

A community co-development model

The Yee Project: Re-imagining mixed-used



Acknowledgements

Land

This booklet was crafted in the area known as Vancouver, on the unceded Indigenous lands belonging to the xʷməθkwəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliłwətał Nations. The Cultural Land Trust (CLT) recognizes that the colony of British Columbia was created through organized dispossession and colonial violence. As an organization focused on re-commoning land and buildings, our relationship to First Nations' territories is inherent. Our responsibility to honour and uphold Indigenous rights to self-determination and sovereignty is inextricable with our work, which operates within colonial property conventions in the radical hope of stabilizing the arts sector and decolonizing property relations.

Fiscal Sponsor

221A is the fiscal sponsor of the Cultural Land Trust (CLT), supporting the research, planning, and startup phases of the CLT. 221A is a non-profit operator of housing, workspaces, and cultural facilities. 221A envisions a pluralistic society in which all people have the means to access and make culture. The CLT is envisioned as an entity independent from 221A with a separate board of directors.

Masthead

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Grounding and Introduction

The Yee Project is a pilot initiative that aims to sustain and expand community-owned housing and cultural infrastructure in Vancouver's Chinatown. The project is a partnership between the cultural non-profit 221A and the land-owning Yee Fung Toy Society (Yee Society), two organizations with different histories but shared values. Central to this project is the proposal for a long-term ground lease, whereby the Yee Fung Toy Society would lease the site to 221A for redevelopment. This leasing and partnership model would enable the Yee Society to retain equity and ownership of the site while allowing 221A to leverage the lease to fund the redevelopment. The pilot involved early redevelopment planning, including the design of the project with particular consideration for the cultural, social, and heritage values of the site and neighbourhood.



Figure 1
Yee Project Section Perspective. 2024. By Human Studio.

Beyond this project, the partnership serves as a prototype for how organizations can work together to preserve historic legacies while creating space for future generations. While this project is still ongoing, we offer this document as an account and reflection of the processes we have experienced so far. Sharing our learnings and challenges, we seek to offer a practical example of a model that counters private property norms through both the design process and the partnership model.

Project Context

THE CHINATOWN CONTEXT

The history of Vancouver's Chinatown is inextricably linked to the history of the benevolent societies. These organizations were founded not merely for social gathering, but for mutual aid and collective survival. Established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these associations were a direct response to a hostile environment of systemic exclusion and racial discrimination¹. They have long functioned like community land trusts, pooling resources and holding land for the collective good, providing kinship and essential support to members based on shared ancestry, origin, or interests. These societies represent living and intangible heritage that exceeds the historically significant physical features of heritage buildings. Today, these societies face challenges including gentrification, rising land values, aging infrastructure, and a lack of succession by younger generations.

¹
City of Vancouver's Official
Apology to the Chinese Community
Recognizing Historical Discrimination
Against Chinese People in Vancouver.
2018. <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/18-112-06%20chinese-apology-media-english.pdf>

