

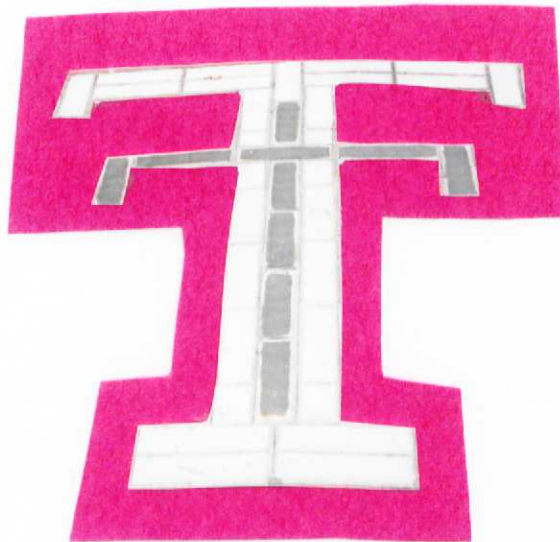
## The Trocadero Theater

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Cities 185

Professor McDonogh

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## THE BUILDING AND ITS HISTORY

Located at 1003 Arch Street and listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the Trocadero Theater is the only Victorian era nineteenth century popular theater left in the United States. Edwin F. Durang designed the theater and it first opened in 1870 as a Burlesque theater under its original name of the Arch Street Opera House. A string of subsequent fires in the first decade of the theater's operation led to its being remodeled several times with the help of architect George Plowman.

The Trocadero continued as a Burlesque theater until 1978. By this time public interest in Burlesque shows had fallen as a result of competition from increasingly sexually graphic films. The theater's new owner, Steven Pang, decided to change the theater into a Chinese movie house, but when this did not attract enough business, he changed it into a concert venue. We found it difficult to find a few details about the recent history of the Trocadero, such as the exact years that it was a Chinese movie house. Since we were not able to speak with either of the managers, our main informant at the theater was Ned, the ticket manager, who told us what he knew of the theater's history. In 1996 the theater was briefly closed for renovations. An air conditioning and heating system were added, as well as a new sound system, and some of the original ornamentation was restored. The Balcony Bar on the second floor, which has a separate entrance from the rest of the theater, was also added.

The first space one encounters upon entering the Trocadero is the box office area. Above the two doorways and the box office itself are three stained glass windows. Inside the doors on either side of the box office are two sloped walkways leading to the entrance of the auditorium. The most striking features in this part of the building are the bright yellow, blue and purple colors of the walls and ceilings. The bright colors one encounters before entering the auditorium are a stark contrast to the interior of the auditorium, which is for the most part dark. The auditorium consists of a main stage area, a wooded floor area in front of the stage, and a balcony overlooking the two. Also, located beneath the balcony are a snack bar to the right of the doorway, and a bar

serving alcoholic beverages to the left. At the sides of the stage are two large fireplace openings that are now used as exits from the stage to the auditorium. The balcony has brass railings, and rows of red, plush benches. The Balcony Bar (from the 1996 renovations) is located at the back of the balcony, and is an entity almost entirely apart from the rest of the theater. It is a separate room with a bar, tables and a stage for small performances. The Bar has a different entrance from the rest of the theater and is open weeknights as a regular bar. An interesting decoration in the Balcony Bar is a life-size cutout of a scantily clad Burlesque dancer. It is the Trocadero's only homage to the Burlesque dancers of its colorful past.

The original seating capacity ranged from 900 to 1,000 people. At the present time, the holding capacity is about 1200 people. The floor area of the theater used to be a sitting area, as well as the balcony. Now, the floor right in front of the stage is used as a standing area and the balcony is the only place with seats. As a result, many more people can fit into the theater. The change in seating arrangements is due to the fact that the concerts currently held in the Trocadero attract a crowd that wants to stand and dance during the concert. Having the open floor space also offers a great deal of versatility in terms of the events that can take place at the Trocadero. For example, the space has the potential to be an excellent dance floor.

The Trocadero holds music concerts of various genres, although for the most part, the bands that play there are alternative groups, and the age group attending consists mostly of teenagers. In recent years, the managers of the theater have talked about trying to change its image by adding more variety to the calendar of events at the Trocadero. For example, the theater has expressed an interest in having Swing dancing or a big band type concert. The image of the Trocadero remains, however, as one that attracts a rowdy and wild, young crowd.



the Box office with the stained Glass windows



the walls on the first floor and stairs to the balcony





The Snack Bar on the first floor (left side)

