a permanent residence, so its integrity did not matter.

Cultural Significance

This property has two significances; firstly, it is a part of Chinese American history, and secondly, it is also historically significant towards the history of Western America's agriculture and expansion. The building has been added to the "1882 Foundation"^[3] as a historically significant building of Asian Americans' heritage. The foundation has helped raise awareness about the China House and has been contributing to its conservation^[4].

Threats and Issues

Although the addition to 2013's list prevented the demolition of the China House, its significance is still not fully recognized. In 2012, a report was assembled after inspecting the building. The report outlined the state of the house and its historical significance; however, it fell short of securing full recognition from the authorities. Further inspection with the help of the Cucamonga Valley Water District highlighted the reality of the disrepair of the building. The hollow clay and clay bricks are deteriorating due to a lack of upkeep. The second floor of the building is in the poorest condition, with the walls sagging and cracking in several areas. The weight of the roof is also contributing to the deterioration of the second floor, and there is a danger of its collapse. Environmental factors are also harming the building, as deep cracks have been appearing in the century-old concrete. It was built using the cheapest material available, which has not been able to withstand the test of time. The building severely lacked structural integrity, which led the city authorities to issue the demolition order in the first place; however, efforts to protect it worked. Although the order for demolition has now been redacted, it still faces demolition due to the state of its disrepair, and if it is not restored, then it is just a matter of "when". One idea that has been proposed is to demolish the building and construct a monument in its place as a historic recognition.

The demolition of China House can also raise tension between the local government and Chinese American citizens as it is a piece of their history in the United States of America. It may lead to a racial dispute, which is never an ideal outcome. Asian racial minorities already feel underrepresented, and this will make them feel more ignored. The subject of China House's restoration or demolition is

extremely sensitive, and the local government should tackle it carefully.

Preservation, Coalition, Education, and Outreach

China House already has numerous foundations, and the locals are striving for its preservation, so it has already achieved a strong coalition; however, the problem lies with the state of the house. Its dilapidated state puts it in danger of demolition, and if timely repairs are not financed, then even strong support for its preservation will not be enough. So, proper repairs must be conducted, and it should be utilized as either an educational space or a museum that educates not only about the history of Chinese Americans linked to it but also the history of the American West.

China House is a historical building that carries the historical evidence of Chinese immigrants' hard work on the Cucamonga land. Preserving it will deepen the connection that the Chinese Americans have with it. It is the evidence of their ancestors who put in their blood, sweat, and tears so that the present generations could have the lives that they are living. It is the only building still standing that links Chinese Americans to their ancestral history and the American West's economic development.

Analysis of the China House

As stated previously, the building is in a state of severe disrepair due to the use of sub-standard materials and neglect over the years. To prevent its demolition, it needs to be reconstructed in a way that seems like the original building but without all the construction errors. The reason reconstruction is a better option than restoration is that the state of the building is beyond restoration, and it would need to be rebuilt from the ground up to re-establish its structural integrity. The material originally used cannot be salvaged as it was of poor quality; trying to salvage it would cause more problems in the future^[5]. Numerous foundations are already providing funds for its "restoration", so there will be a need to educate them about the process. China House is located in Cucamonga Valley, so the preservation tools that it can utilize include the Mills Act and Landmark Designation program. Apart from this, China House is also eligible for inclusion in the "National Register of Historic Places" in Cucamonga's "Cultural Resources Existing Conditions Report 2020"[6].

Conservation Issues

The historical standing and significance of China House have been established, so there are no heritage conservation issues other than those already discussed. The only issue it currently faces is that it has not been able to secure full recognition of the city's authorities as a historical site, and this could pose a great problem in the future.

Additional Thoughts

While researching China House, it was interesting to observe that the building held no architectural significance in contrast; its significance comes from the fact it represents the humble lives of the Chinese workers who had come far from home to provide better lives for their loved ones. Their hard work helped Cucamonga become a flourishing city, and after that, they left as quietly as they came. It is their hard work that made the American West prosper. They helped build transitional railways, worked in vineyards and farms, and helped with construction.

Conclusion

When the Chinese Immigrants came to the United States, they only had the thought of better prospects in mind. They did not know that their humble abode would one day become the centre of attention as the locals of Cucamonga, along with different historical associations, made efforts to preserve that home. The Chinese workers at that time knew that their stay in Cucamonga would be temporary, so they built houses from wood that were going to be abandoned one day. However, fate had different plans, and that was the construction of China House. If the fire had not burnt down the wooden houses, there would have been no evidence left of the hard work done by the Chinese labourers. After its completion in 1919, it survived the Battering of time and remained a constant reminder of those on whose shoulder the Cucamonga Valley was built.

Today, it faces demolition due to its dilapidated state, but even though it does not hold architectural significance, it holds something much more important. It holds the history of a race that travelled from one corner of the Earth to the other to find better lives. It holds the history of these people building a city and its agricultural economy. It is evidence that they worked hard for their future generations, and for that, it deserves to be preserved so that their descendants can remember the sacrifices made for them. In addition to its significance to Chinese American history, it is a representation of the life of the labourers in the 1800s and the development carried out in the West of America. It symbolizes a prominent era of Cucamonga's history of agricultural and economic development. Its importance cannot be dismissed, and although it is a humble building, it holds a remarkable history, which makes it worthy of preservation.

References

"About the Foundation - 1882 Foundation." Accessed December 11, 2021.
<https://1882foundation.org/about-the-foundation-2/>.

"Celebrating Asian and Pacific American Heritage | Advisory Council on Historic Preservation." Accessed December 11, 2021.
<https://www.achp.gov/news/celebrating-asian-and-pacific-american-heritage>.

HuffPost. "Chinatown House: A Legacy in Need of Saving," June 21, 2013.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chinatown-house-a-legacy_b_3475882.

CITY OF RANCHO CUCAMONGA GENERAL PLAN UPDATE. "Cultural Resources Existing Conditions Report June 2020," June 2020.
https://www.cityofrc.us/sites/default/files/2020-07/PlanRC_ExistingConditionsReport_CulturalResources_June2020.pdf.

"The Secretary of the Interior's Standards—Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service." Accessed December 11, 2021. <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards.htm>.

1. "Chinatown House: A Legacy in Need of Saving," HuffPost, June 21, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chinatown-house-a-legacy_b_3475882. ↑
2. "Chinatown House." ↑
3. "About the Foundation - 1882 Foundation," accessed December 11, 2021, <https://1882foundation.org/about-the-foundation-2/>. ↑
4. "Celebrating Asian and Pacific American Heritage | Advisory Council on Historic Preservation," accessed December 11, 2021, <https://www.achp.gov/news/celebrating-asian-and-pacific-american-heritage>. ↑
5. "The Secretary of the Interior's Standards—Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service," accessed December 11, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards.htm>. ↑
6. CITY OF RANCHO CUCAMONGA GENERAL PLAN UPDATE, "Cultural Resources Existing Conditions Report June 2020," June 2020, https://www.cityofrc.us/sites/default/files/2020-07/PlanRC_ExistingConditionsReport_CulturalResources_June2020.pdf. ↑