Building Community in a Shopping Mall: The Development and 'Downfall' of Agincourt's Dragon Centre

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This commemoration project centers around a place that holds nostalgic childhood memories. Growing up in the Agincourt district of Scarborough, there constant cycles of new places being built, shops being vacated and new people moving in. I remember going to local Chinese restaurants for casual weekend meetups or large gatherings of different families over an evening of food and drinks. My earliest memory from the restaurant in Dragon Centre was wearing a matching leopard-print dress and beret at my aunt's wedding banquet. The clinking of teacups, the sounds of chopsticks picking up dim sum and waiters coming out with hot steaming dishes. The loud cheers and Cantonese and Mandarin murmurs over the rows of tables draped with ivory-colored cloth. Over the course of two decades, Agincourt has changed, but Dragon Centre still stands. This shopping mall strip is just a few minutes from my former high school, where my friends and I would visit to buy delicious food and snacks after classes.

All these visual and auditory memories come flooding back when I think about the Dragon Centre Mall, located at 23 Glen Watford Drive. Agincourt as a changing suburban neighborhood has been remembered as "Chinatown" in the suburbs. Dragon Centre Mall is an example of an ethnic enclave, which is a place with a high concentration of ethnic communities and immigrants that gather in that region. With primary sources of newspaper articles and course readings, the commemoration project of a grape arbor bench with an overhead structure pays tribute to the main pillar of Dragon Centre. It is a story of historical and cultural significance that involves using aspects of community building and racial tension as a method of reading to understand the reasoning for this particular vehicle of commemoration.

Bringing a Piece of Home to Chinese immigrants: The Development of Dragon Centre Mall

The suburban neighborhood of Agincourt in Scarborough were empty fields that were filled with single-family homes throughout the 1950s and 1960s. More Chinese immigrants started moving into Agincourt starting in the mid-1980s. The neighbourhood witnessed a new wave of change as Chinese entrepreneurs and restaurateurs moved their business from the downtown Toronto Chinatown[1]. In 1984, Toronto Star reporter Brian McAndrew deemed the neighbourhood as "Chinatown II"[2].

[1] Culinaria. "Mapping 'Scarborough Chinatown'," Culinaria Research Centre, 2019.

[2] Brian McAndrew, "Chinese are moving to suburban 'Asiancourt,'" Toronto Star, May 14, 1984.

With Agincourt as a growing ethnic suburban area, investments towards commerce stores and products were growing as well[3]. Due to the influx of Chinese immigrants, plans for a shopping mall were motioned by two Hong Kong developers, Daniel Hung and Henry Hung. Dragon Centre Mall was built with intention to create a common space where the Chinese community were able to shop for and eat food. The developers purchased what was formerly a roller-skating rink, and the addition of Dragon Centre was the catalyst for the transformation of the Agincourt community[4]. The evolution of Dragon Centre Mall, most notably its physical outer appearance can be seen in the following images.

Figure 1. shows Dragon Centre Mall in 1986 with the original pillar with wooden panels. It has the Chinese characters spelling "Dragon Centre"[5]. The building has a brown and grey color scheme, accented with black and bright red signage that stand out from the wooden, brick structure. In Figure 2., Dragon Centre's appearance changes in 1991 with new road signs, a darker grey aesthetic and golden letters spelling "Dragon Centre" in both Chinese and English[6]. Figure 3. is an image of Dragon Centre in 2019, takes a more modern approach with silver rings around the pillar entrance. An elderly man can be seen placing items into the back of a car, presumably after a grocery or errand run from the stores still operating in the mall today[7]. Figure 4a. and Figure 4b. show Dragon Centre twenty years apart. Figure 4b. shows a storefront called "John's Walnut Cake" with a line of people waiting outside. The photographs indicate that even with Scarborough's changing landscape, Dragon Centre is visited by community members of various generations throughout the two decades[8].

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[3] McAndrew, "Asiancourt."

[4] Gay Abbate, "An Evolution from Village to Asiancourt," The Globe and Mail, December 29, 2001, 16.

