Affective Capacity



As part of the 2025 Chinatown Arts Festival, Think!Chinatown presented Puppets on Pell, a lively afternoon performance of hand and shadow puppetry by Chinese Theatre Works performed outdoors on Pell Street.

Credit: Wei-Ta Chen

Affective capacity refers to an organization's ability to cultivate emotional, cultural, and relational conditions that foster belonging, identity, connection, and agency—both internally among staff and externally with the communities it serves. It can look like people building trust over time, growing through consistency, authenticity, vulnerability, dependability, and commitment. Organizations can carefully create spaces to gather, bear witness from respective traditions, listen more openly, and care more deeply. If spaces are not designed carefully, times of crisis and chaos can surface tensions over the complexities of power, gender, race, class, immigration status, language ability, and religion. Through purposeful effort, people can learn to show up for each other with greater intention and re-establish collective places and their presence in the world.

In the context of organizational development, affective capacity can involve building the emotional and cultural infrastructure necessary to:

- Create inclusive, affirming environments where all individuals feel seen, valued, and respected (sense of belonging);
- Strengthen connections to place and cultural identity by embedding local histories, traditions, and community values into organizational practices (cultural and place attachment); and
- Shift power through storytelling by amplifying the voices and lived experiences of staff and communities, especially those historically marginalized (narrative power).

Affective capacity is critical for advancing equity, trust, and resilience within communities. It moves beyond technical competencies to focus on how people feel, relate, and find meaning—ultimately shaping how well an organization can serve, partner with, and be accountable to diverse communities.

How Think!Chinatown Builds Affective Capacity

Think!Chinatown is a creative placekeeping non-profit that creates intergenerational spaces of art, joy, belonging and connection in Manhattan's Chinatown. At the intersection of arts, storytelling, and neighborhood engagement, T!C works to grow community agency in their neighborhood's built environment, as well as the narrative of their own stories.

"We at Think!Chinatown feel that our community arts initiatives most contribute to a greater sense of community or stronger community identity. Our Lunar New Year festivities, Chinatown!Lit (literature event series), Chinatown Storytelling Festival, Chinatown Block Party, Chinatown Night Market, and Chinatown Arts Festival, are culturally relevant activations for our community to celebrate our cultural heritage, learn traditional crafts intergenerationally, weave our community history, and continue to create a place of belonging. Our target audience is local residents, Chinese Americans, Asian Americans and folks who share an affinity for Chinatown, Chinese culture, and Chinese diaspora culture. These are also the majority of the audience that we end up attracting to our events. These groups find a sense of groundedness to their identity in Chinatown, and through our events, they have an occasion to gather to experience and learn about this heritage together. Whether it's a local elder attending our Night Market for an after dinner stroll or a fourth generation Chinese American vibing to a song that sounds eerily familiar to them at our Block Party, we create a space where they belong and we bring our community a little closer."

For Think!Chinatown, their hallmark and biggest events give them the opportunity to engage elder community members on their own terms—which builds the trust necessary for true intergenerational learning and solidarity building. During Chinatown Block Parties, all attendees bond over music that elders love. The Chinatown Night Market benefits local Chinatown business owners and enlivens the cultural lives of Chinatown residents. The Storytelling Festival captures and shares the personal stories of elders who would not normally want to engage. Through all of this work, Think!Chinatown creates more understanding among the different facets in the neighborhood while maintaining an ecosystem that is culturally rich and vibrant for immigrants and the next generation of Asian Americans who call Chinatown their cultural home.

And for many non-English speaking residents, affective capacity goes beyond cultural relevance and representation. As immigrants, every aspect of their life away from their homeland and trying to navigate, learn, understand how things are done. Think!Chinatown aims to create a platform where immigrants' culture is centered and they are the subject experts. They "receive their flowers" and see the collective joy, curiosity, and interest from the English-speaking community. In these moments, residents are able to feel that their voices matter, feel activated, and have agency. Think!Chinatown is then able to engage non-English speaking community members into conversations about the community's future.

For example, for years Think!Chinatown visited seniors at Hamilton Madison House senior center to record English, Mandarin, Cantonese stories around everyday objects in Chinatown. These stories were compiled to make a multi-media exhibit called Everyday Chinatown: Objects and the Stories They Hold. Seniors were invited to the studio to see the exhibit and were delighted to re-hear their stories, re-see them interpreted into animation, graphic prints, and interactive stations. After seeing the exhibit and sharing more knowledge and stories around the everyday objects, they were very forthcoming when engaged in a small group workshop to talk about community gathering spaces, neighborhood preservation, and placekeeping in Chinatown. Some seniors had well formed opinions on the matter, but many also noted that they did not know how to plan for the community's future because they had never been engaged in neighborhood planning and asked to envision their community's future. These programs build affective capacity that then enables political capacity to be built. By engaging with the non-English speaking community members about their cultural practices and holding space for them to teach others, Think!Chinatown laid the groundwork for neighbors to feel more ownership and agency towards their community and eventually to feel more civically invested.