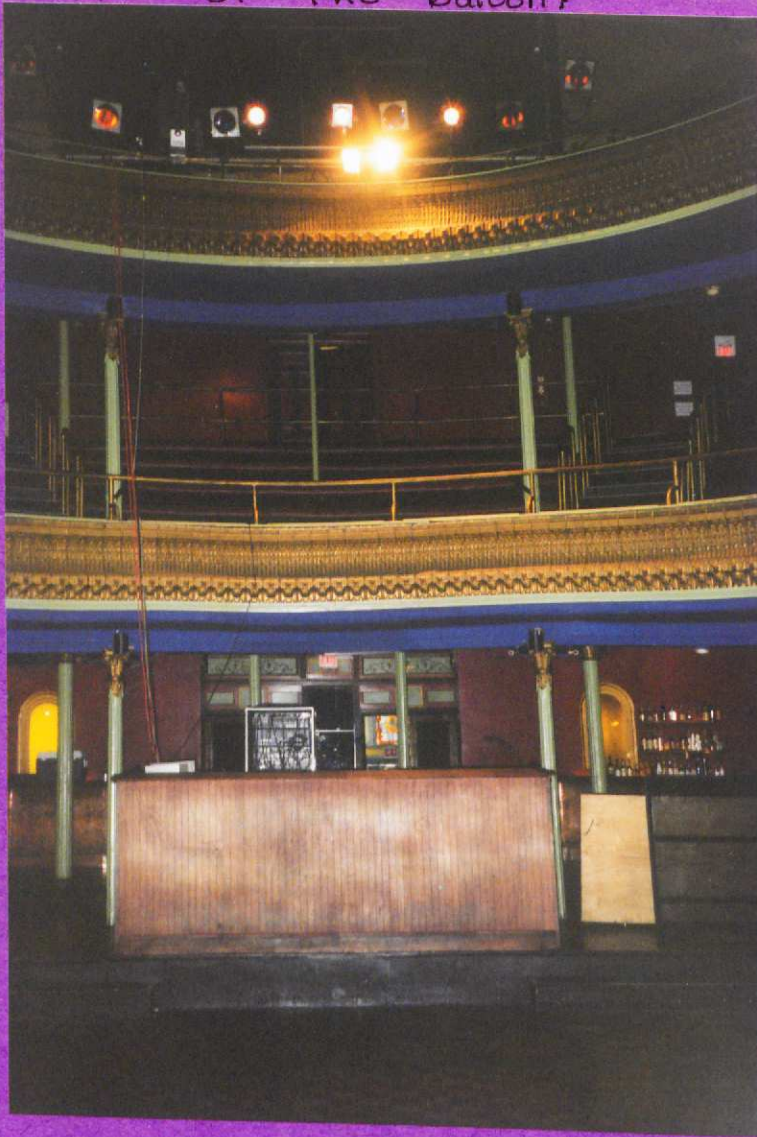


the Bar on the first floor (right side)





view of the Balcony





The Large Fireplace Opening in the auditorium



The Balcony Bar with the Burlesque Figure





the Balcony Bar Stage



view from the Balcony Bar Stage



View of Balcony Bar entrance





## THE TROCADERO AND CHINATOWN

As a result of its current location on the outskirts of Chinatown, it is impossible to evaluate the Trocadero and its relationship to its surrounding area without first evaluating Chinatown itself.

Located near the Delaware River and the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, Chinatown's borders are generally considered to be Wood Street in the north, Arch Street in the south, 8th Street in the east, and 13th Street in the west. It serves as "a cultural center where traditional culture is preserved and ethnic identity perpetuated, a marketplace for Chinese food and other Asian products, a meeting place for friends and relatives, and a home for newly arrived immigrants" (Philadelphia Chinatown homepage). In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, this area was vastly different: Until 1850, it was predominantly occupied by British owned residential homes. With the migration of the British westward, Irish and German immigrants settled in, and commercial loft buildings and row houses largely replaced private homes. Twenty years later, the area began to deteriorate and it became known as a disreputable district, populated with Burlesque theaters, hotels and rooming houses.

Although there was Chinese occupation in the area as early as 1845, it was not until 1870 that the first Chinese business was opened (Lee Fing's laundry at 913 Race Street), and it was not until 1890 that the area became widely known as Philadelphia's Chinatown. By then there were approximately seven hundred Chinese living in the area, a number that has grown over time to 3500.

In recent years, Chinatown has acquired another identity apart from that of being a gathering place for Philadelphia's Asian population: similar to the Chinatowns in many other cities, it has become a popular tourist attraction (especially with the addition of its Friendship Gate at 10th and Arch Streets in 1984). The opening of the nearby Convention Center in 1993 has proved to be very beneficial to the area as well. All of the people we interviewed agreed that in addition to the increase in business and tourism that it has brought to Chinatown, the presence of

the Convention Center has prompted the city to take better care of the area. Now more policemen patrol there and its streets are consistently kept clean.