[5] Jim Russel, "The Dragon Centre, located on Glen Watford Drive, east side, north of Sheppard Avenue East," *Toronto Star Archives*, 1986. Call Number: tspa_0108095f.

[6] Phillip Lee-Shanok, "Exit the Dragon: Once popular mall a piece of Chinese-Canadian history in Scarborough," CBC News, October 5, 2019.

[7] Lee-Shanok, "Exit the Dragon".

[8] Lee-Shanok, "Exit the Dragon".



Figure 1. Dragon Centre Mall in 1986.



Figure 2. Dragon Centre Mall in 1991.



Figure 3. Dragon Centre Mall in 2019.

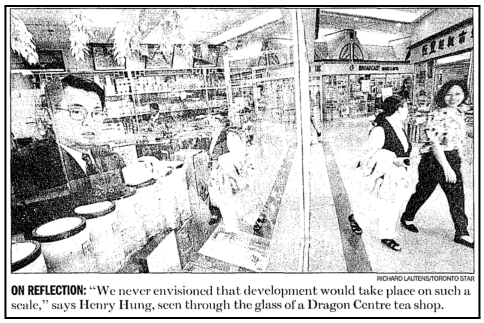




Figure 4a. Henry Hung inside of Dragon Centre Mall, 1999. *Figure 4b. Inside of Dragon Centre Mall, 2019.*

Building Community in Shopping Centres

With the pictures outlining the development of the mall, we can focus on the aspect of why this shopping mall strip should be commemorated. Dragon Centre became known as a cultural hub for immigrants, attracting many groups of Chinese people. However, there were challenges from other ethnic groups accepting the demographic changes in Agincourt. To the Chinese community, this mall strip was a reminder of home. For these newcomers to Canada, Dragon Centre was a symbolic icon; in the sense that it was a place to gather, celebrate and engage with their cultural practices. Over a dinner conversation I asked my father about earlier memories of Dragon Centre. He immigrated to Canada in the 1990s and recalled the mall hallways decorated for the "Flower Market" Fair that is typically held before the Lunar New Year celebrations. He noted that the Flower Market was mainly hosted in regions that spoke Cantonese, but he remembered the large attendance of other Chinese members who spoke various dialects. Although Dragon Centre was called a shopping mall, the location had centralized all types of goods and services: general stores, barber shops, video game stores, herbal shops, small grocery marts and bakeries. The variety of stores kept attracting people, especially with the lack of specialty goods and services in other suburban towns like Markham and North York.



Figure 5. Hallway of Dragon Centre Mall with hanging Chinese lanterns; store fronts include Wai Yip Books and Gifts (centre), QQ Food Stall (left) and Advanced Optical (right).

Food is a central part of East Asian culture. The diversity of cuisine is a common way for diasporic Chinese communities to form connections between vendors and consumers. Food-court style stalls, like Dragon Centre Hung Food Cooking Fast (still operating today), were places where people could get cheap and fresh fast foods that had the "taste of home"[9]. My family and friends have fond memories from eating at the food stalls and restaurants. Many youth that lived in the Scarborough area can recall "collective memories" that bring about nostalgia tied to a specific place[10].

A resident of Scarborough, Michael Vu, remembers a memory they have of Dragon Centre[11]:

> "When I was a kid, we heard about the place by word of mouth, from my Filipino friend's parents. The best fried chicken, fried rice: at a good price, with generous portions. My parents were sold, so they took us to Dragon Centre's food court. When it finally came, it was delicious: crispy, savoury and bursting from its Styrofoam container. We went back again and again. Sometimes we would order a party tray and bring it to gatherings."

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[9] Don Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history – and tensions – behind Scarborough's Chinatown," *U of T News*, July 12, 2019. https://www.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-historian-retraces-history-and-tensions-behind-scarborough-s-chinatown

[10] Susan C. Pearce, "Delete, Restart, or Rewind? Post-1989 Public Memory Work in East-Central Europe," *Sociological Compass* 5, no.4 (2011): 261.

