12 February 2024 / A Tale of Two Chinatowns

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It’s a big week on the calendar.

SCORING IN—People In Philip Glass' House Shouldn't Get Stoned

SEAN: You got Super Bowl Sunday. Ash Wednesday. Mardi Gras and Carnival. Valentine’s Day. And if you’re Chinese, you got an entirely new calendar. Happy Lunar New Year! Happy, unless you live in Philadelphia, where this year is shaping up to be stressful

SCORING TRANSITIONS TO 76ERS THEME

SEAN: The Philadelphia 76ers are trying to build a new arena right next to Philly’s Chinatown. The Sixers say it will revitalize the whole area! But Philly’s Chinatown’s worried that’ll be the end of Chinatown. If only there were a way to know how this might all play out…

SCORING WINDS DOWN

MILES BRYAN (*Today, Explained* Philadelphia bureau chief): Actually Sean, there might be.

SCORING BACK UP

SEAN: *Today, Explained*’s Philadelphia Bureau Chief Miles Bryan, what are you doing here?

MILES: Well I’m gonna tell you about Philly of course. But I also wanna tell you about a similar situation that played out in Washington DC, your backyard, 30 years ago.   
  
SEAN:That’s right! You’re right! A Tale of Two Chinatowns, coming up on the show today.

[PREROLL]

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Rameswaram here with our very own Miles Bryan. Miles, where do we begin?  
  
MILES: This story is about Chinatown, so let's start in Philly's Chinatown.

AMBIUP

MILES: Philly Chinatown is a small area, right? It’s about seven blocks. It's right in the heart of Philly's downtown. And, you know, I've been on the show a few times this past year to talk about how downtowns across America have struggled post-Covid, you know, streets feeling empty and sad, that sort of thing. But Philly's Chinatown is very much the opposite of that. It's it's really alive. It's packed with restaurants and cafes and vegetable stands.

SEAN: It sounds delicious.

XU: In Chinatown, you see people all the time. You see people walking all the time.

MILES: That's Xu Lin. He co-owns a restaurant here.

XU: There's people doing grocery shopping. People doing deliveries come out to eat. There's all kinds of activities.

SEAN: Did you eat at his restaurant?

MILES: I… I actually do not.

SEAN: [laughs]

MILES: It's a sushi restaurant, and I was in the mood for soup that day.

SEAN: [chortles]

MILES: Anyway, I met up with Xu because he's worried about the future of his neighborhood. The Philadelphia 76 ers, our NBA team, Want to build a massive new basketball arena right next to Chinatown.

*<CLIP> 6ABC Phila: “the proposal calls for putting the arena not too far from City Hall, along 10th and 11th. The entire inspiration is similar to how Madison Square Garden in NYC is in the mix of everything….”*

MILES: So it's not in Chinatown. The proposed site is technically in a different part of Philly's downtown an area called Market East. But it's like is literally right across the street from where Chinatown begins.

XU: Look at the first business in Chinatown. That's one story. Yeah. You know, the arena is going to tower over the first business of Chinatown.

MILES: And that's, just, a little variety store.

XU: Right? They said, you know, it's not in Chinatown. It's not in Chinatown. It's in our face.

SEAN: Hold the phone here, Miles. I know people are always averse to change, but building an arena next to Chinatown feels like it could be good for business. What is Xu Lin worried about?

MILES: Yeah. Fair question. First off, Xu and other activists fighting this arena say Chinatown has seen this movie before.

SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> CHINATOWN: “forget it Jake, it’s Chinatown…”*

SCORING IN—STACKING LADDERS

XU: Yeah. The first time I heard about the Sixers proposal, I was shocked. And then I was angry. It was just like, here we go again.

SCORING BUMP

MILES: There is a long history of Philadelphia city officials and developers trying to put big projects in or right next to Chinatown against the residents wishes. You know, there's a highway that cut Chinatown in two in the 1980s

SEAN: Huh

MILES: The city's convention center displaced hundreds of residents when it was built in the 1990s. Chinatown fought off a proposed baseball stadium in the early 2000s. And, you know, a couple of years later, they fought off a casino.

XU: There is a history here. Like every other few years. They want to put something in Chinatown that other people don't want.

MILES: And, you know, there are specific concerns Xu and other activists have about a new arena right next to Chinatown. They're worried about traffic and parking.

