



PLANTING IMAGINATION:

Community Co-Design 'How-to-Guide'

Community Co-Design
for Chinatown Toronto

Jan 2025

Welcome to Planting Imagination's How-to Guide!

This How-to Guide details how a group of architects, residents, community organizers, and public health researchers embarked on a journey to explore more radical ways of designing, working, and building together. Our aim was to go beyond the usual (and at times disempowering) community consultation methods commonly used in neighbourhood design, to see if we can develop an ethical co-design approach that starts and ends with the local community.

Through a combination of virtual reality (VR) centric visioning sessions and co-design workshops, we worked together to redesign Cecil's community garden located in Toronto's Chinatown West. This process helped us build community power to address '**neighbourhood health**' as a collective resource in the context of COVID-19, and encouraged us to think beyond individualized health outcomes.

This guide is our way of sharing what we learned. We hope to encourage others to design and build in a more authentic and generative way by collaborating with local communities, and be open to bringing together diverse skills, practices, knowledge, and people. We're excited to see how you might take, build, and make use of our insights in your own work and community. Let's get started!

About

Planting Imagination (the "Project") took place between 2021 and 2023 in Toronto's Chinatown West neighbourhood. The Project brought together a group of local Chinatown community organizations, researchers, and community members to redesign and transform a community garden at Cecil Community Centre ("Cecil"). The Project engaged over 60 diverse community members ("Chinatown Activators" or "CAs") and six community Facilitators, and operated as direct action against the deterioration of the physical environment of Chinatown West. The Project created a series of virtual reality (VR) collaboration platforms to make it easier for communities to come together and envision the future of their own neighbourhoods during a time of heightened pandemic related impact and increased social and physical isolation.

Who is this guide for?

We hope that by sharing some of the tools we used throughout this work, architects, designers, engagement consultants, and planners (“design professionals and researchers”) will feel inspired to start thinking differently about the possibilities for collaboration with local people and communities in their everyday practices. While not all lessons detailed will be applicable to every project type, we hope this guide provides inspiration and self-reflection for better allyship and advocacy for communities within the spheres of architectural design, urban planning, engineering, and urban and regional development.

This guide might also be useful for community organizers and **‘insider-outsider’ academic researchers**¹ by providing resources and tips for working together ethically in a community research setting.

¹ Bukamal, H. (2022), Deconstructing insider–outsider researcher positionality. *British Journal of Special Education*, 49: 327-349.

Project Team

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Land Acknowledgement

In Toronto, what is now called Chinatown West is located along Spadina Avenue, a road whose name has its roots in the Ojibwe/Anishinaabemowin word "Ishpadinaa" (ish-pah-di-naw) which means "hill" or "sudden rise in the land." Our project in Chinatown West takes place on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat, and continues to be home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island. Together we all exist under the Dish With One Spoon Treaty where it is our shared responsibility to protect the land: to never take more than we need and ensure that we leave something in the Dish for others. We also exist under the Two Row Wampum Belt Treaty which symbolizes two paths traveling down the same river together, living side by side in peace, with respect for one another's customs, laws and ways of life.

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01

Laying the Groundwork

Scan the QR Code to access links and resources for **Laying the Groundwork**:



- [Archives](#)
- [Mapping](#)
- [3D Scanning](#)
- [Community Partner Agreement](#)

Laying the Groundwork

Call to Action

Architects, urban planners, designers, engineers, engagement consultants, and researchers functioning within institutional research settings or informal **design processes** (such as those outlined in the Environmental Assessment Act or Planning Act—See Appendix) often use engagement practices in their interactions with members of the local community that are perceived as extractive. This may be inadvertent, legislated (such as the “duty to consult”), or bound to funding or timeline constraints.

However well-meaning, poorly considered engagement practices have the potential to compound **gentrification** and displace local residents. Conventional engagement approaches to design and research focuses on the client (i.e., commercial developers, academic institutions, city staff and councillors) at the expense of residents and other local stakeholders. Often, by the time the design has reached the community, it’s too late—once design decisions have been made, the community has very little leverage to put forth ideas they feel would be beneficial for them. This process leaves little to no room for community agency or ownership in the shape and form of local neighbourhoods. At that point, the consultation process does more harm than good: it leaves people feeling disempowered, disillusioned, and reduces trust even further.