[11] Michael Vu, "Finding fried chicken, and no nonsense, at Scarborough's Dragon Centre," Toronto.com. https://www.toronto.com/opinion-story/9642158-finding-fried-chicken-and-no-nonsense-at-scarborough-s-dragon-centre/

According to food historian Camille Bégin, food plays a "critical role" in why Dragon Centre became a popular community space[12]. Food businesses are relatively easy to set up, since immigrants don't have to go through the processes of re-training or re-certifying their existing credentials. They offer something a community craves: a taste of home[13]. These growing businesses did not go unnoticed by newspaper outlets. Numerous articles were written about Dragon Centre Mall and the issues surrounding the changing demographics of suburban Agincourt. The first primary source is a newspaper article "Chinatown moves to the suburbs", written by John Gray in 1992 for *The Globe and Mail*.



SCARBOROUGH / *Toronto's largest Chinese community blossoms in a former Anglo-Saxon stronghold*

Chinatown moves to the suburbs

BY JOHN L. GRAY
Special to The Globe and Mail
Toronto

WHEN Kwok Fung moved to suburban Scarborough nine years ago, he could hear the crowing of roosters at dawn from the farms up the street. But the farms and roosters have vanished. Now Mr. Fung wakes every morning to the sound of neighbours warming up their cars to make the long drive into the city.

Mr. Fung is among the estimated 150,000 Asian-Canadians who have made their way to Scarborough's blossoming Chinatown over the past 10 years.

In that time, Toronto's two downtown Chinatowns have expanded into six, including suburban centres in Markham, Mississauga and North York, but the largest community is in the part of Scarborough known as Agincourt. Until the 1980s, Agincourt was a predominantly Anglo-Saxon neighbourhood. Now, with the influx of Chinese Canadians, the neighbourhood is often dubbed Asiancourt.

"Since I moved here in 1983, the Chinese population has doubled," Mr. Fung said.

Many different ethnic groups have made the move from downtown Toronto to the suburbs in the last 60

Holding her bridal bouquet, Yui Man Bronica Wan poses with groom Leung Chit Sze among their friends and families after a wedding ceremony at Scarborough City Hall yesterday. (FRED LUM/The Globe and Mail)

The article starts with an interview from Mr. Kwok Fung, an immigrant who moved to Agincourt in 1983. Gray writes that Mr. Fung was among the estimated 150,000 Asian Canadians who made their way to Scarborough's blossoming Chinatown[14]. The neighborhood was predominately Anglo-Saxon village up until the 1980s, where the Chinese Canadian population nearly has doubled. As the new suburban shopping mall with restaurants and food stalls, Dragon Centre Mall connected the Chinese communities from Scarborough, Markham, Mississauga and North York[15]. President Raymond Kwok of the Federation of Chinese Canadians says, "we have everything we need in Scarborough; we don't need to go downtown anymore", which hints to the reason for the increased visitation to Dragon Centre Mall[16].

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[12] Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history."

[13] Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history."

[14] John Gray, "Chinatown moves to the suburbs," *The Globe and Mail*, April 23, 1992, 13.

[15] Gray, "Chinatown moves to the suburbs", 13

[16] Gray, "Chinatown moves to the suburbs", 13.

The Chinese population started to move out of downtown due to them being "sandwiched there"[17]. When Dragon Centre opened in 1984, it was one of the visible symbols of a growing Chinese presence. Many Hong Kong immigrants were drawn Scarborough's Chinese presence, as they were afraid of what tensions would happen between Hong Kong and China in 1997. Hong Kong immigrants like Ms. Lynn said they "felt the need to remain close to their community"[18]. Gray captures a moment in history where it records the movement of people and the growing development of suburban ethnic enclaves like Dragon Centre Mall. The emphasis on community building and gathering in a place with food that reminds Chinese immigrants of a "taste of home" is important to consider for the proposed vehicle of commemoration for Dragon Centre: a bench and interactive structure where people can grab something to eat, sit down and converse with others.

