

New Chinatown/ Japantown Historic District Design Guidelines

PROJECT BRIEFING to PORTLAND HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION

The Portland Development Commission (PDC), in partnership with the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS), has hired a consultant team to develop design guidelines for the 10-block New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District, listed on the National Register in 1989. The guidelines project seeks to meet one of the implementation actions identified in the West Quadrant Plan, adopted in March 2015, while adding clarity to the City's historic resource review process. The consultant team is made up of Waterleaf Architecture Interiors & Planning; Peter Meijer Architect, PC (PMA); and JLA Public Involvement. Key project managers and contacts are:

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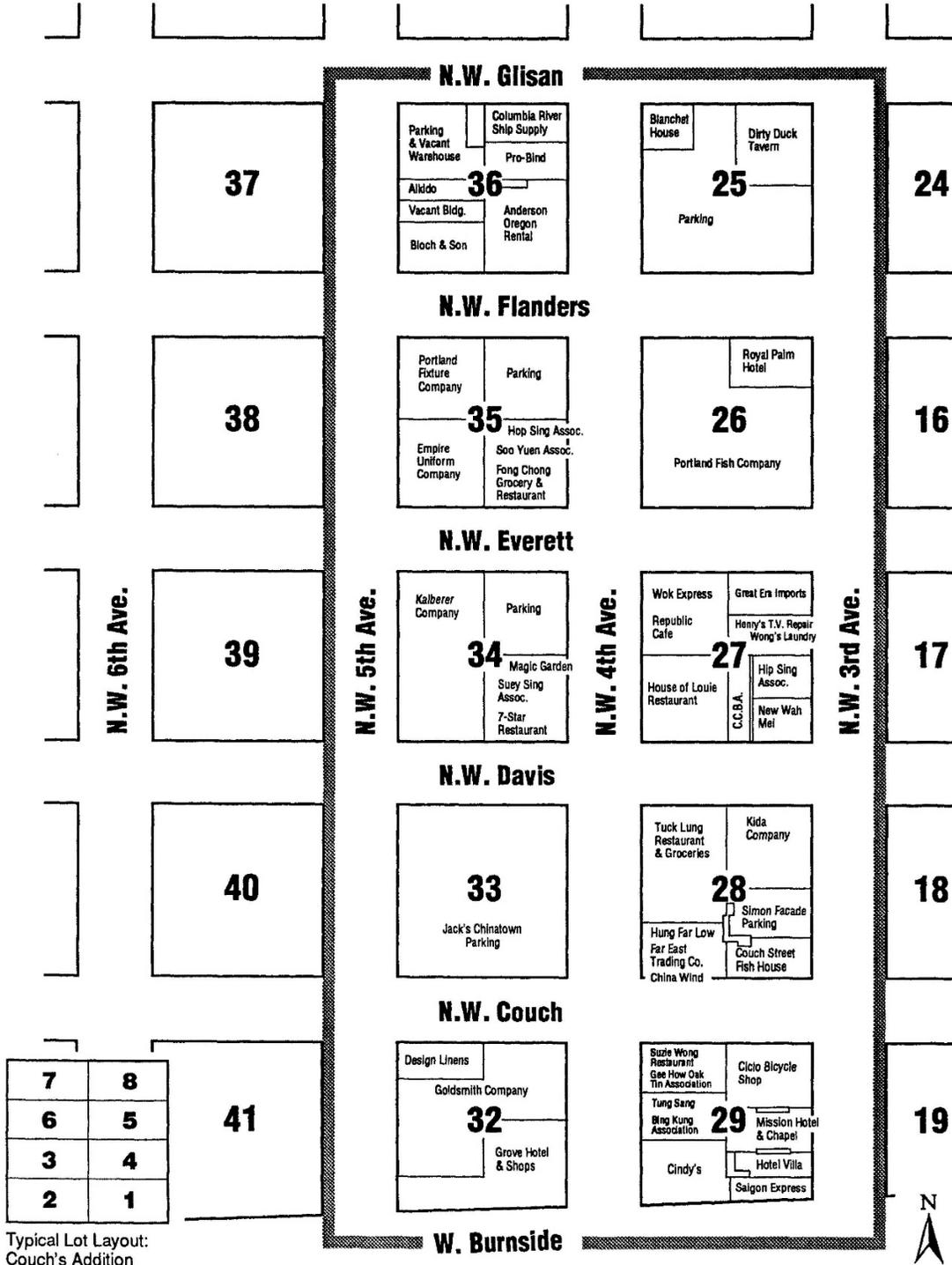
About the District