Common ways that satisfy requirements of “engagement” where the preferred design has been pre-determined and public feedback is solicited to get “buy in” on the preferred design include:

- Sending information gathering letters or notice of commencement email;
- Erecting notice signage outside of a property;
- Open houses showcasing the design;
- Public information sessions;
- Small working groups; and
- Online surveys

As design professionals and researchers, we need to do better. We've been told that community consultations are enough. But the existing consultation norms leave little room to explore community-led design outcomes. We need to invest our time in building **ethical design processes** and research approaches that meaningfully engage community members and encourage participation from diverse stakeholders. This would in turn enable individual and collective agency and action to sustain our neighbourhoods and communities.

We can do that by starting our design process with the people who live and work in the place where we're building. This means challenging the prevailing norms around who is the "expert", recognizing community knowledge, and building capacity for mutual knowledge sharing and upskilling to be able to work together early on. As designer professionals, we have the "formal" skills and knowledge that can complement and enhance local knowledge and lived experiences, resulting in better design outcomes. In order to do that, we first need to understand who they are, recognize their expertise, and make space in our processes to be able to work alongside them.

Asking the Right Questions

- 01 Who is already working in this space?
- 02 Who are the community leaders / organizers who can give you a sense of the social history of the area?
- 03 What are you providing through your work that will make community life better?
- 04 What languages do local people speak? How will you need to adjust your work accordingly to ensure you can engage with them?
- 05 What type of collaboration will have the greatest impact on how your work is perceived by members of the community?

Tools from Our Work

We researched the history of our site, Chinatown West, via [archives](#), [mapping](#) and [3D scanning](#) before approaching any potential collaborators to ensure we had a good understanding of the community's political context and complexity. This socio-political context also allowed us to think more critically and inclusively about how we define Chinatown's community in addition to its residents, workers, and owners. Then, we co-wrote a [community agreement with community partners](#) to outline how we planned to work together over the course of the project: What are our expectations, responsibilities, how we expect to be treated, and how we will treat others? What are the core values we share and agree to uphold, and what are our guiding principles? This agreement is a living document that is revisited and collectively revised throughout the project.

Overcoming challenges

Low trust

It's not easy to build trust especially in places where people have been deceived, displaced, or let down. If you don't have direct connections with the community you're designing with, make sure to collaborate with someone who does. Be clear about how your work will impact the area and how people can be involved. Impacts may be interpreted by the community as positive, negative, or neutral. Be clear about how you are working to make a positive impact as well as how you are making space for local people, community knowledge and community agency in your design process.

Lack of local knowledge

Design teams should be led or co-led by 'insider-outsiders' where possible. This includes architects, designers, engagement consultants, planners and researchers with a thorough understanding or informed perspective of the issues at hand, who can bring in their existing networks (while avoiding the tokenization of employees with lived experience). Insider-outsiders may also have an intimate understanding of the community's needs relative to the project, which will improve both the delivery and wider outcomes of the work.

02

Bringing People Together

Scan the QR Code to access links and resources for **Bringing People Together**:



- [English Flyer](#)
- [Simplified Chinese Flyer](#)
- [Traditional Chinese Flyer](#)
- [Vietnamese Flyer](#)
- [Expression of Interest Form](#)
- [Recruitment Process](#)
- [Selection Rubric](#)
- [Community Panel Training](#)
- [Mapping Key Stakeholders](#)
- [Identifying Key Issues](#)

Bringing People Together

Call to Action

Once we've committed to (and made space for) collaborating with local stakeholders in our work and laid the initial groundwork with the community we're building in, we need to have a plan for how we engage them across the design process. This has to start with bringing people together, building trust and exploring common values. But first, we need to map out who we're going to bring on board and how we're going to engage them.

As design professionals and researchers, we need to recognise that although our position as technical experts equips us with the tools to actualize the imagined realities of local stakeholders, we may sit furthest away from the people who most need to be in the room. So, we need to focus on creating recruitment and engagement processes that can be supported by the local community actors and leaders we've built relationships with in the 'laying the groundwork' phase.

Residents and local stakeholders may have negative perceptions of our client or associated institution. We need to consider our difficult role as bridges, while honouring the terms of the community agreement and balancing our contractual obligations to our clients/Institutions.

