New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District
Design Guidelines Project

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

ITALIANATE

20TH CENTURY COMMERCIAL

MODERNE

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)
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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
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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

PROJECT OVERVIEW
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DISTRICT VISION

“Allow change to take place in a mindful way that brings vibrancy to the district while retaining the architectural and cultural qualities that make it a unique, historic neighborhood.”

- Stimulate destination experience within the district; increase opportunities for living, shopping, and working necessary for a thriving neighborhood
- Retain historic resources, cultural significance and authenticity
- Promote compatible development and the enhancement of the pedestrian right of way
- Honor the district’s background and historical context

GUIDE CONCEPTS

[Images of district features]
CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY & CHARACTER

Cultural authenticity is achieved when a project within the district incorporates architectural references to the history of the site or building. To avoid “kitsch,” a designer should know where those references come from and what they mean to the culture that developed them.

The following guidelines specifically address this issue:

GENERAL

A2 Authentic Chinese and/or Japanese design expressions are encouraged, but not required.

A3 Use signs to help preserve the district’s character.

A4 Provide researched history plaques or information at the ground floor level.

A5 Encourage street-facing balconies.

A9 Reflect the desired character of the district when making improvements in the right-of-way; special consideration should be paid to the Festival Streets and NW Fourth Avenue.

ALTERATIONS

B3 Design alterations to be respectful of the original style; culturally authentic applications related to the history of the building may be introduced.
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BUILDING FORM

Early 20th Century architecture most clearly defines the urban character of the district. Three styles make up three-quarters of all buildings in the district and provide stylistic uniformity: 20th Century Commercial, Italianate, and Moderne. The Chinese and Japanese communities within the District also uniquely shaped its physical character, though not necessarily in an overt manner. It was not uncommon for occupants to add cultural adaptations or embellishments to the regular building forms.

The following guidelines specifically address this issue:

ADDITIONS

C1 Ensure additions are compatible with the original style, form, and massing of the existing building.

C2 Design horizontal additions to Contributing buildings to appear to be a new building, or as a visually secondary and more contemporary version of the original façade.

C3 Design vertical additions to Contributing buildings to limit the visual impact of the addition.

NEW CONSTRUCTION

D1 Design the new structure to be inspired by one of the historic styles found in the district.

D2 Reflect the form and type of the district's Contributing buildings in new construction.

D3 Relate the height of the new structure to the height of adjacent Contributing buildings; employ strategies to reduce the impact of taller buildings.
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.

A1 Use durable, high-quality materials and finishes.

A7 Durable canopies or awnings within storefront bays are encouraged.

A2 Authentic Chinese and/or Japanese design expressions are encouraged, but not required.

A8 Hide rooftop mechanical or equipment from view when looking from the ground level.

A3 Use signs to help preserve the district’s character.

A9 Reflect the desired character of the district when making improvements in the right-of-way.

A4 Provide researched history plaques or information at the ground floor level.

A10 Minimize the appearance of any security features.

A5 Encourage street-facing balconies.

A11 Minimize the appearance of garage openings; keep loading in the right-of-way.

A6 Focus exterior lighting on the pedestrian environment.

A12 Provide an architectural edge for any surface parking area.
GUIDELINE CONCEPTS for ALTERATIONS

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

B1 Retain the important original stylistic features of a building.

B2 Retain any changes to the building that are historically significant.

B3 Design alterations to be respectful of the original style; culturally authentic insertions related to the history of the building may be introduced.

B4 Retain and repair historic materials, or if necessary, replace with the same material.

B5 Keep alterations visually secondary to the original building features.

B6 Undertake seismic improvements in the most unobtrusive way possible.

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.

C1 Ensure additions are compatible with the original style, form, and massing of the existing building.

C2 Design horizontal additions to Contributing buildings to appear to be a new building, or as a visually secondary and more contemporary version of the original façade.

C3 Design vertical additions to Contributing buildings to limit the visual impact of the addition.
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.

D1  Design the new structure to be inspired by one of the historic styles found in the district.

D2  Reflect the form and articulation of the district’s Contributing buildings in new construction.

D3  Relate the height of the new structure to the height of adjacent Contributing buildings.

D4  Extend the primary mass of the building, or the building base, to the property lines.

D5  Design street-facing walls with a regular rhythm of bays and features.

D6  At the ground floor, provide small-scale texture and detail.

D7  New windows should be of similar proportion and depth to those in adjacent Contributing buildings and window sills should align.

D8  Provide visual interest to exposed lot-line walls.