The New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District consists of ten blocks in the Old Town/Chinatown neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. The district is bound NW Glisan Street to the north, NW 3rd Avenue to the east, West Burnside Street to the south, and NW 5th Avenue to the west. The district is zoned CX (Central Commercial) and is primarily commercial in uses, though also includes residential uses, hotels, and parking lots. The Skidmore/Old Town Historic District boundary overlaps the New Chinatown/Japantown, and therefore ten buildings along NW 3rd Avenue between West Burnside and NW Everett are included in both historic districts. Current Title 33 Code allowances for height and Floor Area Ratio (FAR) in the district are 75' (4:1 FAR) within the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District overlap, 100' (6:1 FAR) for blocks 32, 33, 34, and 27 to the south of NW Everett, and 350' (9:1 FAR) for the four blocks north of NW Everett. All of these FAR limits may be increased by another 3:1 through use of bonuses, and the 350' height may also be increased by up to another 75' through bonuses. Changes to maximum heights and FAR are currently being proposed as part of the Central City 2035 Plan.

The New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. It is significant in the areas of Asian Ethnic Heritage, Industry, Commerce, and Architecture from the primary period of 1880-1909 and the secondary period of 1910-1943. Primary architectural styles include Italianate, 19th and 20th Century Commercial, Moderne, Half Modern, Mediterranean, and Industrial. The district was found nationally significant under Criterion A "for its history as the largest and most intact Chinatown in Oregon." It is locally significant "as the largest remaining and most viable Chinese ethnic community in Portland." However, designation of the district under Criterion C, for the architectural significance of the buildings in the district, was added by amendment just after the district was approved by the National Parks Service in 1989. At the time of its designation, the district included 45 buildings, 2 objects, and 6 vacant lots. Of the 45 buildings surveyed, 29 were considered contributing and 16 were considered non-historic/contributing. 13 of the 29 contributing buildings were designated primary contributing and 16 were designated as secondary contributing. The two objects include the Chinatown Gate and the Simon Façade. A single individually listed historic resource, the Pallay Building, was nominated in 1985.

Chinatown National Register Historic District

Land Use and Businesses



Map of the New Chinatown/ Japantown Historic District from the 1989 nomination



Scope and Process of the Project

The project team is tasked with writing Historic Design Guidelines to guide new construction and alterations as major as new floor area and as minor as new awnings, signs, or rooftop equipment in the Historic District. The existing historic nomination for the district is not being updated at this time. The model for the final product is the Skidmore/Old Town Design Guidelines, anticipated to be adopted in spring 2016. The format includes a background and context discussion preceding the actual design guidelines, each of which are illustrated with photographs (both modern and historic) and a series of ways each guideline can be met. Appendices at the end may contain maps and other reference materials.

The process is expected to follow this general outline and schedule:

- Mid-March* A. *Establish a Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC).* The SAC is comprised of 10 representatives of cultural groups in the area, local property owners, architects, developers, neighborhood organizations, and preservation professionals. The group will provide ongoing feedback on the project over the course of five committee meetings. The first meeting with the SAC included a walking tour of the district.

- Mar-Apr* B. *Conduct research.* Research will include existing City and District plans, historic maps and photos, interviews with stakeholders and SAC members, and comparative research including other historic districts and guidelines.

- April* C. *Complete field work and documentation.* Conduct a physical analysis of the characteristics of contributing buildings, sites, and objects.

- End April* D. *Prepare Draft Concept Report.* Outline level summary of initial ideas for historic design guidelines, with illustrations.