Despite its highly commercial function, Chinatown has a strong sense of community and family. "Everybody in Chinatown knows everybody," the valet at the Clarion Suites Hotel told us, and the most popular word that people used to describe it was "close-knit." He added that many of the businesses are family-owned, and that children are trained from a young age to take over the business one day. We also learned of the banquets and fundraisers that take place in the area to bring people together. At the fire station, several firefighters noted the kindness and friendliness of their Asian neighbors: Apparently, whenever there is a holiday, their neighbors bring them free meals.

Although the Trocadero was built a few blocks away from the original location of Chinatown and it operated for many years before Chinatown expanded to Arch Street, today their close proximity has brought about tensions between the theater and its neighbors, most of which are Asian-owned businesses. These businesses complain about the type of crowd the Trocadero attracts to its concerts--young, rowdy teenagers who tend to get drunk and cause damage along the street, either while waiting in line or after the concert is over. These damages include littered sidewalks--especially with broken bottles--vandalized cars, and broken store windows. The manager of the Universal Video and Electronics store said that the city takes care of cleaning up the street the following day, but the cost is shared by all of the businesses there. He felt that the Trocadero should have to pay for everything since it is the theater's customers who are to blame. In addition, he said that when these teenagers are lined up outside his store—which they begin to do around 7 or 8PM—his own customers will not enter. As a result, most of the businesses around the Trocadero have begun to close early whenever there is a concert.

The owner of the Japanese restaurant, Shogun, which is the closest business to the theater, made especially harsh comments about it. "They only care about themselves and their own business," he said. "They don't help anyone here." He complained that the rowdy teenagers who



go to the Trocadero disrupt the kind of atmosphere he wants to create for his customers, who come to his restaurant looking for a quiet place to eat and enjoy their time.

The only person we interviewed who felt positively about the Trocadero was the parking lot attendant, who said that both the Convention Center and the Trocadero bring business to the parking lot. The nights when there are concerts are the busiest for him, and he even pointed to a schedule of the theater's concerts that hangs prominently inside his booth to show us how important it is. He did admit that cars are occasionally vandalized on those nights, but it did not seem to concern him too much.

As for the Trocadero's reaction to the displeasure of its neighbors, it has attempted to alleviate the problem by having bouncers keep an eye on its customers while they are waiting in line before a concert (the bouncers make a point of preventing them from standing directly in front of the other stores), but it seems that most of the damage occurs after a concert is over (around 11PM) when no one seems to be around to keep the crowd under control. Some of the people we interviewed mentioned that there is a strong police presence during the concerts, but when Clare went to see the Patti Smith concert, she did not notice any.

View east down Arch Street



View west down Arch Street (towards Convention Center)





The Convention Center



The Friendship Gate at 10<sup>th</sup> and Arch Street



## NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES

The area around the Trocadero contains all of the items in the service category. Everything is within walking distance and located within a square formation from Walnut Street and Callowhill Street to the north and south and Broad Street to Seventh Street to the east and west. Although housing is not easily visible, it is clear that the neighborhood is well populated, creating a need and demand for certain services.

**Grocery Store:** Chung May Food Market 1017 Race Street

Chung May is the largest food store around the Trocadero. There are a good number of smaller stores that sell similar items but Chung May is the biggest. There were a lot of people on a Saturday afternoon. People who were browsing appeared to be tourists or not from the area. Practically all of the serious grocery shoppers were Asians.

**Fire Station:** Engine Company 20 Ladder 23 Medic 1 Cherry and 10th Street

The fire station is one block away from the theater. Outside of the fire station is a colorful painted mural showing a dragon spitting fire. In large, black letters the following message is painted: "House of Dragons salutes Chinatown." The relationship between the firefighters and the community was described as "close-knit" by one of the firefighters.

**Hospital** Thomas Jefferson University Hospital 111 South 11th Street

**Cinema Samson** Cinema 120 South 13th Street

**Mall** The Gallery Market between 11th Street and 7th Street

The Gallery is a large mall that is home to Strawbridges, Kmart, JC Penny's, the Gap, Waldenbooks, other stores, a large food court, and a SEPTA station on the bottom level. The Gallery attracts a lot of people from all parts of Philadelphia.

**Police Station:** Center City District 927 10<sup>th</sup> Street

**Bookstore:** WJ Bookstore 1017 Arch Street

The bookstore is a few storefronts down from the Trocadero. It sells foreign CDs, books, and greeting cards. It has a children's section with workbooks and toys. Almost all of the items were



in a different language, which signifies that it caters mainly to the surrounding Asian population.

There was a good number of customers of different ages on Saturday afternoon.

### **Public Transportation**

The Trocadero is close to many forms of public transportation. SEPTA stops at the Gallery with lines to New Jersey and the surrounding suburbs. Greyhound is two blocks away. The Market-Frankford Line runs along Market St and the Broad St. line is on Broad Street. The 76 bus has a stop on Market Street. The 76 Interstate Highway is three blocks away. The theater is surrounded by different transportation options. It is accessible by train, bus, car, and foot.