*<CLIP> SAVE CHINATOWN ACTIVIST: The churches already suffer everytime something happens, we can’t get our people to church. Can you imagine when they are bringing 17,000 people into the arena and there is no parking?*

MILES: You know, they're worried about construction chaos and noise and road closures deterring customers.

*<CLIP>: XU LIN SPEAKING AT RALLY: “Who wants to eat in a neighborhood when pollution and noise are a constant issue?*

MILES: And they're worried about gentrification.

*<CLIP> NBC PHILA: Protestors say the arena would cause a number of problems, including rising rents for homes and businesses, which would drive people out of the neighborhood.   
WOMAN: It would impact the business. It would also push people out of Chinatown….*

SCORING OUT

MILES: And, you know, I think you got to know a little bit of Xu's backstory to understand his passion here. So Xu is 39 and he immigrated from China when he was 16 with his family. He enrolled in a big Philly high school and immediately starts getting into fights.

XU: Like every other day. And then I realized, this is not what I expected.

MILES: Why was that? Like, why are you getting into so many fights?

XU: Well, the kids in our school were just picking on him. Grandkids, Asian kids. You know.

SEAN: I can relate, Miles.

MILES: Yeah, yeah. So Xu's got this really rough transition into life in America, and it almost breaks him.

XU: Every time we went to school, we went outside. We always had to be careful. We always had to watch our back. We could never just walk the street and feel like it's safe or feeling okay to speak our language.

MILES: But his family settled here in Chinatown, and that ended up being kind of a saving grace.

XU: Chinatown was always the community we could come back to and, you know, just exhale and be like, okay, we're home now. We are safe.

SEAN: Okay? I totally get why he doesn't want to see an arena just dropped down on what's been a safe harbor for him. But what are the people who want this arena next to Chinatown in Chinatown in Philly saying?

MILES: Yeah, you know, a lot of people are stoked about the arena and think it could be great for the city and Chinatown could thrive alongside it. I asked Dan Pearson to make the case. He grew up in Philly, he's the son of a pastor, and now he's an editorial writer at the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper.

DAN (Philadelphia Inquirer): Any time that people are betting on Philadelphia, that's really exciting for me and for that to be happening in the midst of this post-pandemic landscape. What a lot of people are kind of naysaying cities and Philadelphia is even more exciting for me.

MILES: So Dan gave me a tour to, he took me to an empty lot in the market east part of downtown. Remember that? That's just a couple of blocks from Chinatown. And Dan took me to a lot known as the Disney Hole.

SEAN: The Disney Hole?

MILES: The Disney Hole.

DAN: So this is what people call colloquially the Disney Hole.

MILES: So in the 1990s, Disney was opening these kind of mini indoor theme parks called Disney Quest. They opened one in Atlanta, in Chicago.

*<CLIP> ABC CHICAGO, 1999: Welcome to the Virtual Jungle Cruise here in the Explore Zone area of Disney Quest. It is a virtual adventure land…*

SEAN: Sounds fun!  
  
MILES: Yeah. You know, Philly's mayor at the time saw this and was like, this is great. This is the perfect idea to revitalize this part of downtown.

DAN: But it never happened.

SEAN: Ugh.

DAN: Oh, and it's just been empty. There's actually a lot of, empty blocks along this corridor. Unfortunately, they're all too small to put an arena.

MILES: And, you know, I like the Disney Hole example because first off, it's funny. And second off, it's indicative of the state of this whole stretch of downtown. You know, many years ago it was Philly's retail hub:  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
MILES: But it's been struggling for a long time and it's gotten way worse since Covid.

SEAN: And now the Sixers want to come in and revitalize a corner of it.

MILES: Yeah, exactly. They want to replace most of a massive, struggling mall called the Fashion District, just a block or so away from the Disney Hole.

*<CLIP> FOX PHILADELPHIA: They're going to call it 76 place, located on a portion of the current site of the Fashion District, Philadelphia, and serve as an anchor to Center City.*

SEAN: That's cool. 76 place like 1776, right?

MILES: Yeah, like the Philadelphia 76ers.