- End April* E. *Host Public Open House #1.* Gather input/feedback about the project and Draft Concept Report.

- Mid-June* F. *Prepare Discussion Draft Report.* Includes design guidelines at a development level, with report background draft and illustrative maps and photos.

- Mid-June* G. *Host Public Open House #2.* Gather input/feedback about the Discussion Draft Report.

- Early July* H. *Prepare Proposed Draft Report.* Complete design guidelines report including all appendices, photos and other illustrations, and “ways to achieve” each guideline. Report available for public review a minimum of 45 days.

- End Aug* I. *Begin legislative process.* Includes a public hearing(s) at the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission (PHLC) for consideration of Proposed Draft Report and recommendation to City Council.

- Winter* J. *Prepare Recommended Draft Report.* Recommended draft presented to City Council at a public hearing for adoption.

New Chinatown/ Japantown Historic District Nomination Summary

The New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District “is an excellent example of an immigrant, working-class, and merchant community that developed in cities throughout America in the last 19th and early 20th centuries.” Early settlement of Chinese immigrants in Portland dates back to 1850. Most Chinese emigrated from the “Toi Shan, Yan Ping, Hoi Ping, and Sun Hui districts near Canton, in southeast China.” Many came to Portland by way of California and southwestern Oregon. By 1851, direct trade between Portland, San Francisco, and China also increased the Chinese population in Portland. Many of these immigrants did not intend to stay permanently, so “they retained their ancient customs and cultural traditions.” By the late 1860s, Chinese were employed locally with the Oregon Iron Company, the Clackamas Paper Manufacturing Company, and the Oregon mills. The railroad industry was also a prominent employer of Chinese labor, but by 1874 Chinese labor had mostly shifted from the railroad industry to fish canneries. Though Chinese labor was used to help build Oregon’s infrastructure and industry, they were openly discriminated against during the process.

Bills, taxes, and ordinances were used to steer and suppress Chinese immigrants from obtaining power, money, or property. In 1879, “Congress passed an act which prohibited Chinese immigration.” Three years later in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, which prohibited all immigration of Chinese labor and naturalization. Acts of discrimination continued throughout Portland with anti-Chinese parades, arson, robbing, and exclusion until 1943 when the Chinese were viewed as allies in World War II and the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed.

Portland’s first Chinatown developed along Portland’s waterfront “because it was considered an undesirable residential area by the Whites due to constant flooding.” As the Chinese population increased during the 1870s and 1880s, they began to concentrate in the blocks bound by SW 1st Avenue, 2nd Avenue, and SW Alder and Oak Streets. Between 1880 and 1910, Portland’s Chinese population experienced another population increase due to “new work opportunities.” Because the Chinese did not have the right to own property and were excluded from other areas of Portland, Chinatown became heavily populated. In 1873, a fire destroyed many Chinese businesses. As buildings were rebuilt, many of the Chinese could not afford the increased rents, so in the early 1880s many began to move to Couch’s Addition north of West Burnside Street where they could afford larger living quarters, escape the constant flooding, and live less densely. This move established the foundation of New Chinatown.

The National Register District nomination does not include the following information about the Japanese presence and history in Portland, which is inserted here for chronological context as provided by the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center website.

“In the 1890s, hundreds of young Japanese immigrants arrived in Oregon to work on the railroads, lumber mills, farms, and fish canneries. Portland was the hub from which these Issei, mostly young bachelors, found work in the surrounding areas, or stayed and began to work in Portland. The area of Portland by the Willamette River north of W. Burnside Street became known as Japantown. Portland's Japantown grew to become a thriving heart of the Nikkei community, a central business district that was home to many families, schools, sports, and social activities. By 1940, there was a concentration of over 100 businesses located within a six or eight block area. Nihonmachi was a busy place, where the Japanese would come to buy Japanese food, receive dental and medical care, find legal assistance, and take care of their banking needs.”