### **Schools:**

The closest elementary school is Holy Redeemer Chinese School located at 915 Vine St. It is a parochial school that is a popular place for Chinatown residents to send their children. Philadelphia Regional High School is at 1118 Market St. According to census data, there is not a large school aged population, limiting the demand for schools. Children attend Holy Redeemer or commute to schools outside of the neighborhood.

### **Social Service Agency:**

There are several agencies located around the Trocadero. Three of the four are for the area's immediate residents:

Chinese Christian Church and Center 225 N11th St.

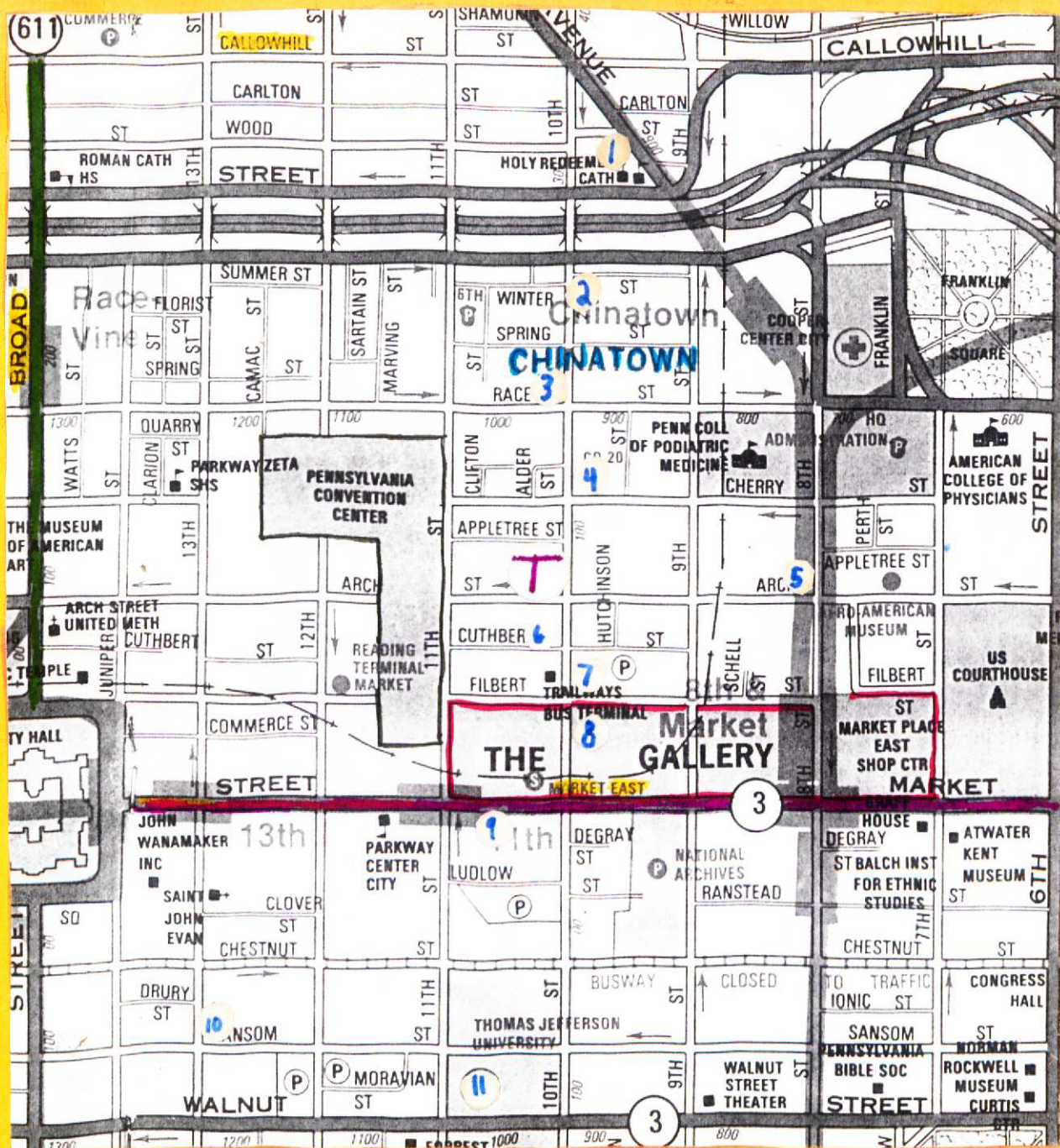
Chinatown Learning Center 137 N11th St.

Asian Americans United Inc. 801 Arch St.

US Veterans Center 1026 Arch St

The neighborhood surrounding the Trocadero is a close-knit community where there are services that are easily accessible. Everything is within walking distance. The farthest items are the hospital and the high school.