*<CLIP> ESPN: Joel Embiid, chance at 70. Embiid….coast to coast for 70! [cheers]...*

MILES: Now, to be fair, the Sixers ultimate motivation here is definitely profit. You know they think they can make more money with a shiny new downtown arena they own instead of the one on the fringes of the city they currently rent from Comcast. But the team has pledged they won't take any public funding from the city, and they'll spend More than a billion dollars building the thing. So lots of construction jobs. And people like Dan see the arena as being a big shove towards a more walkable, vibrant post-pandemic future. You know, the Sixers are going to build apartments on top of the arena, and the whole thing will sit on top of a giant, currently underused train station.

DAN: I view this arena proposal as something that could bring people downtown who haven't gone downtown, and I also view it as a potential way to revive this market East corridor, which is just very, very far away from what it could be doing in terms of jobs and revenue for the city and its residents.

SEAN: But did you ask him about Xu's concerns about, you know, the loss of heritage, the loss of a cultural landmark for him?

MILES: Yeah, you know, he and others argue that most fans coming to games will take public transportation, and that those that drive can park in some of the many lots that already exist in garages in the area. So the parking concerns are a bit overblown. Dan says MANY buildings in Chinatown are owned by Chinese and asian Americans, not big corporate developers. Essentially, he argues that the arena would be a rising tide that lifts all boats.

DAN: You know, I understand the approach of some people who say, I'm always going to be with what the community says, but it's, you know, not always possible because you have to govern and write for what the city's interests as a whole are.

MILES: But, you know, there is one other thing that Xu brought up with me. It's something that he and other anti arena folks point to as the most concrete evidence that shows this whole thing is a bad idea.

XU: We study other Chinatowns in North America. Every time a big project comes in, the community either disappears or shrinks. The closest example is D.C. Chinatown.

SCORING FADES IN—LIKE A BOOMERANG (DC GO GO MUSIC)

SEAN: D.C. Chinatown. Yes, definitely one of America's Chinatowns …

MILES: <chortles> Yeah. DC's Chinatown, as we're going to talk about in a couple of minutes, has seen better days and its story parallels in some really interesting ways what's been happening in Philly. You know, 30 years ago, downtown D.C., which includes DC's Chinatown, was also strugglingAnd DC also turned to an arena as a way to reverse the decline. And they built it in Chinatown.

SEAN: *Today, Explained* heads home to the District of Columbia. When we return.

[MIDROLL]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> THE POSTAL SERVICE – “The District Sleeps Alone Tonight”*

*BEN + JEN: D.C. sleeps alone to–*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back through the magic of, of audio storytelling. We have gone from Philadelphia to Washington, DC, right down the northeast corridor, still with Miles Bryan. Miles, what did you find in Chinatown, District of Columbia?

MILES: Yes, I went and I'm back and I'm here to tell you that DC's Chinatown is like Philly's and that it's right in the middle of downtown. But that's basically where the comparison ends.

RICHARD WONG (1882 Foundation): You're going to see a lot of storefronts that are empty. There's a lack of foot traffic, high crime, drug use.

MILES: That’s Richard Wong. He’s a senior Director at the 1882 Foundation, a Chinese and Asian American ADvocacy Group. He's been working in DC's Chinatown since the 70s, an era when the streets were packed with dimsum spots and banquet halls.

RICHARD: There's a lot of, you know, Chinese restaurants that's still here, but most of them have, disappeared or have been bought out.

SEAN: Yeah, yeah. DC's Chinatown famously not even the best place to get Chinese food in the DC area.

MILES: Yeah, man. Most of the restaurants and cafes and retail there that are active in Chinatown are chain stores, you know, Dos toros Taqueria or Hip City Veg? Not Chinese at all, but there's this super weird detail that I noticed as soon as I got into the neighborhood. And I'm sure you remember, which is that every business has its name spelled out in Chinese characters under the English sign.

SEAN: Hey, are you making fun of our Chinatown?! Go back to Philly!

MILES: Yeah. I mean, hey, the city of DC required it to to make Chinatown feel like, Chinatown. But in reality, it mostly just seemed sad to me. You know, Richard said a lot of the translations are bad, too. Like. Like the one for Capital One cafe, which …

SEAN: Oh, no.

MILES: … Yeah. Which is operated by Capital One. The bank, but is not a bank. It's a cafe.

RICHARD: And there isn't, a translation. It's a capital one. So because it's a cafe, it's a it's the number one cafe. It's the number one bank, and it's got good food. Well, it's not a bank. That's not a description of a bank.  
MILES: Incredible.  
RICHARD: But nobody cares.