We can start by considering our own accountability, professional boundaries and the limits of our obligations. We also need to consider if and how we plan to advocate for local people (which will often be at odds with the objectives of our own institutions, funders and employers) and build this contingency up front as we ask them to show up and get involved.

Asking the Right Questions

- 01 What are you offering to the community you're working with?
- 02 How do you plan to reach the widest cross-section of people possible?
- 03 What kind of engagement tools and recruitment language call people in, and what kind leave people out?
- 04 How will you run a truly equitable recruitment process?
- 05 How will you identify the people who most need to be in the room, but are probably the people you're least likely to be connected with?

Tools from Our Work

The recruitment process for our Chinatown Activators was designed carefully, with the intention that it would be open, flexible, low-barrier and accessible. This encouraged all members of the community, particularly seniors and those who do not speak any English or have access to digital technologies, to get involved. Here's the [English](#), [Simplified Chinese](#), [Traditional Chinese](#) and [Vietnamese](#) versions of our flyer. Here's the English version of our accessible [expression of interest form](#) which could be filled out online (text or audio) or over the phone. We produced both the flyer and form in four languages to ensure Mandarin, Cantonese and Vietnamese speakers could sign up to the project.

Our recruitment process sought to reach diverse representatives from the Chinatown community. This includes across generations, disciplines, geographic boundaries, language, immigration status, ability, ethnocultural background, and more. To reach people that intersect with any or all of these factors, the team worked with community leaders to identify highly impacted and marginalized groups to carry out targeted recruitment. Here's the [recruitment process](#) we followed. Here's our easy-to-use [selection rubric](#) and here's how we [trained our community panel](#) to select participants.

Overcoming challenges

Lack of buy-in

Because public trust in institutions is so low, participants may conflate those responsible for running public consultations with those building new structures and those delivering community design projects. As a result, it's important for any type of community co-production project to have clear communication, to ensure participants are fully aware of who is involved in the project and the differences in roles and responsibilities between who is delivering, support, and commissioning the work, so they can trust the work enough to get fully involved. This includes clearly communicating the scope of decision making power (both for the community and your own role in advocating for community) as well as factors that influence power dynamics such as who commissioned the project, who owns the property and who is running the community engagement or consultation process.

Reaching the right people

Conduct a [Mapping Key Stakeholders](#) and [Identifying Key Issues](#) session with community members and community partners, and identify outreach networks to reach those **stakeholders**. Mobilize personal networks through word of mouth and community connections. Circulate flyers amongst student groups and post flyers in high-traffic areas across the neighbourhood. Think about the audience using various social media platforms to create targeted posts. Make sure to conduct a review midway through the process to assess which demographic groups haven't yet registered interest, and carry out a focused recruitment push. groups and post them across the neighbourhood. Think about the audience using various social media platforms to create targeted posts. Make sure to conduct a review midway through the process to assess which demographic groups haven't yet registered interest, and carry out a focused push to recruit them.

03

Working Together

Scan the QR Code to access links and resources for **Working Together**:



- [Workshop Series Plan](#)
- [12 Session Plans](#)
- [Co-design Workbook](#)
- [Garden Game Object List](#)
- [VR Instructions](#)
- [AR Instructions](#)
- Research Forms:
 - [Consent form](#)
 - [Intake form](#)
 - [Baseline Survey](#)
- [Translation Insights and Index](#)
- [Payment Forms](#)
- [Honourarium Tokens](#)

Working Together

Call to Action

How do we avoid the pitfall of designing buildings and spaces that aren't fit for purpose, or don't serve the surrounding community? We need to design together within the boundaries of what is technically feasible.

Co-design and **co-production** methods and processes¹ can be useful tools for empowering residents to play a part in making changes to the built environment. They can also help design professionals and researchers sense-check or validate the feasibility of a building or space from a user's perspective.

Co-design projects can be big or small; co-production tools can be used across the entirety of a design project or to work out one specific element of a design. As design professionals and researchers who feel accountable to both the client and the community, we need to make realistic decisions around where and how co-design tools can be used in the design process, and make sure this is communicated in advance to anyone who decides to take part.

¹ Vargas, C., Whelan, J., Brimblecombe, J., & Allender, S. (2022). Co-creation, co-design and co-production for public health. *Public Health Research & Practice*, 32(2), e3222211.

Asking the Right Questions

01

How will you set expectations around which parts of the work or design can be influenced or decided upon collectively, and which will be decided on by the design team?