# Key

- |                                       |                                     |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1-Holy Redeemer Chinese School        | 7-Police Station                    |
| 2-Chinese Christian Church and Center | 8-The Gallery                       |
| 3-Chung May Food Market               | 9-Philadelphia Regional High School |
| 4-Fire Station                        | 10-Samson Cinema                    |
| 5-Asian Americans United Inc.         | 11-Thomas Jefferson Hospital        |
| 6-US Veterans Center                  | T=Trocadero !!                      |



## CENSUS INFORMATION

The Trocadero Theater is located in census tract 2, which covers the area from Arch Street north to Vine Street and N. 7th Street west to N. 13th Street. Two distinguishing geographical features of this tract are Chinatown and the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

At the time of the 1990 census, tract 2 had 1409 residents. The largest racial group in this area is Chinese, accounting for 69% of the population. Other represented groups include whites (16%), blacks (8%), and Vietnamese (7%). Despite the clearing of land for the new Convention Center between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, and the population decline in Philadelphia overall, the number of people living in census tract 2 increased by 23%. While the representation of Chinese, Vietnamese, and black persons increased significantly (by 42%, 380%, and 85% respectively), the white population decreased by 39%. Clearly, census tract 2 is an area increasingly populated by racial and ethnic minorities.

While 69% of the residents of tract 2 are Chinese, it is interesting to note that they represent only 9% of Philadelphia's Chinese population. It is quite clear by the number of thriving restaurants, markets, and shops in Chinatown that many Chinese from other neighborhoods frequent the area. Its Center City location, only a block from Market East Station, makes it a convenient place for many people to visit.

This area has many other demographic characteristics that distinguish its residents from Philadelphians as a whole. It is an aging population, with 40% of its residents over the age of 50 (and 19% over the age of 65). Approximately 16% are enrolled in elementary or high school; 57% of those in public and 43% in private school (many presumably at the nearby Holy Redeemer Chinese School). Only 35% of residents 16 and older work and 41% of households reported no earnings in 1989. The median household income in 1989 was \$8,170, versus \$24,603 for all of Philadelphia. However, it is important to remember that there might be a significant amount of underreporting of income by the Chinese population. 54% of persons over the age of 25 have

never been to college and 30%, all of whom are Chinese, have less than a 9th grade education. 67% of residents speak Chinese, rather than English, at home.

Although there are 498 reported households in tract 2, there are 444 housing units, and 40 of them are vacant. This implies that almost a fifth of households are living with friends or relatives. Despite the shortage of housing in 1990, the units in tract 2 are relatively newer than those in Philadelphia as a whole, with the median year the structures were built being 1961 versus 1939. Three quarters of householders rent rather than own their homes. From our visits to Chinatown, it was evident that several new housing developments have gone up in the last few years to account for the rising population in the area.