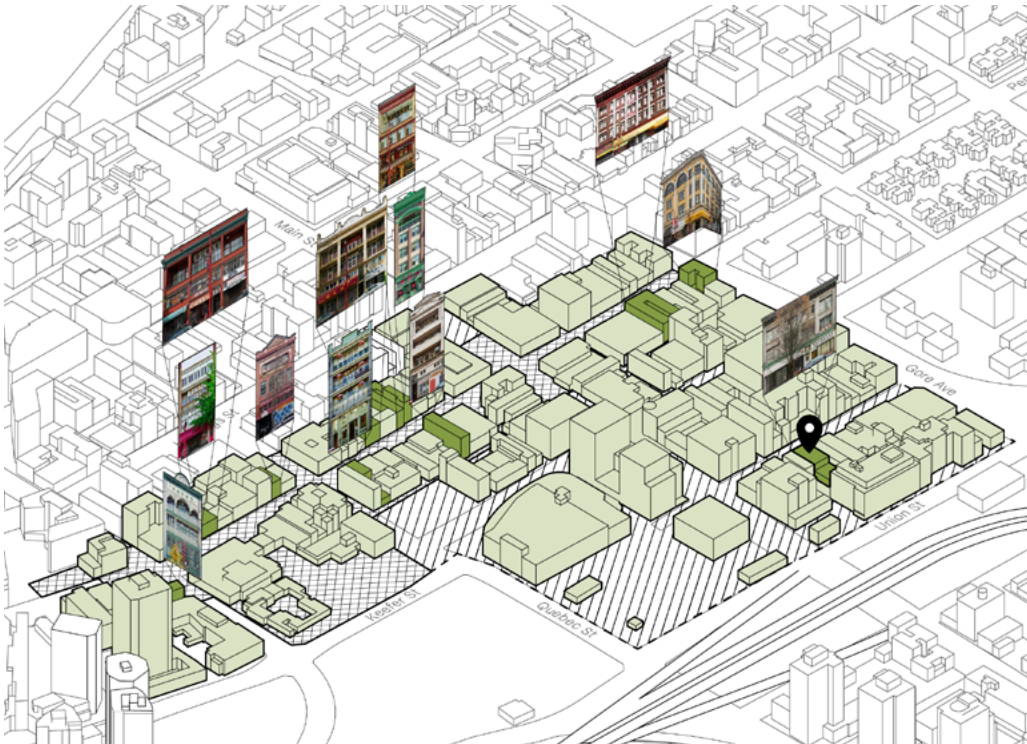


Figure 2
Chinatown Urban Context. 2024.
By Human Studio - Carmen Kam.

THE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The Yee Fung Toy Society (Yee Society) was founded in 1904 in Victoria, BC. In 1948, members pooled their resources to purchase 222-226 East Georgia Street and relocated their headquarters here. For over 70 years, the building served as their headquarters, a members' gathering place, and a home for Chinese seniors.



Figure 3
222-226 East Georgia Street in Vancouver's Chinatown. 1985. From: City of Vancouver Archives.

221A began as a student-led initiative in 2005, with our first home at 221 East Georgia Street operating as a collective arts production and public exhibition space. The space was foundational to our organization's growth, enabling us to learn from grassroots advocacy, resilience, and the collective spirit that define the Chinatown community. We continue to be guided by these values as we expand our operations and overall footprint. Today, 221A works to secure the long-term viability of cultural spaces by navigating the complexities of urban development and policy. This project is also rooted in our history in the neighbourhood as well as the history of the area itself.



Figure 4
First Location of 221A at 221 E Georgia Street in Vancouver's Chinatown; exhibition opening of Stratiform featuring the work of Kara Uzelman. 2013. By Dennis Ha.

The existing Yee Society building features its society hall, a commercial retail unit, a two-storey rear annex warehouse and production space, and two floors of low-income housing units. In 2011, 221A leased the Yee Society's commercial retail unit and two-storey rear annex. Further, several 221A members are of Chinese-Canadian descent and have familial or cultural connections to Chinatown. Brian McBay, one of 221A's founder and Executive Director, has a family history in the neighbourhood: his great-grandfather and grandparents operated the Hong Kong Cafe, a long-standing restaurant at 149 E Pender Street, from the 1920s until 1993. This relational proximity was central to 221A's initial rental arrangement with the Yee Society in 2011, and to the continuation and growth of that relationship as both organizations explored this redevelopment pilot project.

“When we first saw the ‘For Lease’ sign, I stopped to speak with one of the Yee Society elders who was outside the society hall, where members would often gather to play mahjong. At the time, many of the Society’s members were seniors who had lived and worked in Chinatown for decades. When I mentioned that my family had operated the Hong Kong Cafe at 149 E Pender, the conversation immediately changed. There was an instant sense of familiarity and trust. I realized there was a good chance they had known my grandparents, so I invited my grandmother to join me for the lease negotiations. She had always styled herself a tactful businessperson, but it was during those meetings that I came to appreciate the depth of the relationships she had built over a lifetime in Chinatown. Those longstanding community connections became the foundation of 221A’s relationship with the Yee Society.”