02

What kind of decision-making model will you use to ensure everyone has a say?

- 03 How will you pay participants fairly for their expertise?
- 04 How will you equip participants with the skills they need to meaningfully contribute to the design?
- 05 How can the expertise of an architect or designer be used to support community-led decision making, instead of being used as a barrier to access?

Tools from Our Work

Over the course of a year, Chinatown Activators participated in [12 sessions](#) that took them through: the journey of learning about the project, the garden and AR/VR; to co-designing and working together to physically build the garden; to collaboratively planning future programming for the space; and finally, to learning how to fundraise to ensure the sustainability of the garden and its programs. Here are all of our [session plans](#), [co-design workbook](#), [garden game object list](#), [VR instructions](#), and [AR instructions](#).

Here are the multilingual research forms: [consent form](#), [intake form](#), [baseline survey](#)) that helped us gather demographic information about participants for monitoring and reporting purposes.

Overcoming challenges

Setting expectations

Architects, designers, engagement consultants, planners and researchers must be clear about which elements of the project is open for co-design and feedback, total community control, or shared decision-making. A balance must be struck between technical expertise and decision-making grounded in the wider community vision and community knowledge.

Recognizing cultural nuance

Design professionals and researchers should factor in considerations around cultural education and nuance (e.g. political tensions within given communities, differing definitions of gentrification and displacement, limited

awareness due to lack of translation of key concepts across language groups) whenever they try to involve community members in co-production processes. We must recognize the political implications associated with language translation and the differing political beliefs of various language communities and understanding of vernacular language across different generations.

For example, terms like 小姐 ("miss") may be neutral for an older generation but are offensive or dismissive 小姐 ("prostitute") for a younger generation. Or, for example, an official Chinese land acknowledgement translation did not exist. Many non-English speaking community members learned about these indigenous histories for the first time in our co-design process, even though they were the same generation as English speakers who were already knowledgeable about anti-colonial frameworks.

To address this, we produced [a translation insights guide with an index of key translation terms](#) to ensure consistent translation across materials and sessions that are culturally competent.

Addressing Compensation and Participation Barriers

Community members should be compensated with a living wage for their role as community researchers/designers and for their knowledge contribution and expertise. Compensation also incentivizes the equitable participation of lower-income community members, including women in traditional caretaking roles, which foster a more comprehensive and representative cohort in the project's engagement initiatives.

The designer needs to be cognizant of institutional barriers as they arise and proactively address and advocate for the participant. For example, payroll barriers requiring a permanent address and bank account for electronic payments can exclude precariously housed, unhoused, and undocumented community researchers.

Whenever possible, cash honourariums should be offered. We tracked compensation using honourarium tokens. Here are the [payment forms](#) and [honourarium tokens](#) that helped us gather the information we needed to pay participants while fulfilling the requirements of our funders and granting agencies.

04

Supporting Community Stewardship

Scan the QR Code to access links and resources for **Supporting Community Stewardship**:



- [Session Plan](#)
- [Session #11: Legacy Planning Slides](#)
- [Session #11: Program Planning Template](#)
- [Session #11: Budget Template](#)
- [Programming Co-design Workbook](#)
- [Session #12: Fundraising Training Slides](#)

Supporting Community Stewardship

Call to Action

Where possible, architects and planners should think beyond the project timeline and consider the long-term use and function of the project. If the space or building we're developing will remain in the community for decades or generations to come, we need to be thinking about how our designs and the design process will support the Project's ongoing use and ownership—beyond our own limited project timelines.

We can learn a lot about **community stewardship** from the history and legacy of past community organizers and activists, including those in Toronto's Chinatown, who work to keep their communities involved in stewarding local assets despite their exclusion from city planning processes.

Ethical design practices should offer up resources that help community members build and acquire the legacy planning and leadership skills necessary to steward and care for community spaces (and shared land more broadly) in the long term.

Asking the Right Questions

01

How will you support the community's resistance to the forces of gentrification and displacement while the project is being carried out and even after it's finished?

02

How will you equip participants with the skills they need to steward, steer and take care of the space after the formal completion of the project?

03

How will you work with participants to plan for the handover of the project / site as it moves into its legacy phase?

04

How will you empower your community partners to make use of the design skills you shared with them during the project in other contexts?