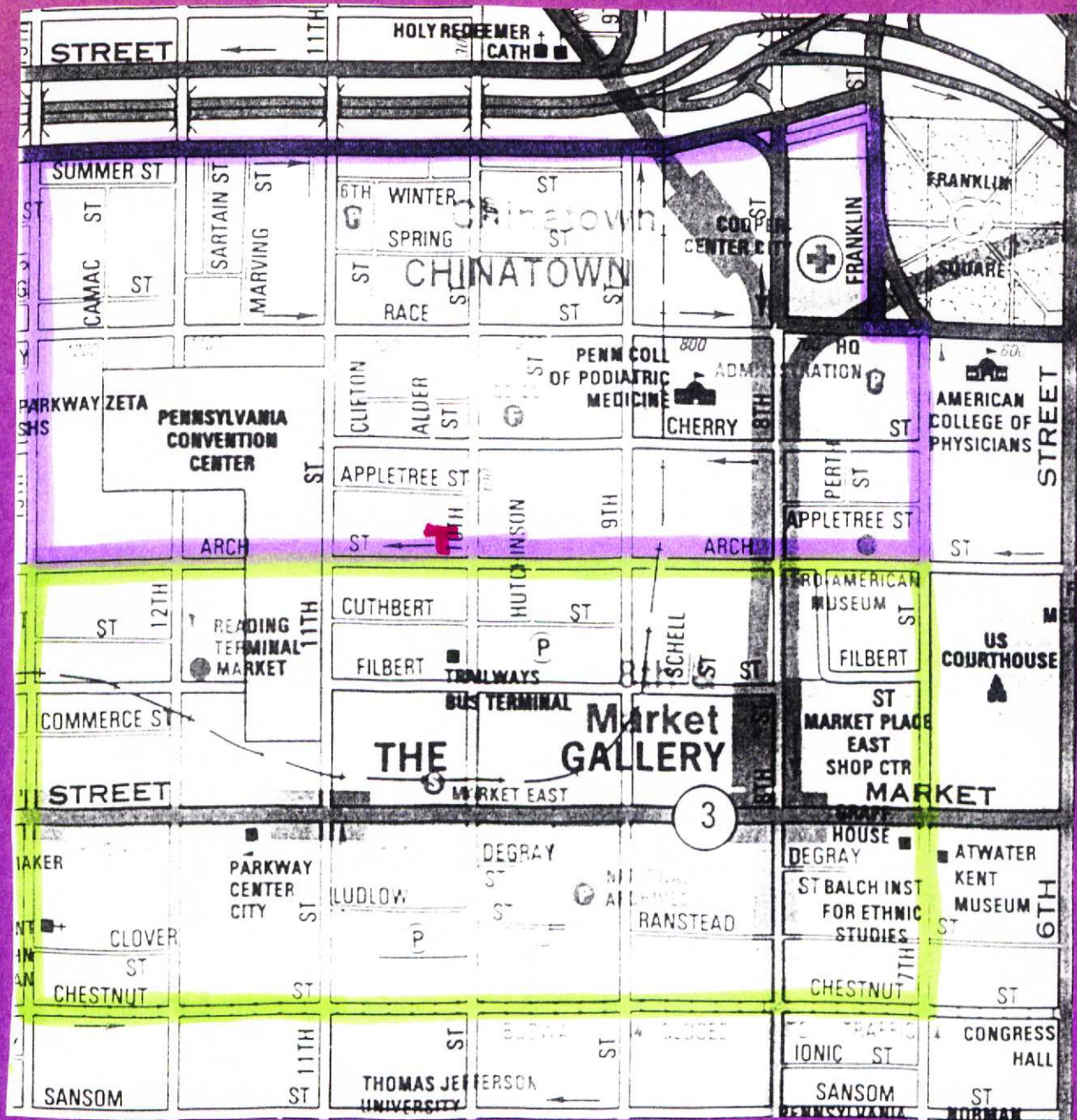
While the theater is technically located in census tract 2, the opposite side of Arch Street is in tract 5. Therefore, in terms of analyzing the Trocadero's relationship to its surroundings, it is also important to get a sense of the demographics of this area. Tract 5 covers the area from Chestnut Street north to Arch Street and N. 7th Street west to Broad Street. Its most prominent features are Market East Station, the Gallery Mall, and City Hall.


There were 1120 people living in tract 5 at the time of the 1990 census (a 143% increase in population since 1980). 63% of residents were male, as opposed to only 46% in tract 2. The racial composition of the tract is also quite different: 66% white, 25% black, 3% Chinese, and 5% Korean. 75% of residents are between the ages of 19 and 50 (while only 6% are under 18 and 19% over 50). 62% of persons 16 and older work, contributing to a median household income of \$19,946 in 1989. Census data from tract 5 leaves the impression of a predominantly white, male, middle-class population that lives and works in the area.

On the edge of tract 5, across the street from the Trocadero, there are several Chinese shops and restaurants. However, the rest of tract 5 clearly has a different feel to it. These two tracts are so different in terms of their demographics that it is hard to believe they coexist so close to each other. Much of the difficulty in deciding the best use for the Trocadero Theater is identifying whom it should serve and whether it can accommodate both the local population and its current users.