—Brian McBay, Executive Director, 221A

Further, these relations, cultural and physical, allowed us to understand the challenges of maintaining historic infrastructure firsthand while weaving in new and historical relationships found through Brian's family history.



Figure 5
Hong Kong Café on 100 block East Pender Street. 1986.
By Paul Yee. From: City of Vancouver Archives.

Hong Kong Cafe, known for its apple tarts and wide variety of Chinese-Canadian dishes, was owned and operated by Brian McBay's maternal family at 149 E Pender Street from 1952 to 1993.

Chinatown's benevolent societies have been providing housing, social safety nets, and cultural connections for over a century. However, because these societies historically prioritized low overhead costs to protect affordable rents for their members, many lack capital reserves required for modernization and critical life-safety upgrades. With the rising costs of building repairs and complexities of zoning, private acquisition and redevelopment may be seen as a solution to the operational burden of maintaining aging infrastructure. Unfortunately, the pace and financial interests of such redevelopment projects are often drivers of gentrification, which leads to the loss of cultural heritage and the displacement of residents. The need for an alternative model became evident.

Vision

INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

For 221A and the Yee Society, this alternative model emerged from existing relationships and grew organically over a decade of sharing space on East Georgia Street. When 221A followed its Co-Founders' roots in Chinatown to establish its first public exhibition space at 221 East Georgia, it was a lean, resourceful collective of young people who DIY'ed their own space upgrades and found ways to access funds and public grants. The opportunity to lease the space across the street came at a time when Chinatown was navigating economic decline, and the Yee Society's storefront and annex had sat vacant. 221A's lease of the space from the Yee Society was an alignment in both purpose and opportunity. 221A was seen actively doing something interesting across the street, demonstrating that they were responsible and active tenants.



Figure 6
Brian McBay with his Grandfather and Brother at the Hong Kong Cafe. 1990s. By Paul McBay.

Deepening this foundation were the personal and family relationships that connected 221A's founders into the neighbourhood fabric. Both organizations share Chinatown roots and are driven by a place-

specific practice that values community care. This mutuality is an actualization of contemporary cultural heritage. Shared values continued to strengthen throughout our decade-long tenancy, as we engaged in daily reciprocity in operations and in managing building repairs. 221A acted as more than tenants, but as caretakers of the building, while bringing fundraising acumen and problem-solving skills to repair aging infrastructure. These factors laid the foundation for the partnership as the building's physical needs grew more complex.

In 2021, our two organizations began exploring a formal partnership to redevelop the shared building. The Yee Society recognized that its infrastructure was aging and required significant modernization, though they lacked the internal and operational capacity to manage such a complex project. As an expanding non-profit, 221A had gained experience in navigating fundraising, government relations and the technical aspects of development. The collaborative model aimed to create a mutually beneficial scenario in which the Yee Society would retain land ownership and communal space for its members while minimizing operational risks, and 221A would provide operational capacity to manage and fund the redevelopment process, securing affordable space for artists. Importantly, the project aligned with the broader goals of Chinatown's cultural district of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Throughout the design process, we focused on the conservation of both intangible and tangible heritage. “Tangible” heritage describes physical places and objects, whereas “intangible” heritage includes “elements that cannot be seen or touched”.² Intangible heritage includes “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts”.³

²
First Peoples' Cultural Council,
“Intangible Cultural Heritage,”
FPCC, <https://fpcc.ca/resource/intangible-cultural-heritage/>

³
UNESCO, What Is Intangible Cultural
Heritage? (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 3.

In Canada, “heritage” has historically been more widely associated with tangible expressions, namely architecture, monuments or collections of objects, and has received more attention in heritage conservation than “intangible heritage”. However, in recent years, the importance of intangible heritage in sustaining vibrant communities, enhancing intercultural dialogue and addressing inequities is becoming more understood and valued.⁴ In fact, much of Chinatown’s distinct sense of place stems from the integration of its tangible and intangible heritage. Society-owned heritage buildings, such as the Yee Society building, feature architectural elements of significance. And just as important are the cultural and social practices housed within the buildings, from the nurturing of Yee members and community leaders, to the daily sounds of seniors playing mah jong, that make them integral to the community. The design process challenged us to begin introspectively, reflecting on heritage values and then their architectural expressions.



