

From "gift of Tianjin" to "community symbol"—the construction and history of Philadelphia Chinatown's Friendship archway

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Abstract. The paper examines the Philadelphia Chinatown Friendship archway's transformation from a diplomatic gift to an enduring community symbol, while providing close observations of its architectural details. Constructed in 1984 after Tianjin and Philadelphia announced a sister city tie, the Friendship archway was the first authentic archway built within the United States by Chinese artisans—using Tianjin's Confucian Temple as the reference blueprint. Drawing upon archival records, historical scholarships and recent news documentations, this essay will explore the material biography of the archway and the stories embedded in its physical form. At its core, this study contends that the archway's significance lies not solely on symbolic nor architectural meaning alone, yet in the inseparable union of both. Through its glazed tiles, mineral pigments, and interlocking brackets, the archway narrates the stories of two cultures—confronting and combining. It is a piece of history not told by words, but by the hands that shaped them.

Keywords: architecture, transformation, community, diplomacy

1. Introduction

At the intersection of 10th street and arch street in Philadelphia stands a 40-foot tall traditional Chinese archway. It is decorated with glazed, brilliant tiles, intricate motifs of dragons and 4 bold Chinese characters proclaiming "Philadelphia Chinatown". Erected in 1984, the archway holds more meaning than simply a decoration. It acknowledges the struggles and hardships that early immigrants overcame, symbolizes the diplomatic bond between two cities and two nations, and, most importantly, represents the vast Chinese—and more broadly Asian—community that dwells in this foreign country.

This paper examines the archway through the lens of its architecture and history. It is never a static object, but a statue that accumulated meanings across four decades. It was initially built to celebrate the new sister cities tie bonded between Tianjin and Philadelphia and to draw visitors to Chinatown, yet over time, its meanings have been continuously reshaped by the community. Through physical aging, restorations, and its daily use as a communal gathering place, the archway has gradually acquired layers of significance that its builders did not anticipate.

To understand the transformation requires a close look at both its physical fabric and the changing world around it. The same hands that built it up in 1984 returned 24 years later and recolored it using traditions passed down from generation to generation. Meanwhile, the neighborhood faced new challenges—a new highway running past its edge, new apartments rising within its old streets, and a new arena proposal that will potentially impact the community. Through all of these moments, the archway remains not as a passive witness but an active participant. By tracing the biography of both objects and community, this study aims to reveal how architecture can hold meanings. This research offers a critical case study of immigrant cultural resilience in urban renewal, connecting architectural heritage to community identity. It provides a practical, accessible framework for studying diaspora heritage and meaningful insights into the history of architecture. Ultimately, this article explores how a diplomatic monument transformed into a community symbol over time. The Friendship Archway was selected because it stood as the first diplomatic archway between the two nations—the U.S. and China. The research adopts a tripartite theoretical framework, analyzing through material culture, diaspora heritage and urban memory. The guiding three research questions are: (1) How has the diplomatic gift gradually evolved into a symbol of local Asian American communities? (2) How have restoration actions and urban renewals impacted its architectural meaning? (3) In what ways does the archway participate in community resilience rather than standing as an observer?

2. Construction background and architectural form of the Friendship archway

2.1. Historical formation and spatial pattern of Philadelphia's Chinatown

Philadelphia's Chinatown traces its origins to 1870 when the transcontinental railroad was established and Chinese immigrants—along with other Asian immigrants—fled to the East. *The Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 gathered migrants into concentrated urban enclaves for mutual protection, and that is how most Chinatowns were formed across America. The very first documentation of a Chinese business opened in the Philadelphia Chinatown was Lee Fong's laundry shop, opened in 1871 at 913 Race Street [1]. It marked the beginning of a packed but resilient community.

A major transformation took place after World War II, when the restrictions on Chinese immigrants loosened, enabling people already there to have more freedom and encouraging more migrants to come. The territory of Chinatown, following the thriving of its population, expanded to its peak. By 1980, the boundaries were north to Wood Street, south to Arch Street, and from Eighth to Twelfth Street.

However, this did not remain long. In 1966, there was a proposal for the Vine Street Expressway construction that would cut across the heart of Chinatown, seriously impacting the neighborhood. Through protest and communications, it was delayed for 14 years, started construction in 1980 and was eventually completed in 1991. Though some territories were cut off, Chinatown successfully preserved three additional blocks. This pattern of resistance defined the character of Chinatown for decades and set the stage for the establishment of the Friendship Archway in 1984.