# Census Tracts



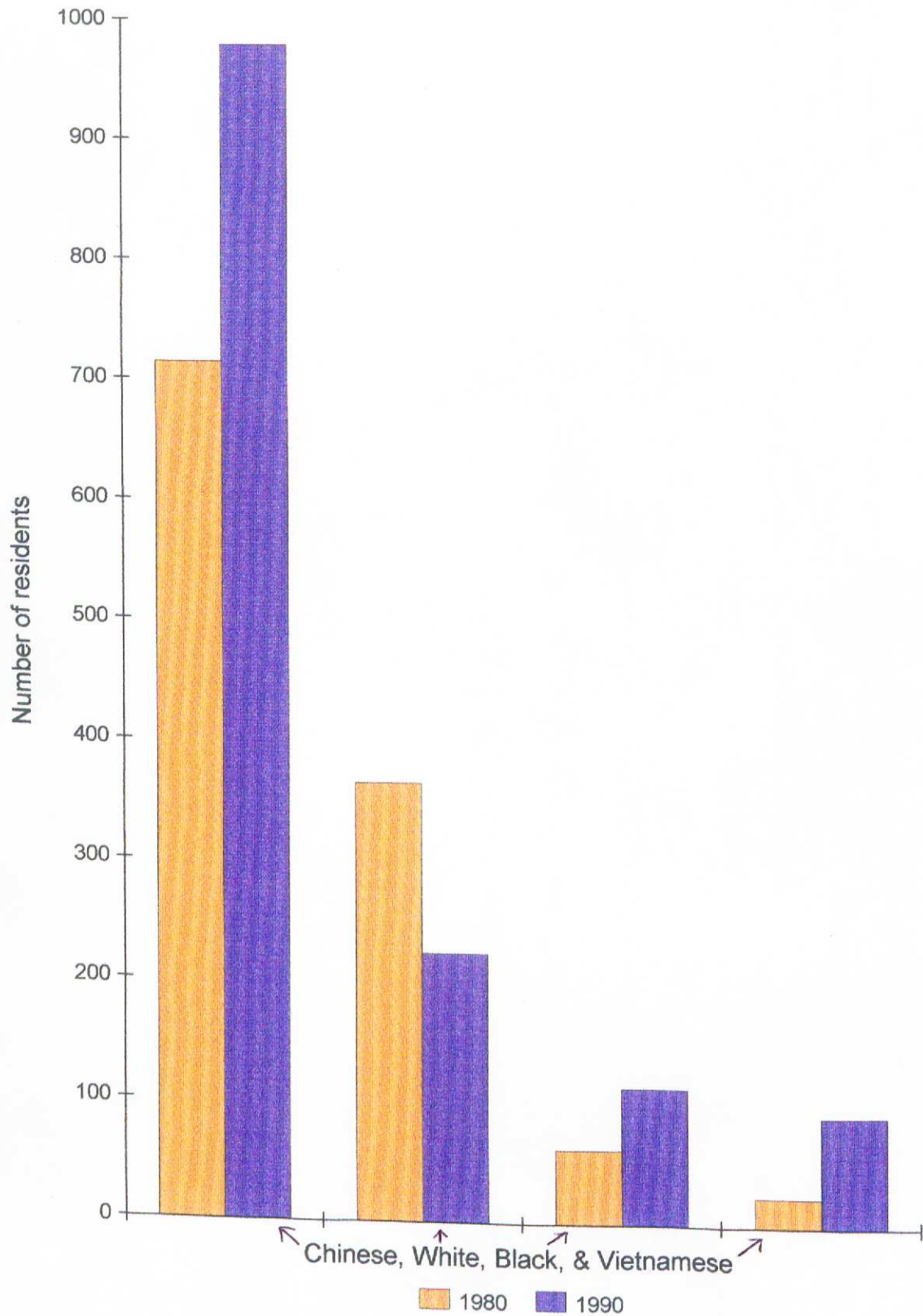
 = Tract 2

 Trocadero

 = Tract 5

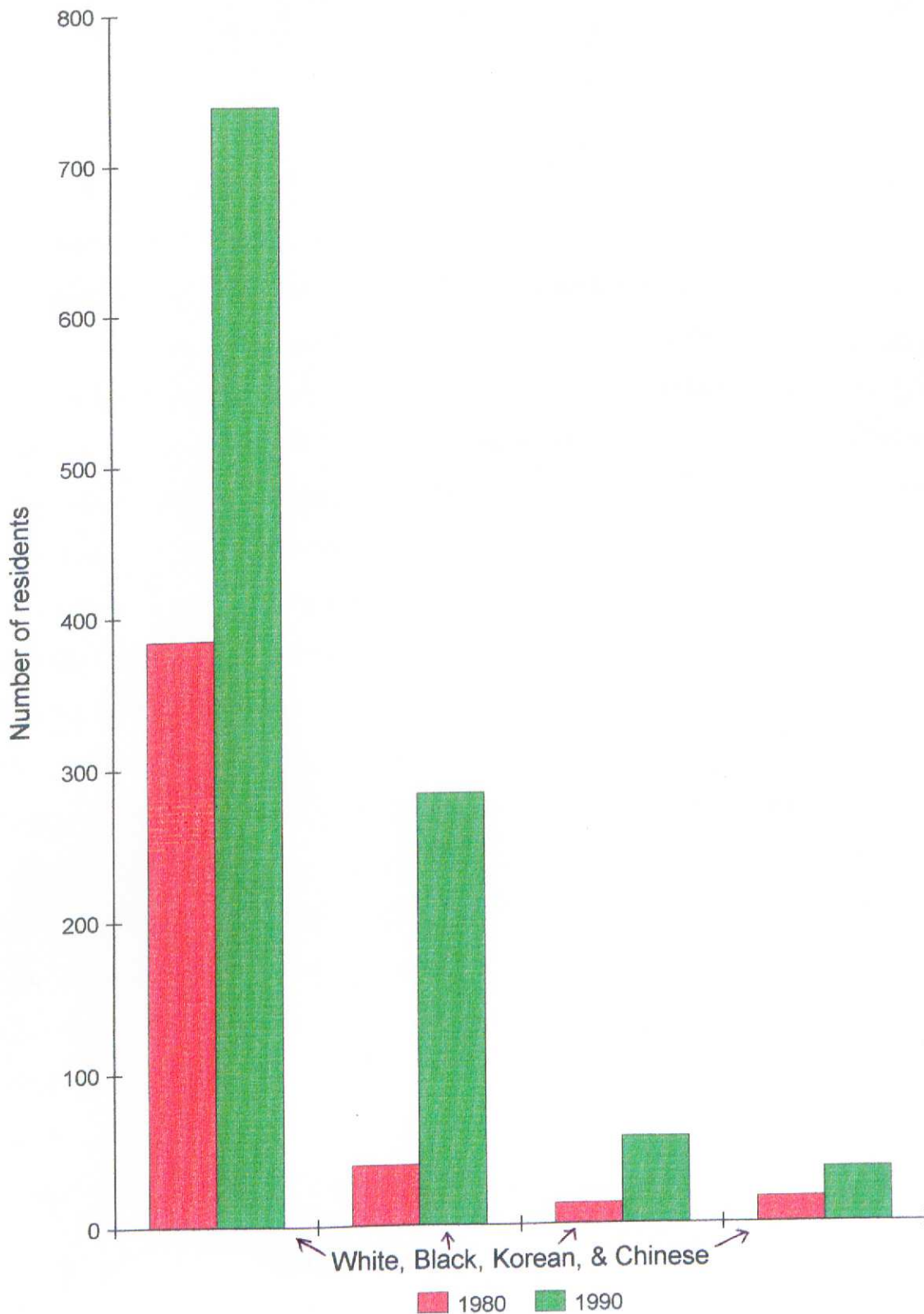
## Racial Make-up of Tract 2

1980 vs. 1990





# Racial Make-up of Tract 5 1980 vs. 1990



## CONCLUSION

The Trocadero is now located on the edge of Chinatown. Over time, Chinatown has expanded and it appears that it will continue to do so. This will result in the Trocadero being located more deeply in the middle of this close-knit community than it ever has been in the past. The ties that the theater has with its neighbors now are clearly not interwoven. According to interviews with people, the theater does not cater to the entertainment needs of Chinatown; however, it is important to note that residents are not asking for--or looking to--the Trocadero to do this. It does show Kung Foo movies on Sunday afternoons (which still does not attract many local residents), but, mostly, its performers succeed in drawing large numbers of people from other parts of Philadelphia and the suburbs who ordinarily would probably not be found around Chinatown. While it is true that the theater does not fit into the area, that fact does not seem to bother most of the people in Chinatown unless their business is directly affected by the problems associated with the theater's customers. Beyond that, there seems to be a mutual, unspoken agreement between the theater and Chinatown; both are independent of each other and neither of them is interested in integrating.

We agreed that the Trocadero Theater should continue to be a concert venue. However, we also believe that its owners should make greater efforts to expand its audience by recruiting a greater variety of musical acts to perform there. For instance, Swing is very popular right now and the large, empty floor in front of the stage would be perfect for dancing while a Swing band performed on stage. While Wednesday nights are reserved for the Grateful Dead, another night could be reserved for Swing. It is also our thinking that the crowds that Swing, Jazz, etc. attract are less likely to be as rowdy as the younger, alternative-interested audience that the Trocadero now mainly welcomes. This might help to appease some of the theater's neighbors who are tired of dealing with the crowds that line up in front of their stores, hurting business and damaging property.