Figure 7
Cultural Heritage Collage. 2024. By
Human Studio - Jessica Hanzelkova.

Our Approach

The Yee Project brings together design, fundraising, and partnership-building as interconnected parts of a community co-development process. Across each project component, the following principles grounded our approach:

Creating a new model where Society ownership is retained, and redevelopment occurs without perpetuating erasure and/or displacement.

Driving our work is a commitment to cultural renewal that is not premised on dispossession, but rather on strengthening existing community bonds and assets. At the heart of the Yee Project is a long-term lease agreement and regenerative financial model. Access to land is provided through a long-term ground lease from the Yee Society to 221A. Yee Society retains legal ownership of the land, while 221A can borrow against the land and building to fund the development.

Deepening security through long-term, affordable and quality housing and cultural spaces.

The proposed 46,000 ft² mixed-use project addresses the issues of housing security and cultural displacement. Non-market housing for seniors and artists is integrated with cultural and social spaces, including artist studios, presentation spaces, and culturally relevant retail.

Enabling intergenerational collaboration, historic legacy and future stewardship.

The project celebrates the intangible living heritage of Chinatown through design that honours the neighbourhood's history and provides opportunities for intergenerational exchange by integrating housing and culture. A dedicated Yee Society Hall ensures that the Yee's presence remains a cornerstone.

Addressing financial resilience through design and funding navigation.

The architectural approach explores the unique small-lot typology characteristic of Vancouver's Chinatown, aiming to maximize floor space while preserving the neighbourhood's historical and future context. Operational cross-subsidization from commercial retail balances the affordability of housing and cultural spaces. A complex funding stack is composed of government grants, loans, and philanthropy.

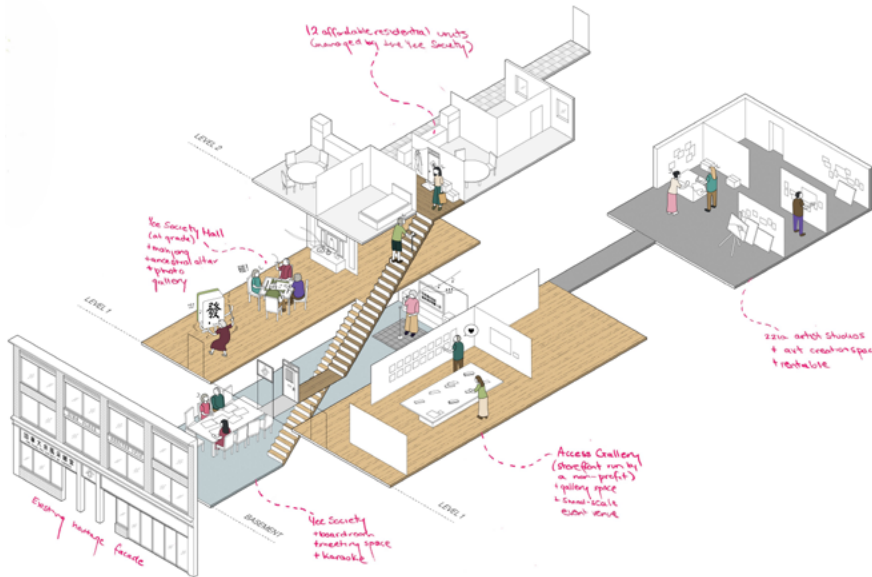


Figure 8
Existing Intangible Heritage. 2024. By Human
Studio - Carmen Kam.

The core components of the project included **design, fundraising, and the formalization** of the partnership between 221A and the Yee Society.