2.2. Construction background of the Friendship archway

The Friendship archway was born from a pivotal moment, when "(China) mainland cities became eager participants in sister city programs" [2]—Tianjin and Philadelphia was the first sister city pair between America and China (December 6, 1979). This bond provided the impetus for the establishment of an archway that marks the presence of Chinatown and celebrates this international relationship.

The idea took shape through the collaboration of the two cities' officials and the Chinatown community. Philadelphia initially committed 190,000\$ to the project, while Tianjin was responsible for material and expertise. The glazing tiles were produced by Tianjin using their own kilns; these were then sent, along with 12 artisans from Tianjin and Beijing, to Philadelphia during October of 1982. Local Chinese-American architect Sabrina Soong supervised the entire construction process, making sure that the archway aligned with traditional Chinese aesthetics [3].

When the archway was finally erected in 1984 after two years of hard work, it stood as something new: the first authentic arch built upon American soil by Chinese artisans. The brilliant tiles, lively dragon carvings, and vibrant paintwork announce the physical presence of Chinatown. It is a gift from one sister city to another, and a landmark that will carry stories within.

2.3. Architectural form of the Friendship archway

Standing at the intersection of 10th and Arch street, the Friendship archway marks the entrance to Chinatown. The architecture follows traditional Chinese style, using Tianjin's Confucian Temple—built during the Ming Dynasty's Wanli era (1573–1620)—as a blueprint. The structure, bracketing system and carvings were carefully studied and applied on the Friendship archway by Chinese artisans.

The structure is a three-bay, single-eave archway, supported by four main pillars rising from the carved stone bases. The stone base consists of two traditional Chinese patterns: the ripple pattern and the pearl roundel pattern. Both were commonly seen on Chinese architectures and have respective implications. The ripple pattern symbolizes moral virtue, resilience and adaptability, just like how water can flow through different terrains. The pearl roundel pattern, also called the connected pearl pattern, originated in Persia, passed to China in Tang and Song dynasties through the Silk Road, representing solar power and light. Above the pillar are interlocking brackets, known as *duogong*, which is a structure that can bear heavy weight and stabilize the building without the use of nails. Although the Friendship Archway incorporates modern materials to ensure structural integrity, its use of *duogong* pays tribute to the historical techniques employed by Chinese architects. Figure 1 depicts the details of the archway's *duogong* structure.



Figure 1. The details of the archway's *duogong* structure

The roof is covered with glazed ceramic tiles manufactured in Tianjin. The imperial yellow and verdant green catch the sunlight during the daytime, distinguishing itself from the surrounding brick and stone buildings. At each corner of the roof ridge sits a small ceramic animal figure—a mythical Chinese creature placed on buildings to protect it from harm and bad fortunes.

3. Physical changes and spatial use of the Friendship archway

3.1. Physical aging and restoration records of the archway

Wooden structures require ongoing maintenance, and the friendship archway is no exception. After twenty years of exposure to sun, rain, snow and wind, the once vivid colors of the archway faded, and a thorough maintenance and restoration were necessitated. For this reason, six artisans and architects from Tianjin traveled back to Philadelphia in 2008 with the goal of reviving the original tone of the archway.

In July 2008, the 6 Tianjin experts set off on their journey, beginning a four-month restoration process. One remarkable aspect of this maintenance is their insistence on using traditional techniques. The artisans requested fresh pig blood—an important material in Chinese architecture and art. When mixed with lime, pig blood ensures that paint adheres better to the building surface and slows the fading process.

The task of searching for fresh pig blood landed on Nancy Gilboy, CEO of the International Visitor Council of Philadelphia; she called Watson and Dietz to have the blood shipped from North Carolina. Surprisingly, the blood arrived frozen, so she contacted the city morgue and asked if it's possible to store it there [4].

In an open field, the artisans boiled the blood in a big pot. The pig blood gradually transformed into traditional paints as pedestrians watched. Simultaneously, other rare raw pigments were also in search. In November 2008, the restoration process was finally complete, the dragons and phoenixes once again wore their brilliant hues.

3.2. Changes in the surrounding built environment

Since the establishment of the archway, its surrounding environment has undergone a series of changes. One of the most significant iterations is the proposal of building a Vine expressway that went through part of Chinatown; this proposal was part of the 20th-century urban renewal plan. The expressway acted as a physical barrier that separated the community, as well as isolating the archway from the whole Chinatown. The construction of the expressway, though delayed for more than a decade, still impacts the Chinatown community.