Tools from Our Work

The Project continues as one of Cecil's community programs, led by 20 Chinatown Activators (CAs) who have self-selected to continue the work alongside support from Cecil's staff team.

The ongoing interest and commitment on the part of the CAs to take the work forward and continue to steward the future of the garden is indicative of the ways in which deep engagement, upskilling, and legacy planning with community members can build the confidence and agency necessary for marginalized communities to reclaim the future of the spaces and places in their neighbourhoods.

Here are our tools relating to legacy planning: [Session Plan #11](#), [Session #11: Legacy Planning Slides](#), [Session #11: Program Planning Template](#), [Session #11: Budget Template](#), [Programming Co-design Workbook](#), and [Session #12: Fundraising Training Slides](#).

Overcoming challenges

Exiting too soon

Legacy planning should be included as a final phase of any future co-production project, allowing time for exit strategy planning and a detailed handover to the lead community partner.

Disempowered neighbourhoods

Co-produced design projects should strive to provide the skills, as well as building the confidence necessary, for participants to both get involved in existing civic processes, and encourage participants to build their own initiatives and processes that could influence existing civic structures, where there is interest.

The background is a collage of various 3D geometric shapes in muted colors: light pink, yellow, orange, and sage green. These shapes include rectangular blocks, some with rounded edges, and others with unique, multi-lobed or curved profiles. They are scattered across the page, creating a textured, architectural feel.

05

**Final thoughts:
Building Community
Power through
Co-Design**

Final thoughts: Building Community Power through Co-Design

Call to Action

As architects, designers, engagement consultants, and planners, we navigate a complex web of project constraints (clients, budgets) and institutional constraints (municipal policies, compensation requirements) which act as project limits. At times it doesn't always feel like we have full control over the scope of the project or share value alignment with our client or employer. While there may be elements out of our scope, we must take responsibility and be accountable for the untapped potential, power and opportunities that lies in shaping the design process to engage local people and communities, and advocate to build community power.

Asking the Right Questions

- 01 In what ways are "expertise" understood, quantified or disqualified in your profession? How is that similar or different from what the community understands or values as "expertise"?
- 02 What are the power structures and dynamics shaping the design process? Where is your position within this structure and how can you use your role to advocate for and build power with those who are currently least heard from?
- 03 In what ways are professional conventions and standards getting in the way of community power and agency? What are small, medium and big ways you challenge these taken for grant given practices?
- 04 What are ways in which you can make use of your design knowledge to take more of a facilitator role that honours community expertise?

Additional Tools and Resources

Linda Zhang. (2023). Planting Imagination: Community Co-Design for Chinatown Toronto | Impact Report. UWSpace. <https://hdl.handle.net/10012/20104>

Alan Li, Josphine Pui-Hing Wong, Kenneth Fung, Linda Zhang, Mandana Vahabi & Tyler Fox. (2024). Planting Imagination: Community Co-Design for Toronto's Chinatown West. 112th Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) Annual Meeting Proceedings, Disruptors on the Edge. <https://doi.org/10.35483/ACSA.AM.112.98>

Kasdan, A., Cattell, L., & Woo, R. (2020). Research for Organizing: A Toolkit for Participatory Action Research. TakeRoot Justice, Facilitator's Guide and Toolkit, Urban Justice Center, Community Development Project, Research and Organizing Initiative. <https://www.researchfororganizing.org/>

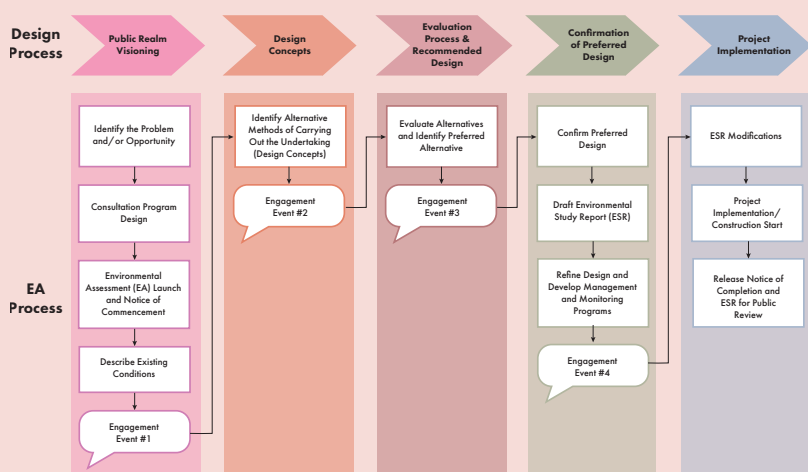
Boilevin, L., Chapman, J., Deane, L., Doerksen, C., Fresz, G., Joe, D., ... Winter, P. (2019, March 15). Research 101 : A Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0377565>