Rising Racial Tensions between Different Communities in Agincourt

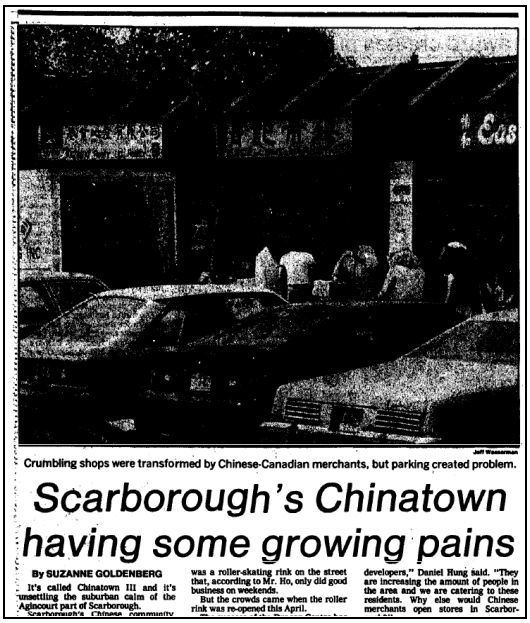
The unpredicted, but immense success of Dragon Centre Mall was appreciated by the Chinese ethnic community. However, with the increase in visitors during the week, more problems started to arise. This was especially during weekends when folks would travel by car to the Agincourt shopping mall. To understand the challenge of building community for the Chinese population among a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon neighborhood, we examine the second primary source to see these racial tensions. We will be using racial tensions mainly between the minority Chinese and majority white communities of Agincourt as a method of reading to reveal why Dragon Centre Mall needs to be commemorated. The newspaper article titled "Scarborough's Chinatown having growing pains" was written by Suzanne Goldenberg in 1984 for *The Globe and Mail*. Goldenberg writes in the caption of the photograph taken by Jeff Wasserman, "Crumbling shops were transformed by Chinese-Canadian merchants, but parking created problem", reflects the parking situation Dragon Centre Mall was facing in the late 1980s[19].

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[17] Gray, "Chinatown moves to the suburbs", 13.

[18] Gray, "Chinatown moves to the suburbs", 13.

[19] Suzanne Goldenberg, "Scarborough's Chinatown having some growing pains," *The Globe and Mail*, June 4, 1984, 3.



Crumbling shops were transformed by Chinese-Canadian merchants, but parking created problem.

Scarborough's Chinatown having some growing pains

By SUZANNE GOLDENBERG

It's called Chinatown III and it's unsettling the suburban calm of the Agincourt part of Scarborough.

was a roller-skating rink on the street that, according to Mr. Ho, only did good business on weekends.

But the crowds came when the roller rink was re-opened this April.

developers," Daniel Hung said. "They are increasing the amount of people in the area and we are catering to these residents. Why else would Chinese merchants open stores in Scarbor-

The parking problem was happening due to an influx of cars to this sector of Agincourt. Glen Watford Drive was mainly a residential neighborhood, and this provoked local residents to fight back against a success business complex[20]. Agincourt's reception to new residents and growing Chinese presence were not anticipated, thus meetings were called to check the racism that flickered in the area[21]. Organizers at a meeting in late May 1984 did not budge to deal with people shouting, "let them learn English!"[22]. Mr. Ho, former president of Scarborough Chinese Businessmen Association, pointed out the problem were the planning policies in the Agincourt area. The fact is that Scarborough hadn't done any planning since 1961, said an embarrassed official Kenneth Whitwell about Glen Watford Drive, "the whole layout quite frankly is an atrocious design way of doing it"[23]. Figure 6. exhibits an aerial view of Glen Watford Drive in 1988 where Dragon Centre Mall is built. The yellow lines marked on the image indicate the property where the shopping mall is located, built behind an existing plaza (marked in red). The image shows Dragon Centre Mall having rows of cars parked in the allotted spaces and even around and along the sides of the building.

[20] Goldenberg, "Growing Pains", 3.

[21] Goldenberg, "Growing Pains", 3.

[22] Goldenberg, "Growing Pains", 3.