SEAN: <laughs> I don't think it's that people don't care, Miles. I think it's that people don't know.

MILES: Yeah, fair. But, you know, it wasn't always like that. When Richard moved here in 1978, it was a vibrant community.

RICHARD: Well, it's a neighborhood, you know, we all knew each other. We went from home to home. You know, we played in the streets, we played in the alleys. And I say this jokingly, but this is a fact. We did not have a day where we were hungry because our our families, our relatives worked in restaurants right after school. You know, we'd pop into a restaurant or we used to joke around, said, well, whose family should we rip off today for lunch? We go to the restaurant, sit down, and, you know, auntie and uncle would feed us. All right. That was the community, you know?  
MILES: And I could take it you're not popping into hip city veg and getting a meal on the house.  
RICHARD: Oh, no, no, no, not at all. Matter of fact, I hardly frequent these places now.

SEAN: You know, Miles, as a DC resident, I have heard tell of this bygone Chinatown. If I had a Delorean that could travel through time, I would. I would immediately go see DC’s Chinatown in its prime.

MILES: I don't have a Delorean, but I can tell you about it.

SEAN: Please!  
  
MILES: So…

SCORING IN—Surf Rock for Water BEars

MILES: Richard's nostalgic about the late 70s, but DC's Chinatown had actually started losing Chinese residents to the suburbs years before Richard got there, in the late 60s, after the riots that followed the killing of Martin Luther King Jr.

*<CLIP> FORMER CHINATOWN RESIDENT: A lot of people started moving out of DC. People’s parents were buying homes in Silver Spring mostly..*

MILES: In the 1980s, in another parallel with Philly, DC built a convention center in Chinatown, which displaced many Chinese residents.

*<CLIP> FORMER CHINATOWN RESIDENT: My uncle had a carryout on 9th street where the convention center moved. When he got kicked out by eminent domain he retired…*

MILES: And By the early 1990s DC’s Chinatown was struggling, largely because for the same reasons the rest of downtown DC was struggling…the crack epidemic and a wave of violence.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: In 1990 D.C. saw more than 470 homicides, earning it the label: murder capital of the US.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: But then eventually, if I'm not mistaken, they would build an arena where I would go see the Washington Capitals play hockey.

MILES: Right. So this is when the arena enters the stage. And in the early 1990s, DC officials reached a deal with Abe Pollint and the owner of the Washington Capitals hockey team and the NBA team, now known as the Wizards, to move their teams from the burbs to an arena in Chinatown. Matt Blitz is a reporter at DC's who wrote a really thorough history of Chinatown and the arena.

MATT BLITZ (DCist reporter): They were talking a lot about how the arena is going to change everything, right? And this is a quote from a from a story in 1994. “This shows we're making a comeback. We're telling everybody that the lights are still on here, and I think it will change a lot to attitudes towards to what our city is about.”

SEAN: And I'm getting deja vu here, Myles, because this is of course the exact situation Philly's in right now. DC was in it, whatever 30 years ago. Did the locals in Chinatown oppose this arena the way locals in Philly are right now?

MILES: Yeah, I mean it's worth pointing out that in DC they proposed to build the arena right in Chinatown, whereas in Philly it's just nearby. But there was reaction from the Chinese community in DC at the time. It was more mixed than what's been happening in Philly. I talked to some Chinese business owners in DC who said that they supported it in the 90s because the neighborhood was struggling and they thought it would be good for business. I know other community members were worried about change and gentrification. But the city didn't seem particularly tuned into the Chinese community and the project went ahead full-steam.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWS: The arena threw open its gates on December 2nd, 1997. The newly christened Fun Street lived up to its name as hundreds lined the block in front of the MCI center….*

SEAN: Fun street. Is that where they kept the Disney Hole?

MILES: <laughs> The Disney Hole never made it as far south as D.C., for better or for worse.

SEAN: Sad.

MILES: But what was definitely not fun was for some Chinese businesses who were forced out when the city of Washington, D.C., used eminent domain to see some land around the arena.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWS REPORTER: The arena, affectionately nicknamed the Phone Booth, transformed its surroundings almost overnight.   
MAN: All of a sudden, it was green light go for opening restaurants and nightspots, and it radiated out across that part of DC instantly.*

MILES: Like you heard in that quote, you know, when the MCI arena opened in 1997, it kicked off a lot of commercial growth in the area. Violence fell. You know, more people came in to see games, and that made the neighborhood more attractive to new groups. The Chinese population fell in 1990. About two thirds of the residents in the Chinatown area were Asian, according to the census. But 20 years later, less than a third were.

