NEW CHINATOWN/JAPANTOWN HISTORY

Since its early foundation in the 1880s, this district became a hub for Portland’s Chinese and Japanese communities. Though other immigrant ethnic and cultural groups also lived in the area, these two cultures adapted the built environment to reflect their heritage and provided a safe and varied social setting that included schools, social clubs, hotels, dentists, pharmacies, and churches among many other institutions required for everyday life. Over time, social, political, and economic factors contributed to the continued exodus of Chinese and Japanese residents, business owners, and patrons from living in the district. However, the district still continues to reflect the influence of its residents over time, both architecturally and culturally.

DISTRICT OVERVIEW

- Founded circa 1880
- Once largest/most intact Chinatown in Oregon
- National Register Listing: 1989
- Period of significance: 1880-1943
- Nationally significant for Asian Ethnic Heritage, Industry, Commerce, & Architecture
- Number of Contributing buildings in 1989: 30
- Number of Contributing buildings today: 26
- Overlaps the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District

CONTRIBUTING BUILDINGS & STYLES

- Chinatown Gate (1986)
  SW 4th Ave & W Burnside St
- Former Hop Sing Tong Headquarters
  SW 4th Avenue, currently a vacant lot

Pre-war Japantown map showing the location of different Japanese businesses and the extended boundary that the Chinese and Japanese shared (Courtesy of Nihonmachi: Portland Japantown Remembered)

ITALIANATE

20TH CENTURY COMMERCIAL

MODERNE
New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District
Design Guidelines Project

PROJECT PURPOSE/OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this project is to develop and adopt historic design guidelines for the New Chinatown/Japantown historic district through a community process that will encourage development that respects the district’s multi-ethnic history, recognizes Portland’s relationship to the Pacific Rim, and reflects today’s Pan-Asian culture.

Once adopted by City Council, the design guidelines will be used as approval criteria to be met as part of historic resource reviews of both new construction and exterior alterations/additions to existing buildings.

HOW DESIGN GUIDELINES ARE USED AND HOW THEY ARE NOT

Design guidelines are qualitative statements that address the desired character of development in a certain area (in this case, the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District). Guidelines apply to the exterior appearance and material quality of buildings and other structures. The design guidelines will guide new construction and alterations such as new floor area, awnings, signs, and rooftop equipment.

The guidelines are written to be flexible, yet serve as approval criteria for any design changes within the district. They are not applicable to types of uses within a building or to interiors. The resulting document will include a background and context discussion preceding the actual design guidelines, each of which will be illustrated with photographs (both modern and historic) and options for how each guideline can be met.

YES

New Construction
Signage

NO

Function
Interiors
New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District
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PROBLEM STATEMENT

Protect significant resources and enhance the historic multi-cultural significance of the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District. Support the district’s historic character, multi-ethnic history and today’s Pan-Asian culture.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Through a community process, develop and adopt historic design guidelines for the New Chinatown/Japantown historic district to encourage development that respects the district’s multi-ethnic history, recognizes Portland’s relationship to the Pacific Rim, and reflects today’s Pan-Asian culture.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Guiding principles will be used to prioritize and select guideline topics, and inform specific guideline language. The following are not listed in order of priority.

1. The Design Guidelines will guide compatible infill development, changes to existing buildings in the district and non-standard improvements to the right of way; Design Guidelines are not use-related or interior-related.

2. The Design Guidelines must consist of simple and clear wording that can be easily understood, describes their purpose, and is legally defensible.

3. The Design Guidelines will be informed by the National Register nomination, by additional supplementary information about the district, and by the physical defining characteristics of the district’s past and present. The guidelines will not prioritize between primary and secondary contributing buildings.

4. The Design Guidelines will ensure that changes in the New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District balance the past and present by preserving the character of the district while being sensitive to cultural misappropriation.

5. The Design Guidelines shall not address the underlying base zoning or Plan District allowances. The guidelines will recommend methods for achieving compatibility of infill acknowledging the existing allowances on a site.

6. The Design Guidelines will direct new construction in a way that reinforces the historic significance or story of the district in a compatible yet distinct manner.