DESIGN

The design process thus far occurred in three phases: Feasibility and Business Plan (2021), Schematic Design (2024), and Design Development/80% Development Permit (2024). The phases were shaped by the typical design and development process, grant funding constraints, and considerations regarding our two organizations' readiness to move forward. We worked closely with our development consultant to ensure that technical decisions that impact long-term costs and operations were made through a multidisciplinary lens and to engage other staff members as needed. The collaboration also allowed us to build internal capacity in real estate development.

When approaching design, we carefully considered how the consultant team was assembled. From the outset, we centred our guiding vision of intergenerational collaboration and the safeguarding of cultural heritage. This meant working with practitioners whose values aligned with ours and, whenever possible, professionals who had a relational connection to Chinatown or to Chinese Canadian heritage. The team included 221A staff members, Carmut Me and Brian McBay, ensuring that our values were embedded from the outset and throughout the design development process. Tomo Spaces was selected as lead development consultant: a local development firm with expertise in community-centred projects and communal ownership modelling, led by Leslie and Mark Shieh. These values also guided the selection of our architectural consultants: Perkins+Will for the feasibility study, and Human Studio for the schematic and design development phases.

First, we began with a feasibility study to examine potential development scenarios for the site. This took place from March to December of 2021. The outcome of the feasibility study was the selection of the “L-scheme” as the primary scenario to further develop. The L-scheme proposed retaining the existing three-storey heritage building and constructing a new eight-storey building behind it. This phase also confirmed the viability of the project through examining site conditions, zoning and budget constraints. Central to this phase was the recommendation of a ground lease model to retain Yee Society’s long-term interests as property owners while ensuring financial viability for the redevelopment.

We formed a working group of staff and board members from both organizations to work with the consultant team. Together, we sought to answer a central question: *How can we design an infill development that meets the needs of both 221A and the Yee Society to cultivate a collaboration that is mutually economically and socially advantageous?* Through visioning workshops, an aspiration emerged of a vibrant cultural hub with principles and programmatic elements of:

- Intergenerational exchange and celebration,
- Cultural spaces for art production and presentation,

- Culturally-relevant and balanced retail and housing, and
- A renewed Yee Society Hall.

L-Scheme – Sectional Perspective

The building embodies the synergy between Yee Society and 221A as a vibrant culture hub that celebrates intergenerational exchange.

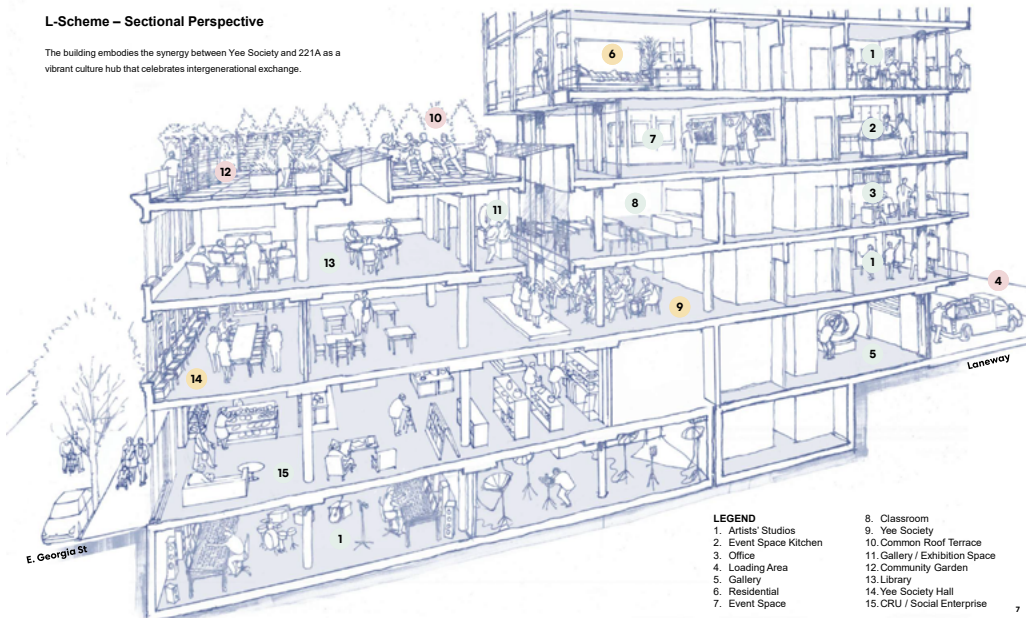


Figure 9
L-Scheme Sectional Perspective. 2024.
By Human Studio.