We also feel that greater efforts should be made to preserve the rich history of the Trocadero Theater. While some renovations were made two years ago, this is not obvious from walking around inside. The ticket manager admitted that the owners had limited funds. As a building that is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and therefore cannot be torn down, it is critical to keep it in good shape so that it is useable. While it appears to be in great condition from the outside and in fairly good condition on the inside, we believe further steps could be taken to make sure it remains this way despite its constant use.

We would also like to see more of its history represented within the theater and more information provided to the public about its past (the Burlesque dancer cutouts are not enough to make audiences aware!). Although the Trocadero has a web page, the information provided there is mostly about its current events; there should be more information about its past not only here, but in other areas of the Internet as well. In its advertising, the Trocadero could effectively incorporate its status as the country's oldest Victorian theater--and one of its first Burlesque theaters--still standing. Perhaps this would spark further interest in preserving the theater and attract different audiences to visit it. These efforts might also make the neighborhood more aware and appreciative of the Trocadero and help to integrate it more successfully into its environment.

After almost 130 years, the Trocadero is still holding concerts and fulfilling its original purpose as a theater, providing a small, intimate atmosphere at a reasonable price. Whether or not it chooses to make better use of its history or to become more integrated into Chinatown, it appears that the theater will remain there for many years to come.

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Sat. Nov. 14 Drs: 8PM <b>PATTI SMITH</b>	Sun. Nov. 15 <b>DEATH</b> Hammerfall	Fri. Nov. 20 <b>SICK OF IT ALL</b> Ensign / Vision / Step Ahead
Sat. Nov. 21 <b>Reverend Horton Heat</b> The Amazing Crowns	Fri. Nov. 27 <b>The Toasters</b> The Skoldats / Slow Gherlin	Sat. Nov. 28 <b>KID ROCK</b>
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