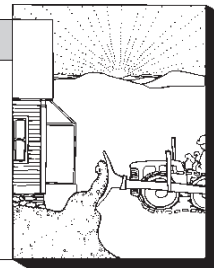


Creative Land Use: The World's Narrowest Commercial Building

by Steve Carlson



Once in a while, it's possible to fight city hall and win.

Back in 1912, Chang Toy wanted to build a structure in Vancouver, B.C., for his business, the Sam Kee Company. The city fathers tried to thwart the project by expropriating most of Chang Toy's lot for a street-widening project. He was left with an apparently useless strip of land less than six feet wide.

In defiance, Chang Toy went ahead and built the structure, using steel girders and reinforced concrete. On the inside, it measured 4 feet 11 inches by 100 feet. Big bay windows on the second floor added a little elbow room. The basement was extended six feet under the city sidewalk, and glass blocks were embedded in the sidewalk to let in some natural light.



The large bay windows on the second floor expand the interior dimensions to a maximum width of 7 feet 4 inches.



With innovative construction to overcome the city's safety concerns, the building's glass sidewalk, which had long since been paved over, was re-created (left). It serves as a skylight for the lower level of the structure (right).

The Sam Kee Building, known at the time as "Chang Toy's Revenge", became a landmark in Vancouver's Chinatown. At one time it housed 13 small businesses and a public bathhouse. It's been listed by "Ripley's Believe It or Not" as the world's narrowest commercial building.

By the mid-1980s, the building had fallen into disrepair. Jack Chow, a realtor and insurance agent, bought it and spent \$250,000 to restore it to its former glory.

Chow faced some obstacles. The City Planner and City Engineer raised safety concerns about replacement of the glass sidewalk (which had been paved over) and a sidewalk balcony that was needed for convenient entrance to the lower level.

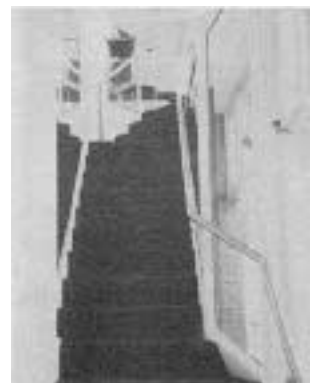
But by the time the job was finished, the building that was created in defiance of City Hall finally received the appreciation it deserved. In honor of the restoration, Mayor Gordon Campbell presented Chow with the 1988 City of Vancouver Heritage Award. ■



The World's Narrowest Commercial Building. The Sam Kee Building was constructed on a 6-by-10-foot city lot in Vancouver.



The ground floor, less than 5 feet wide inside, is divided into double-sided work stations for the owner's insurance business.



The staircase to the second floor spans the width of the building. Windows and mirrors provide a more spacious appearance.