7. The Design Guidelines will recognize that new construction and historic rehabilitation is critical to promoting economic vitality, urban density, activation, safety, and tourism within the district and therefore must be cognizant of economic feasibility.

8. The Design Guidelines will embrace “telling the story of the district” through:
   • Sense of place
   • Historic character and context
   • Cultural respect and authenticity
   • Connectivity
   • Enduring, quality improvements
   • Vibrant, active streetscapes and built environment
PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

The historic design guidelines to be proposed to the Landmarks Commission will be informed by stakeholder input provided in various forums, including public open houses, interviews, and Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) meetings. The SAC provides advisory recommendations to the project team based upon their knowledge and expertise related to land use, architecture, history, property development and familiarity with the community.

SAC ROLES

- Evaluate information presented by project staff and the consultant team and provide feedback on key elements of the design guidelines.
- Develop an advisory recommendation regarding the proposed design guidelines which will be forwarded to the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission for additional refinement.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT GOALS

- Seeking out and facilitating the involvement of people potentially affected by the Project.
- Providing participants with the information they need to be involved in a meaningful way.
- Communicating to participants how their input will affect decisions.

DESIGN PROCESS

PROJECT TIMELINE
GUIDELINE CONCEPTS for ALTERATIONS

Alteration guidelines should be used to guide changes to existing buildings without increasing the building’s height or size.

1. Protect important features of the original building.

2. Protect changes made more than 50 years ago.

3. Alterations should be compatible with the original building.

4. Seismic upgrades are encouraged but should be visually minimized.

5. New materials should be compatible with the original building style and materials.

6. Alterations should be visually secondary and not detract from the original aesthetic of the building.

GUIDELINE CONCEPTS for ADDITIONS

Addition guidelines should be applied to projects that increase an existing building’s height or size, along with the Alterations guidelines. If the project creates more than 25 feet of new street frontage, the New Construction guidelines should be used instead of the Additions guidelines.

1. Respect the original form, massing, and proportion of the building.

2. Additions should be visually secondary to the original building.

3. Horizontal additions should include a visual break between original and new, or the new addition should appear to be a new building.

4. Vertical additions should set back enough to retain a sense of the volume of the original building.
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GUIDELINE CONCEPTS for NEW CONSTRUCTION

New Construction guidelines should be used to guide infill projects and new floor area (if more than 25 feet of new street frontage). If the project is an addition to the existing building, the Alterations guidelines would apply to the existing building.

1. New building designs should be inspired by existing styles of Contributing Buildings in the district.

2. Authentic Asian design is encouraged, but the primary design should reflect a style of Contributing Buildings in the district.

3. Building forms should be simple, with flat roofs and parapets.

4. Apparent massing should generally not be larger than a quarter-block to reflect historic development.

5. Cornice or parapet lines should relate to Contributing Buildings and additional height minimized.

6. New buildings should restore a sense of a unified "street wall" by extending to the street property lines.

7. Unify the design of rooftop elements and set mechanical equipment back from street facades.

8. Design should provide for art or other visual interest at large blank lot-line walls.

9. Facades should reflect a regular rhythm of structure and openings at street facades.

10. Durable, high-quality materials like brick, masonry, and concrete stucco are compatible. Brick patterns and insets are encouraged.

11. Use neighboring Contributing Buildings as a template to match window proportion and alignment.

12. Storefronts should have textured or paneled bases and be inset from the wall.

13. New buildings should have traditional base, middle, and top sections.
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GENERAL GUIDELINE CONCEPTS

General guidelines are intended to apply to all projects. The Central City Fundamental Design Guidelines also will continue to apply to all projects.

1. Avoid linear lighting or lighting large areas other than upper-level architectural features and signage.

2. Keep awnings within storefront openings.

3. New large three-dimensional signs are encouraged and faded painted building signs should be retained.

4. Security gates or grilles must be designed to slide open or up during daylight hours. Lighting should be on sensors.

5. Surface parking must have a built edge to hold the street wall (may incorporate planting).

6. Garage openings should be minimized. Size should be similar to a storefront opening and include a garage door.


8. Protect archaeological finds.

9. Corral rooftop mechanical elements and limit views of them from the street.

10. Add applicable historical plaques.

11. Encourage open balconies if compatible with the building style.