[23] Goldenberg, "Growing Pains", 3.

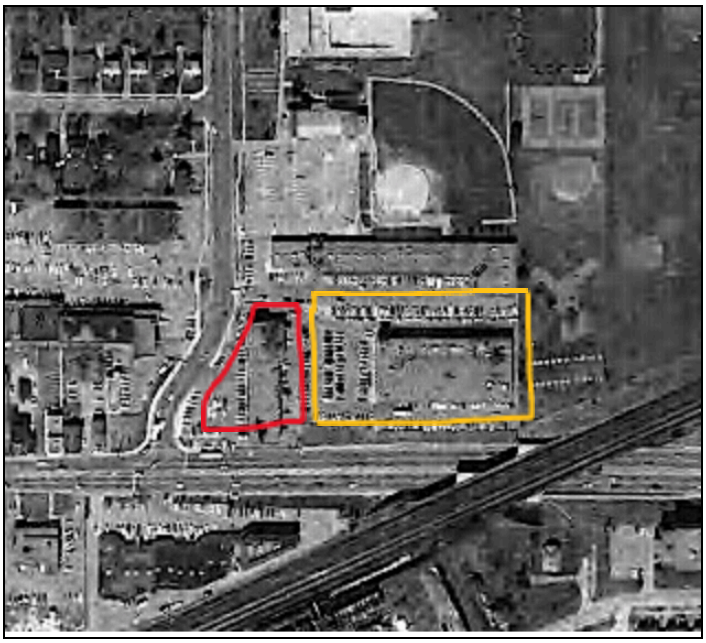


Figure 6. Aerial view of Sheppard Avenue East and Glen Watford Drive in 1988. Source from Scarborough Archives.

Municipal officers were concerned about the parking issue as an undercurrent of racism that would give an excuse for mostly white residents to attack the Chinese community in Agincourt. Despite their agreement on poor planning and ill-placement, they claim there is little to be done about the situation immediately; they had to wait two weeks for a traffic study for Glen Watford[24]. Dragon Centre was a physical display of growing Chinese presence, where old and new Chinese immigrants could meet at a place to eat and converse[25]. The quiet neighborhood was disrupted by noisy businesses, causing people using their residential 'status' to justify racially charged complaints of the Chinese community in Agincourt[26]. The criticism against Dragon Centre was not just centered on increased traffic problems, but rather it was an attack against the Chinese who gathered at the mall. What residents misunderstood was that many Chinese newcomers did not intend to cause traffic problems, but they were just trying to find a community at Dragon Centre Mall; a cultural space that could give them a taste and small reminder of their home country.

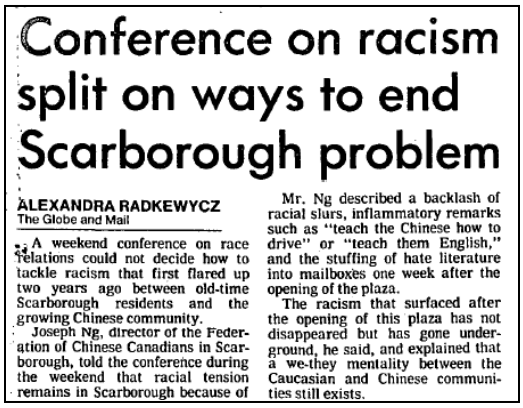
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[24] Goldenberg, "Growing Pains", 3.

[25] Karin E. Peterson, "Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, And the Cultural Transformation of The Patchwork Quilt", *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 462.

[26] Peterson, "Display and Discourse", 464.

Furthermore, the lack of parking space at Dragon Centre became an issue of not only traffic jams but came with challenge from the predominately white community members of the Agincourt neighborhood. The final primary source is the newspaper article from Alexandra Radkewycz named, "Conference on racism split on ways to end Scarborough problem," for *The Globe and Mail*. It was published on June 30, 1986, written two years after Goldenberg's article.



