

Little Saigon

An Ethnic Enclave in Vancouver, BC

By artist Chrystal Phan



More than 40 years after thousands of Vietnamese refugees came to BC, you can now find two generations of Vietnamese Canadian–owned businesses. In this photo, a modern Vietnamese vegetarian restaurant founded by two generations of a Vietnamese Canadian family opened in 2019 in Vancouver. It sits beside a Vietnamese grocery store and deli that originally opened in the early 1980s to cater to Vietnamese-speaking clientele. Credit: C. Phan.

What makes a neighbourhood “ethnic,” and why does it matter? Along four blocks of Kingsway Avenue in Vancouver there are special street signs and flags. These signs mark the area as “Little Saigon.” The name represents a new home for Vietnamese refugees.

The idea to name the area Little Saigon originated from Vietnamese Canadian residents and business owners. After more than 3,000 signatures of support were gathered, it was approved in 2011 by Vancouver City Council.

Traditionally, cities only recognize special neighbourhoods when between 30 and 50 per cent of the residents share a similar ethnic background. These neighbourhoods are often called “ethnic enclaves.” In 2010, Little Saigon’s Vietnamese residents made up only 10 per cent of the area’s population. So then why is this stretch of Kingsway considered an ethnic enclave?

Greater Vancouver is home to the largest population of Vietnamese Canadian people in BC (almost 35,000 by 2016). Many refugees eventually migrated there after first resettling in other areas of the province. Over time, Vietnamese Canadian–owned businesses and services emerged to support this growing population. Many opened businesses along Kingsway because it was affordable. By 2010, 38 per cent of businesses in the area were Vietnamese Canadian owned. Business signs were written in Vietnamese, and services catered to Vietnamese immigrants who struggled with English. And so, because of this concentration of Vietnamese Canadian businesses, not residents, the area was considered an ethnic enclave.

By 2022 there are at least 430 Vietnamese Canadian–owned businesses in Vancouver alone. The majority of those businesses are food services, restaurants, building trades, landscaping and beauty salons. Yet most of them are not in Little Saigon. In fact, by 2020, 25 per cent of the Vietnamese businesses in Little Saigon have disappeared. While the area has always been home to Chinese Canadian, Korean Canadian and other ethnic businesses, the majority of the new businesses are non-ethnic. Over time, new buildings, changing technology and changing populations will continue to alter the shape and character of Little Saigon.

Ethnic enclaves like these reflect specific periods of BC history. The next time you venture around your hometown, look at the buildings and stores. What do they tell you about who built them, who lives there and how they fit into the story of BC?