In 1954, when Shirley Chan was six years old, her parents Mary and Walter moved their family from rental accommodations near Chinatown into a house they purchased a few streets away. Her mother, working full-time in a garment factory, also served as an unofficial "social worker" for the community: finding people jobs, accommodations, and even marriage partners. Mary Chan would later serve as a prominent leader in the community's efforts to save their neighbourhood.
Shirley's father Walter, a shopkeeper, writer, scholar, and former teacher, kept people in the community informed about major developments through his articles in the Chinese language press. Though he played a prominent role in the protecting Vancouver's Chinatown neighbourhood, he died prematurely young.

When the Chans bought their house, they proceeded to fix it up. Theirs, like many in the neighbourhood, was a little run down. It was partly for this reason that the City of Vancouver came to describe the area as a "blighted" neighbourhood - one that was incurably diseased and would spread its contagion to adjacent areas.

In 1958, following studies of the area, the City developed a comprehensive plan for Strathcona's 'redevelopment' that would see wholesale razing of the homes, replaced by high-rise and mid-rise social housing apartment blocks. In the Planning Department's words at the time, "the Chinese quarter to the east of Main Street is at present of significance only to the people who live there."

The announcement of the City's plan for redevelopment was the signal for Mary Chan to go into action. In 1958, she recruited her daughter Shirley, not entirely willingly, to go door-to-door to get signatures for a petition to stop the imminent expropriations of residents' homes. Only ten years old, Shirley's job was to translate from Cantonese into English and English into Cantonese.

In Phase One, despite dogged community resistance, 28 acres were redeveloped with 1600 people displaced. In the second phase, a further 1700-plus were removed from 29 acres. The plan for Phase 3 was to raze what was left.

Shirley had, meanwhile, graduated from high school and had begun her education at Simon Fraser University. She majored in English and social sciences. As she got more active, her Political Science and Sociology professors let her submit her community work as assignments. This included co-founding with her parents the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA), preparing briefs and speaking at City Council meetings, speaking to print and television media, and strategizing with community leaders and supporters about next steps to save the neighbourhood.

In September 1968, she came home expecting to find dinner on the table, but her mom out. Her dad told her, "Your mom is at a meeting at the First United Church, and you and your brother should be there too."

At the meeting community members were hearing from two City officials: Darlene Marzari, future Minister of Municipal Affairs (NDP), and her boss, Maurice Egan, one of the first social planners in Canada. Marzari and Egan were there to provide information and assistance on relocating from the neighbourhood. But when residents made it clear they wanted to stay, Marzari and Egan decided to help them, even though it nearly cost them their jobs, ignoring the instructions they had been given by senior administrators at the City.

On December 18, 1968 her father chaired the first meeting of SPOTA. The organization proceeded to lobby sympathetic
City Council members and encourage councillors of all stripes to meet with the community. They were successful in winning influence at the federal level, including local Member of Parliament Ron Basford, later the driving force behind Granville Island. They further succeeded in attaining representation from a legal aid lawyer and future Vancouver Mayor and BC Premier, Mike Harcourt.

In early 1969, Paul Hellyer, Minister of Transportation for the Trudeau government, came to town. Shirley and Marzari managed to join his entourage which included Hellyer's executive assistant Lloyd Axworthy. The two joined them for drinks and the next day Shirley found herself on a City-sponsored bus tour sitting next to Hellyer, feeding him a counter-narrative to the City's propaganda.

It's astonishing to contemplate how this handful of community activists, though largely denigrated by City administration, were able to help effect a major shift in Canada's future urban policy. Such was the temper of the times.

On his return to Ottawa, Hellyer announced a moratorium on the Urban Renewal Program while he studied the program's impact on communities. The federal government had been providing 50% of the funds for 'renewal' while the City and the Province each provided 25%.

Hellyer returned to Vancouver in spring 1969 where the SPOTA feted him as a "guest of honour." It was a great shock when, shortly after his return to Ottawa, Hellyer resigned from cabinet over a disagreement with Trudeau. But not long after, Trudeau created a new Secretary of State for Urban Affairs, with Robert Andras in the post. Andras came to Vancouver to meet SPOTA and attend a banquet sponsored by the community.

Following this meeting, Andras announced that "no project using federal funds should proceed without the explicit consent of the affected citizens." This was a game changer for Strathcona's residents. SPOTA began to be treated, in Shirley's words, "like a fourth level of government. We had a seat at the table."

Working with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the Province, and City officials, SPOTA negotiated, and then implemented, the prototypes of what would later become the Neighbourhood Improvement Program (NIP) and Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP). These programs were later rolled out nationwide.

Before the demolition fight was over, a second battle was emerging. The City wanted to construct a system of freeways, with a third crossing from the north shore through Vancouver to Highway 1. Chinatown was the hub for five of six possible routings.

The proposed freeway galvanized not only the neighbourhood, but people throughout Vancouver and helped lead to a sea change in municipal politics. In 1968 a new municipal party was formed - The Electors Action Movement (TEAM). In 1972, TEAM swept the election and put investment broker Art Phillips in the mayor's chair, effectively ending the freeway proposal.

With the highway threat out of the way, SPOTA turned to more proactive tasks, such as building infill housing and a linear park on sites cleared by urban renewal. The Mau Dan Gardens Housing Co-op was built, designed by architect Joe Wai.

In 1973, Shirley departed for Ottawa and, in 1976, to Toronto to do a Master's degree in Environmental Studies with a specialization in Planning at York University. After graduating, she worked in Toronto for the Ontario Social Planning Council and then Indian Affairs.

When Mike Harcourt was elected as the mayor of Vancouver in 1980, he called her back to work as his chief of staff. Since then she has since gone on to occupy a number of prominent posts. She has worked for Health Canada, served as Chair of the VanCity Credit Union, and been on the Board of Governors of the University of British Columbia. She has also been the President of the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden Society, directed community economic development initiatives in Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, and currently serves on the board of Learning for a Sustainable Future, an organization devoted to raising environmental awareness among schoolchildren.

While now retired, Shirley remains active, fighting to revitalize Chinatown and to preserve the historic area from developments that would negatively impact the heritage buildings and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Gardens. Throughout her activist career, her parents served as her role models. Their commitment to community service and their willingness to persist in the face of overwhelming odds continue to inspire her. Shirley prides herself on being her parents' daughter through and through.

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