Conference on racism split on ways to end Scarborough problem

ALEXANDRA RADKEWYCZ
The Globe and Mail

A weekend conference on race relations could not decide how to tackle racism that first flared up two years ago between old-time Scarborough residents and the growing Chinese community.

Joseph Ng, director of the Federation of Chinese Canadians in Scarborough, told the conference during the weekend that racial tension remains in Scarborough because of

Mr. Ng described a backlash of racial slurs, inflammatory remarks such as "teach the Chinese how to drive" or "teach them English," and the stuffing of hate literature into mailboxes one week after the opening of the plaza.

The racism that surfaced after the opening of this plaza has not disappeared but has gone underground, he said, and explained that a we-they mentality between the Caucasian and Chinese communities still exists.

Joseph Ng highlights the racial tension in Scarborough remains an issue due to the interplay between development and multiculturalism[27]. The traffic jams, noise pollution and zoning bylaws were met with a defensive reaction by long-time residents of Agincourt. Chinese immigrants trying to build a community away from their home country was met with racial backlash. Hate literature was stuffed in mailboxes one week after Dragon Centre was built, riddled with comments such as "teach the Chinese how to drive" or "teach them English"[28]. The initial racial tension subsided, but a 'we-they' mentality between Caucasian and Chinese communities still exist[29]. Ng says that potential racial conflict could be mitigated by implementing social issues into future city planning decisions. These problems include "severe" under-representation of Chinese and other minorities in municipal management, opposition to bilingual street signs, as well as the Board of Education rejecting a heavily requested Heritage Language Program by the Chinese community. Nolan argues that reviewers are the gate keepers in legitimizing the value of arts, like Indigenous theatre[30]; this directly correlates to municipal

[27] Alexandra Radkewycz, "Conference on racism split on ways to end Scarborough problem," The Globe and Mail, June 30, 1986, 12.

[28] Radkewycz, "Scarborough problem", 12.

[29] Radkewycz, "Scarborough problem", 12.

[30] Yvette Nolan, "Why it matters who reviews Indigenous theatre," CBC Arts, (February 19, 2020. https://www.cbc.ca/arts/why-it-matters-who-reviews-indigenous-theatre-1.5467785

alderman Douglas Mahood for Scarborough Ward 12 saying that there is insufficient 'information' on under-representation for a municipal level hiring[31]. The key point resonating from Nolan is the explanation on why it's important for Dragon Centre to be recognized by 'my people'; those who grew up with the mall[32].

The reasoning for commemoration is to rediscover the cultural significance of Dragon Centre through examining racial tensions and struggles Chinese immigrants faced when trying to build a community space. We use the lens of ethnic tension as a method of reading to reveal the significance behind the bench commemoration of Dragon Centre Mall. Searles pointed out that white-owned businesses were perceived as catering to everyone, but Chinese-owned businesses were seen as only catering to Chinese communities[33]. The othering of Chinese people from long-time residents can be understood as a reaction to the poor development plans, however, the racial prejudice towards Chinese communities cannot be forgotten. Howard Tam, an urban planner and Agincourt resident remembers that "my mom got really upset after coming home from the meeting, saying that people will never understand or accept us in Canada"[34]. Initially, it was difficult for the Chinese community to withstand the pushback they faced when trying to build a community in a white-dominated suburban neighborhood. It is remembered differently by people who know the shopping mall and local residents that grew up in the area. The tensions between the White and Chinese communities have been largely forgotten, as Dragon Centre Mall receives less visitors due to the Chinese moving uptown and going to mega-malls like Pacific Mall in Markham (intersection of Steeles Avenue and Kennedy Road)[35]. Therefore, the meaning shown through the photographs and primary data sources of newspaper articles convey different meanings for people; it affects how they remember and interactions with others based on the memories of Dragon Centre[36].

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[31] Radkewycz, "Scarborough problem", 12.

[32] Nolan, "Who reviews Indigenous theatre."

[33] Radkewycz, "Scarborough problem", 12.

[34] Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history."

[35] Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history."

[36] Marjorie L. Devault. "Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation." *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 4 (1990): 889.