By 1885, the number of Chinese businesses was increasing, and Chinatown gained popularity due to its cultural differences such as clothes, food, language, and fireworks. Festivals also added to the intrigue of Chinatown, giving it an “exotic atmosphere.” In 1894, the Willamette River flooded 250 city blocks, which led to more Chinese businesses moving to New Chinatown. This move “replaced many businesses on 3rd and 4th Avenues in

the primarily Japanese district.” By 1895, New Chinatown featured “a hospital, four churches, two Joss Houses, five Herb Shops, and a theater.” After the turn of the century, “by the late 1920s, second and third generation Chinese had made enough money that they no longer had to live within the confines of Chinatown,” and by 1938, 61% lived outside of Chinatown. This exodus from New Chinatown was intensified by the Magnuson Act of 1943, which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Magnuson Act allowed for Chinese to become naturalized citizens, allowing them to access many professional and commercial activities that they had been prohibited from. The Magnuson Act was a first step towards a diminishing New Chinatown, but was exacerbated by an assimilating younger generation, a rise in middle-class families, and Mayor Dorothy McCullough Lee’s anti-gambling campaign in the 1950s. By the 1960s, “only one Chinese restaurant and business remained in Old Chinatown.” New Chinatown was able to survive due to culturally strong businesses, restaurant and association halls, but ultimately it too lost the “vitality it had when Chinatown existed as a cohesive community.”

New Chinatown experienced a renewed interest in the 1970s, which stimulated a revitalization effort. New businesses, restaurants and grocery stores opened during this time. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) headquarters was restored by a donation from the Republic of China and the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. After 1984 bilingual street signs, ornamental street lights, banners, and the Chinatown Gate were installed and constructed.



Hop Sing Tong Headquarters, 4th Ave at Everett, 1931 photo (Oregon Historical Society)



1987 Chinatown Gate, 4th Ave at Burnside, current photo

Project Considerations

The existing District Nomination sets the boundaries for the District and is not to be updated as part of this project, primarily based on strong community stakeholder consensus to not revise the nomination. Based on current conditions, the consultant team will need to consider the following:

- The District Nomination is written primarily to support preservation of the Chinese ethnic heritage within the community, with minimal mention of the Japanese ethnic heritage or associations to buildings in the district that existed prior to 1942. While there is a map of Japanese-associated buildings included in the nomination, the early Japanese history and associations within the district are not discussed or researched. A cursory search of the US Census from the year 1900 in the immediate vicinity shows many more persons originating from Japan rather than China. Likewise, there is no discussion of other immigrant groups and the role the district played as a gateway for these groups in the nomination.

- There have been a number of changes that have impacted the district since 1989, the year it was listed. Changes include eight buildings that have either been demolished or significantly altered. Of the eight, three were designated as secondary contributing; four were designated as historic non-contributing; and one (the alteration) was designated primary contributing. New construction since 1989 includes the 15-story Pacific Tower apartment building, the 4-story Blanchet Building, 8-story Old Town Lofts, the 5-story Union Gospel Mission, and the approved (but not yet constructed) 9-story north wing of the Grove Hotel. The 2-story Empire Uniform Co. was converted into a six-story multi-family development called the Fifth Avenue Place Apartments. Festival Streets with flanking art features were created in 2006 at NW Flanders and Davis Streets between NW 4th and NW 3rd Avenues.
- The recognition of the District primarily under National Register Criterion A (“associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history”) is also a challenge in terms of writing design guidelines, because guidelines are about physical attributes of new or existing development. The District is also significant under Criterion C, for its architecture, though the nomination is more focused on Criterion A significance. However, there are a number of examples of other historic districts primarily listed for their importance as ethnic communities; many of these have design guidelines which we are studying. Examples include historic Chinatowns in Victoria, Seattle, and Honolulu; and Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

Finally, the district continues to struggle with finding a balance between the increased density goals and development entitlements of the City and compatibility with contributing properties. This struggle is not unique to the New Chinatown/ Japantown historic district, and guidelines can and will help decision-makers find that balance. Additional tools and incentives for the rehabilitation of historic resources are currently being considered in the Central City 2035 Plan process.