Glossary

Community stewardship refers to the collective responsibility and active role of community members and organizations in caring for, managing, and safeguarding shared resources, spaces, and cultural heritage. This encompasses the past legacy, current practices, and future actions of mutual aid efforts to preserve and enhance the long-term well-being of the community and its environment.

Community engagement consultant is a professional who helps organizations connect with and involve community members in decision-making. They design strategies for outreach and facilitate consultations to integrate community input into projects and initiatives. However, they are often brought in after design decisions have been made, which limits the community's influence on the design and means their role primarily focuses on securing community buy-in.

Community engagement process such as those outlined in the Ontario Environmental Assessment Act or Planning Act govern the provincial planning process for public infrastructure projects in Ontario. It includes a five steps design process: public realm visioning, conceptual design options, evaluation process and recommended design, confirmation of preferred design and project implementation.



Environmental Assessment process. Engage Ontario Place. (2022, October 2).
<https://engageontarioplace.ca/station/2-oct/>

Co-design in research refers to a collaborative approach where researchers and stakeholders—such as community members, users, or participants—jointly create and design solutions, tools, or interventions. This process values diverse perspectives and ensures that the design is shaped by those who are directly impacted, emphasizing relevance and agency.

Co-production is a collaborative process in which experts and non-experts jointly create knowledge, services, or solutions. It involves equal partnerships and shared decision-making, ensuring that all stakeholders contribute to and influence the outcomes. Co-production values inclusivity and collective ownership throughout the development process.

Citizen participation refers to a model for democratic public participation known as Arnstein's Ladder. There are 8 rungs of the Ladder: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.

Data means any and all information gathered during a project, including community knowledge, information collected from surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Design process refers to the architectural design process which is a structured, iterative method through which architects and designers conceptualize, plan, and develop built environments. It involves multiple stages: Programming (optional), Pre-design/Research, Conceptual Design, Schematic Design, Design Development, Construction Documentation, Bidding/Negotiation, Construction Administration, and Post-Occupancy Evaluation (optional).

Designer broadly encompasses professionals involved in shaping and constructing the built environment, such as architects, interior designers, urban designers, urban planners, city planners, policymakers, and others.

Displacement refers to the forced movement of individuals or communities from their places of residence or community, often due to economic, social, or environmental pressures, leading to the loss of one's home and/or community ties.

Gentrification happens when a previously low or mixed income neighbourhood becomes disproportionately owned or used by the rich.

Neighborhood health refers to the overall well-being and quality of life within a specific community or area. It encompasses various factors, including architecture/physical environment, access to services, safety, social cohesion, and economic opportunities, all of which contribute to the health and vitality of residents and the neighborhood as a whole.

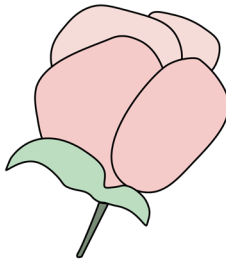
Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to research that involves all stakeholders (researchers and community members) throughout the research process, from identifying issues, establishing the research question, to developing data collection tools, to analysis and dissemination of findings. PAR emphasizes active involvement, reflection, and empowerment, with the goal of co-producing both knowledge and social change through continuous cycles of action and evaluation.

Research is the use of systematic methods to investigate, gather, and analyze information for the purposes of discovering or interpreting phenomena, proving or disproving a hypothesis, critically evaluating concepts or practices, or otherwise adding to knowledge and insight in a particular discipline or field of knowledge.

Urban planner is a professional who designs and organizes land use and development in cities and towns. They create plans to manage growth, improve infrastructure, and enhance the quality of urban environments.

Local stakeholders refer to the groups of people who have/had investment, share, or interest in the Chinatown neighbourhood of Toronto, such as a business, community or organization.

Residents and workers refer to people who live and/or work in the Chinatown neighbourhood of Toronto.



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