After a short pause to pursue funding and build internal capacity using the feasibility study and its recommendations, we progressed to schematic design from March 2024 and July 2024, focusing on further design development of the L-scheme. This phase translated the goals and high level programmatic recommendations from the feasibility study into site plans, floor plans, and form and massing studies.

During this phase, certain trade-offs and significant design decisions were made. These included:

Chinatown Urban Form: The ground floor features double frontages facing both the street and the rear lane. This form encourages lane activation and is a historic and unique urban form to Chinatown. This required creative design solutions that considered the use of the lane by both people and typical building services, such as loading and waste.

Honouring the Yee Society: It was essential that the building remain clearly identified as the Yee Society's home. A double-height central space on the second floor, facing East Georgia Street and with its own dedicated street entrance, serves as the future Society Hall.

Adding Housing for Families: While an efficient rectangular design would yield the highest unit count, it would result exclusively in small studio units. During this phase, we explored how 221A's housing operations would function within the building. This led to the addition of two- and three-bedroom units, aligning with what we know about artists' needs.



Figure 10
Yee Project North Render. 2024. By Human Studio - Julieta Alva.

Immediately following the schematic phase, we began preparing the Development Permit (DP) application. We decided to adopt the “80% Package” approach, strategically pausing to assess at this point. This is an important milestone as the 80% package would allow City staff to provide early feedback and elicit more accurate pricing from trades. The pause was intentional to allow time to evaluate and confirm funding before moving ahead with a complete submission package to the City of Vancouver. Importantly, this strategy allowed us to adopt a slower pace, enabling us to focus on developing fundraising strategies and formalizing the partnership with the Yee Society.

FUNDRAISING

Because the Yee Project intentionally weaves together cultural infrastructure and social housing, it requires navigating a highly complex, multi-sector funding stack. As a non-profit organization without the means

to contribute the necessary capital directly, securing resources for a project of this scale means assembling contributions from all levels of government, alongside private philanthropy.

Housing and cultural funding are administered by different departments, crown corporations, and agencies at all levels of government. This meant that we must pursue several distinct funding streams simultaneously, each governed by its own timelines, cycles, criteria, and compliance requirements.

Level of Government	Culture	Housing
Federal	Department of Canadian Heritage; Canada Council for the Arts (agency)	The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) (federal crown corporation)
Provincial	Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture; BC Arts Council (agency)	BC Housing (provincial crown corporation)
Municipal	Arts, Culture, and Community Services Department	Housing Development Department

The availability and timing of funding across the various sectors differ, adding complexity to an already intricate funding stack. The project required us to align with funding application timelines while maintaining momentum with the architectural and design team. Typically, the design development process unfolds in a linear, fast-paced manner. However, in this case, the scale and complexity of the fundraising process required the consultant team to work more flexibly, adapting to a stop-and-go rhythm as funding opportunities, approvals, and constraints emerged.

A further challenge is that many funding criteria and compliance requirements are designed around conventional mixed-use housing developments, where commercial retail occupies the ground floor, and residential units occupy the upper levels. This

presents a challenge for the Yee Project because its design approach expands beyond conventional mixed-use models. The project's mixed-use composition reflects the values and needs of the community, but because it is somewhat unconventional, it has encountered barriers during the fundraising process. Funders such as CMHC rely on rigid housing formulas that require a certain level of affordability, a specific number of market units, and often an 80/20 ratio between residential and non-residential space. While this ratio is intended to prevent excessive commercial use and ensure that housing remains the priority, it does not adequately support projects where the social value lies not only in housing, but also in cultural and community uses. In this case, limiting non-residential space to 20 percent is insufficient for the project's broader community-serving purpose.