SEAN: Hm.

MILES: But you know, Richard says this story's more complicated than that state would suggest.

RICHARD: There was a lot of developers that came in and left for, you know, Chinese owners, you know, a large sum of money, you know, for the properties. And you can't fault them for not taking those offers. You know, I don't fault them from taking those offers. So people talk about gentrification…the forcing of Chinese out of the areas. But this was also an opportunity for second and third generation Chinese to accumulate wealth.

SEAN: Okay, so people got paid.

MILES: Yeah, exactly. And this is what I think is so interesting about this story is that it's gentrification, but it's gentrification that heavily benefited Chinese people. You know, they made good on their investments and they moved out to the suburbs. Now, most of the remaining Chinese people living in DC's Chinatown live in an affordable housing development for the elderly called the Wah Luck House. And those residents now have to take a BUS into the SUBURBS just to go to a Chinese grocery store.

RICHARD: There's, you know, Asian communities in Maryland and Virginia that has literally replaced Chinatown, you know, because the large grocery stores, you know, restaurants and so forth. But I think if you look at community-wise and trying to be more inclusive, you can't forget history.

MILES: And, you know, there's one other lesson from the saga of DC's Chinatown and its sports teams, which is sports teams moved to the suburbs, too.

SEAN: Ugh. Don't remind me.

MILES: Since DC's Chinatown Arena opened, it's hosted the Washington Wizards and the capitals, the NHL team, but apparently not for much longer. The team's owner is moving them out of the city to the suburbs in 2028.

*<CLIP> NBC 4: What do you say to DC residents who feel like they are being abandoned?  
WIZARDS AND CAPITALS OWNER TED LEONSIS: I understand. And the future is going to be fantastic. And we are 3.5 miles away.*

SEAN: Which, of course is another strike in the column for this 76 ers Arena in Philly right next to its Chinatown. Are people paying attention to what might happen in D.C. and saying here's another reason to not build in Philly.

MILES: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. But you know, Philly and DC are not the same. You know, something else I heard from nearly everyone I talked to is that the fate of DC's Chinatown has also been driven by the fact that it's no longer a destination for new Chinese immigrants. You know, the people most likely to work the kitchen jobs or open a restaurant themselves. And the opposite is true for Philly. It's become a magnet for new Chinese immigrants.

SCORING IN—A CAUTIOUS APPROACH

MILES: So I think Philly may be able to have it all. A new arena and a revitalized market East and a thriving Chinatown. But it is worth pointing out that the kind of rich tapestry of urban life that the Philly arena's supporters are hoping it can cultivate already exists just a couple blocks away in Philly's Chinatown. And one thing I think the D.C. example does show is that that is a really fragile thing, really easily lost. For Xu Lin from Philly, who we started the episode with. That makes it just not worth the risk.

XU: I want Chinatown enough for Chinese Americans. You know, Chinatowns in America came out of racism and resistance to racism. You know, the society did not… They wanted our labor. They did not want us to stay. They did not want us to have of offsprings. We stayed, we fought, we did business, within our community. We helped each other. We persisted. You know, my kids are born here. So I want Chinatown to be here for them. And one Chinatown to be here for my mom and her generation. You know, she speaks limited English, and Chinatown is her comfort. China is her community.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Well, I hope for Xu Lin’s sake and for his mom's sake that that if this 76 town or whatever it's called goes through in Philadelphia, that it can succeed where DC kind of failed and not displace its Chinatown.

MILES: Yeah. Yeah. We'll see. The Philly City Council is supposed to vote on whether the arena can move forward sometime later this year.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Well, in the meantime, I guess go Sixers because the Wizards are hopeless.

MILES: Yeah. I think if there's one thing we can all agree on is that the Wizards suck and the Sixers are great. Go, Sixers!

SCORING IN—SIXERS THEME SONG

SEAN: [laughs]

SEAN: Our show today was edited by Matthew Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd. It was reported and produced by Miles Bryan. Philadelphia bureau chief. *Today, Explained.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]