Using newspaper articles to reveal past racial tensions is a method of reading to understand the perspective of the Chinese community. Ultimately, the portrayal of the Dragon Centre Mall and the significance of community will be rediscovered in the commemoration project.

A Project on Rediscovering the History of Dragon Centre Mall

Dragon Centre was once was a popular cultural hub, but still remains standing today. Over the years, the mall has lost visitors due to suburban development in other areas, but local residents like Bill Walton and Ms. Uy remember Agincourt as having a great sense of community[37]. The commemoration project for Dragon Centre is a grape arbor bench with stone footing and an overhead structure that resembles the pillar of original wooden panels of the mall entrance in 1986 (Figure 1). The purpose of the bench is to have an interactive structure that rediscovers the history of Dragon Centre. A plaque with accompanying text and photographs will be on the wall above where people can sit.

Proposed Dragon Centre grape arbor bench



[37] Abbate, "An Evolution from Village to Asiancourt", 16.

The vehicle of commemoration is appropriate for the Dragon Centre Mall because a bench represents a gathering place for people. The reason for visiting the location of Dragon Centre varies, but the grape arbor bench is a tribute to how Chinese communities were seeking a place to shop for goods, sit, converse and meet new people over food that cannot be bought anywhere else. The overhead structure and walls create an enclosed space which resembles a 'home-like' space for community bonding. The photographs around the plaque with information on the racial tensions and story of how Dragon Centre became a cultural hub is a rediscovery of the site's significance for various generations[38].

Aguilar mentions that photographs were methods of keeping memories alive[39]. The visual representation and recalling of the taste of food bring about nostalgic feelings from communities who remember Dragon Centre Mall[40]. Agincourt residents from 1984 may remember the racial tensions, like Howard Tam, but many have moved away[41]. Gray emphasis the meaning a practice or item holds can be lost over time, reflecting to how Dragon Centre as a cultural hub is forgotten by the different Chinese generations of the Agincourt community[42]. This results in younger generations who may remember memories centered around food, instead of the rise of racial tensions in the late 1980s. Robin Gray with the repatriation of Ts'msyen songs for Indigenous communities helped to unravel the hidden history that was muddled by colonial ownership[43]. Similarly, the bench as the vehicle of commemoration centers around the hidden history of community building that was challenged by racial tensions. The accompanying photographs strengthen the collective memory of the Dragon Centre[44] and its cultural significance on what it means for certain individuals[45].

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[38] Pearce, "Delete, Restart, or Rewind."

[39] Paloma Aguilar, "From Mourning Severed to Mourning Recovered: Tribute and Remembrance Strategies for Families of the Victims of Francoist Repression," *Memory Studies* 13. no. 3, (2020): 281.

[40] Aguliar, "Mourning Severed to Mourning Recovered", 282.

[41] Campbell, "U of T historian retraces the history."

[42] Robin Gray, "Repatriation and Decolonization: Thoughts on Ownership, Access, and Control," The Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation, (2018): 1.

[43] Gray, "Repatriation", 3.

[44] Pearce, "Delete, Restart, or Rewind."

[45] Devault, "Novel Readings", 888.

Suburban development threatens the longevity of Dragon Centre, as zoning permits have been approved by the city of Toronto for twin condominiums to be built at 23 Glen Watford Drive[46]. If Dragon Centre Mall was demolished and had no structure to commemorate it, the struggle of Chinese communities outlined in newspaper articles by Gray, Goldenberg and Radkewycz would be erased as a historically significant heritage site that provided cultural goods and services.

By using the space to share memories with each other over conversation and food, the bench can serve as a reminder for younger generations to rediscover the importance of Dragon Centre Mall in the 1980s and 1990s for old and new Chinese immigrants in Canada.

The bench, plaque and photographs are pieced together in this rediscovery project to remind future visitors that Dragon Centre is a place where groups of Chinese people found home away from their home country. It needs to be remembered as a place of conversation, a space for the celebration of cultural practices and a thriving business community that provided a "taste of home" through delicious food.

[46] Lee-Shanok, "Exit the Dragon".

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