Cultural funding programs tend to be more receptive to this kind of integrated model, but they are also more limited: there are fewer funding options, smaller pools of available capital, and a greater need to socialize the project's vision so that funders understand its value. Across both housing and cultural funding sectors, there has been strong interest in the project; we received positive feedback and enthusiasm from grant officers, but they are often constrained by rigid granting protocols.



Figure 11
Yee Project North Render. 2024.
By Human Studio - Julieta Alva.

This formalization process began with the pursuit of a non-binding memorandum of understanding (MOU), which focused on working together in good faith to broadly outline the key lease terms to be discussed when drafting a formal lease agreement. The key terms include the long term lease, of 60 to 99 years, wherein the Yee Society owns the land and 221A owns the improvements on the land during the lease, then the land and buildings will revert to the Yee Society after the end of the lease term. Further terms that would be in discussed include building's operational structure (evaluating a full-building lease with a leaseback of Society Hall to Yee Society versus a split management model covering the studios, gallery, hall, and seniors' housing), rental terms spanning all pre- and post-construction phases, and a Right of First Refusal for 221A should Yee's decide to sell the property prior to construction.

Co-development models and agreements can take a lot of different shapes; dynamic ownership and leasehold arrangements can be crafted to fit the needs of both organizations. This project sought to position the Yee Society and 221A as complementary partners, wherein each brings distinct strengths to the project and takes away benefits specific to their organization's mandate—a formalization process leaving both partners feeling that they are bringing fair contributions and getting the same fair and beneficial values in return. In this co-development model, each partner offers distinct contributions: the Yee Society provides access to property through ownership, and 221A provides additional equity, fundraising capacity, and project management capabilities. Both organizations come to the project with a need that the other can solve. We sought to craft an agreement between the two parties that addresses the challenges each faces, creating a regenerative structure that helps both build generational wealth.

Reflections

At the time of writing, the project is in a period of pause. While the technical design work has advanced, we have come to understand that the project's success depends not only on feasibility, but on the strength of the partnership itself. Moving forward requires deep relational trust, shared readiness, and a formal partnership structure that can support both organizations through the scale and complexity of redevelopment.

This phase of the pilot brought two core teachings to the surface.

COMPLEXITY OF COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

Building a partnership with a historic benevolent society is fundamentally different from working with a private developer, government agency, or contemporary non-profit organization. The Yee Society holds a long history, a broad membership, and many rightsholders whose perspectives and responsibilities must be meaningfully considered. Significant time and care will be required to build internal consensus. While 221A has established trust through more than a decade as a reliable tenant and caretaker, formalizing a multi-million-dollar redevelopment project requires the relationship to move beyond a tenant-landlord rapport. It asks both organizations to enter a new phase of collaboration, one grounded in shared understanding, clear commitments, and collective decision-making.

ON BUILDING RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

We recognize that this project represents a significant departure from how the Society has operated for much of the last half century, where there was little reliance on outside institutions, including government.

Whereas the redevelopment process introduces new layers of fundraising, financing, governance, legal negotiation, and long-term operational planning.

One of the clearest lessons from this phase is the tension between the pace of development and the pace of relationship-building. Permitting timelines, funding deadlines, and consultant workflows often move quickly, while trust, consensus, and shared understanding must be built more deliberately, at a responsive and thoughtful pace.

We have come to understand that building complex relational infrastructure would require the same amount of resources as physical architecture. The time, care, and capacity needed to build alignment between partners are not secondary to the design, financing, or construction of the project; they are foundational to whether a community co-development model like the Yee Project can move forward.

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Funders



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INSPIRIT

221A is supporting the research, planning, and startup of an independent Cultural Land Trust (CLT).

The CLT builds a future where artists and cultural organizations in B.C. have collective ownership of land and buildings. A community model for artists and non-profit arts organizations—especially low-income, disabled, LGBTQ2IA+, and Black, Indigenous and people of colour—that opens pathways to sustainable stewardship of cultural spaces, rent stability, and collective wealth.