Concurrently, the commercials on the streets experienced a major shift: the old, individual-owned businesses were partly replaced by homogenized, new chain retailers. The previous stores and food places were mostly owned by immigrants; now some of the restaurants, though still retaining some features and tastes of traditional Chinese culture, are mostly catering to a broader consumer base [5].

Moreover, apartment buildings rise within the Chinatown neighborhood, and people moved from old two- or three-floor buildings into larger, less-packed apartments. This change does not necessarily affect the archway directly, but it contributes to the evolving dynamics of the community.

Collectively, the role of the Friendship archway has changed due to iterations of the community and the city. While gaining more exposure through commercialization, the traditional Chinese side of it is diminishing.

3.3. Daily use of the archway as a community place

While the archway itself is a static architectural landmark, its role as an active community space can be seen from community gatherings, cultural events and everyday interactions happening in its vicinity. Figure 2 captures the moment when the Mid-Autumn festival celebration was taking place under the archway.



Figure 2. Mid-Autumn festival celebration

During holidays, people in the community will host events around the archway—putting on decorations and setting up small tables that vend Chinese festival gifts. Sometimes, lion dances are also performed during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year). These gatherings allow the people living inside the neighborhood to reclaim public spaces, bringing everyone together to celebrate and enjoy.

In daily life, the archway is a meeting point for tourists, a stage for festival performances and a symbolic entrance to Chinatown. It invites people into a neighborhood where language, food, and social interactions continue to reflect the community's heritage. Elderly people play chess under the archway, and younger generations use it as a familiar landmark for community initiatives. It is something that unites everyone, regardless of age or background.

4. Architectural significance and historical positioning of the Friendship archway

4.1. Architectural uniqueness as a "diplomatic gift"

Unlike most North American archways where the funding of the building process is supported by local grassroots organizations, the Friendship Archway of Philadelphia Chinatown is conceived as a diplomatic gift.

The archway typically involved collaboration between the host city and the sister city, with materials, artisans and methodology contributed from abroad. This distinguishes it from community-built archways, which often reflect localized interpretations of Chinese culture through immigrant memory.

As a diplomatic gift, the Friendship archway embodies a level of authenticity that local-built archways do not often have. From design to construction, it strictly adheres to traditional Chinese aesthetics and uses existing architecture within China (Confucian temple) as a reference. The intricate bracketing system, dragon motifs, and mineral paints were all handcrafted by artisans from Tianjin using traditional construction techniques.

The origin of this archway and its status as a gift position it as a symbol of cross-cultural friendship and official recognition.

4.2. Identity shifts in the Chinese community as seen through architecture

The Friendship archway serves as a material record of the Chinese community's evolving identity across generations.

In the early 19th century, early Chinese immigrants faced systematic discrimination. Chinatowns emerged not for tourism, but for communal survival. The architecture at that time was packed and inward-facing, with community life unfolding behind unassuming facades [6].

The mid-19th century brought shifts—post 1965 immigrant reforms enabled new waves of immigrants to come [7]. At the same time, normalized diplomatic relationships created the platform for cultural exchanges—the establishment of archways, for example. The gifting of the Friendship archway in Philadelphia's Chinatown is one of those cultural exchanges, marking the formal recognition of the Chinese immigrant communities within the city.

Architecturally, the archway is outward-expressing, completely different from the inward-facing styles of previous buildings in the Philadelphia Chinatown, corresponding to the identity-gaining process of Chinese immigrant groups.

5. Conclusion

The Friendship archway stands at the intersection of architecture, diplomacy and community identity. As a diplomatic gift rather than a grassroots erected monument, the archway represents the formal recognition of Chinese communities. Despite challenges such as infrastructural disturbances and commercial gentrification, the archway remains a symbol of connection and recognition, while also engaging in daily community activities like festivals and celebrations.

This essay demonstrates that the Friendship archway of Philadelphia's Chinatown is not a fixed statue, but an architecture that carries meanings that are continuously negotiated and altered. However, one area of improvement is the incorporation of oral histories from community members living inside Philadelphia Chinatown. While architectural and urban analysis reveals much about spatial information, the voices of residents—especially elders who witnessed the erection of the archway and subsequent changes in the community—can enrich how the archway is truly experienced.

Future research might explore comparative studies of other diplomatic archways erected across the United States and see how their stories assimilate and differ from the narrative of the Friendship archway of Philadelphia.

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