

# CHINATOWN DESIGN GUIDE STUDY

A handbook for designing a cultural district



繁榮

Prosperity

長壽

Longevity

幸福

Happiness

Amended April 2019





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DC

**Photography Note:**

If an image contains this designation, the image was taken in the District of Columbia.

# Introduction

*Buildings and businesses in Chinatown continue to provide residents and visitors in the nation's capital the opportunity to experience various aspects of Chinese culture and the history of Chinese settlement in Washington, DC.*

Chinatown is a known and celebrated place in downtown DC where people and businesses share the experience of Chinese culture with everyone who lives in or visits the DC metropolitan area. Chinese culture is also reflected in the built environment – either through historic buildings that have been modified over the years to accommodate Chinese businesses and homes or through the local practice of incorporating Chinese elements into renovation and new construction in DC's Chinatown.

Construction of the Friendship Archway in 1986, the establishment of the Chinatown Steering Committee in 1988, and the City's adoption of a Small Area Plan in 2009 were concrete steps aimed at maintaining and enhancing Chinese cultural traditions as well as architectural character. Today, as Chinatown becomes the epicenter of DC's entertainment area, the Chinatown Steering Committee and the Office of Planning still refer the design guidelines study developed in 1988 to review changes made to buildings in Chinatown to ensure that the character and architectural identity of this special place is maintained.

This amended version of the Chinatown Design Guide Study is aimed at continuing the cultural richness of Chinatown, in both traditional and contemporary ways. It strives to protect Chinatown's character – the key to its special identity and its continued attraction. It provides guidance and clarity to applicants and reviewers participating in the District's Chinatown Design Review Process; property and business owners and their designers and city government staff. The updated guidelines are a result of collaboration between the DC Office of Planning and the Chinatown Steering Committee.



*Chinatown DC at night at the intersection of 7th and H streets looking west.*

## PURPOSE OF THE CHINATOWN DESIGN GUIDE STUDY

Renovations and new construction projects located within the boundaries of Chinatown shown in maps on page 4 must comply with District Government regulations that address Chinatown Design Review. All exterior construction permits in Chinatown are subject to Chinatown Design Review. The Chinatown Design Guide Study is intended to make the process predictable and efficient for applicants by providing guidance on the design process and the integration of Chinese cultural elements and signage into projects. Chinatown Design Review Applications range from new buildings submitted by professional architects to smaller signage or lighting projects proposed by small business owners. This guide has been designed to assist all applicants in preparing for the projects Design Review process.

## ENCOURAGING INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

These guidelines illustrate the visual characteristics that make Chinatown unique and authentic within the city and region, and assist in maintaining and complementing these characteristics. However, this design guide is also intended to be inspirational and promote variety and innovative design, and not to be prescriptive. We welcome the influence of new infusions of Chinese culture into this area of our city, enriching the experience for all.

## WHO WILL USE THE CHINATOWN DESIGN GUIDE STUDY?

Building and business owners and their designers and expeditors can refer to these guidelines in making their decisions and preparing their designs; prior to preparing their design applications and prior to contacting the Office of Planning to discuss their application. Following that, those involved in the review of these applications – the Chinatown Design Review Sub-committee, the Chinatown Steering Committee, the DC Office of Planning, and the DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs – can refer to this guide to assist applicants in realizing their projects. Some parts of Chinatown are also in the Downtown Historic District and design review needs to be coordinated with the Office of Historic Preservation. Building permits are issued after they have received final approval by the Office of Planning with input from the Chinatown Steering Committee and their Design Review Sub-committee.

## RELATED PLANS SHAPE DC'S CHINATOWN\*



### The Chinatown Cultural Development Small Area Plan- (June 1, 2009)

This plan provided public and private stakeholders with a set of strategies to position Chinatown as the regional anchor for Chinese/Asian culture and attractions. Maintaining the dynamic built environment of Chinatown is critical to realizing the vision defined by the community in the Chinatown Cultural Development Strategy – the Small Area Plan adopted by the City Council for this area.

## INTRODUCTION // Purpose & Intent

### The DC Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan acknowledges Chinatown's "struggle to retain its identity" and includes policies that address this. It recognizes the importance of Chinatown as a place to expand opportunities for small, local, and minority businesses and as a destination retail district. It emphasizes the importance of protecting its character and architecture.

### Center City Action Agenda (2010)

Chinatown is one of the great places in Center City DC and one of its distinctive neighborhoods.

### Chinatown Public Realm Plan- (September 2011)

The Chinatown Public Realm Plan is a set of detailed strategies to maximize the pedestrian safety, economic potential, and pedestrian experience of Chinatown's streets and public spaces to ensure that future generations of Washingtonians will continue to enjoy the unique Chinatown public space experience. The District of Columbia Office of Planning has created the Chinatown Public Realm Plan to both guide government agencies and private property owners decisions about capital infrastructure investments and policies for designing and managing Chinatown's streets and public spaces. The plan is a key action of the Chinatown Cultural Development Strategy and includes detailed plan of actions for enhancing the cultural experience of Chinatown through additional Chinese inspired streetscaping elements, enhanced pedestrian amenities, and expansion of pedestrian spaces and sidewalks.

\*To view related plan documents, visit the Office of Planning Website at <http://www.planning.dc.gov>.



Capital One Arena designed with Chinese decorative motif patterns and super graphic Chinese characters.



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# 01 // CHINATOWN

PAST,  
PRESENT  
& FUTURE

# 01 // Chinatown: A Place In The Past

Chinese immigration to Washington thrived in the 1880s, and since their arrival the Chinese community has been part of Downtown DC.

## GERMAN BEGINNINGS

Chinatown began its development as a residential area for German merchants and craftsmen in the 1820s and 1830s. These merchants worked mostly in the center market at 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue and along 7th Street which served as a major artery between the market and the nearby train station (once located at 6th and B Street, NW) and agriculture to the north. Retail along 7th street later expanded from dry good sales to include department stores making it a popular commercial corridor. The area's once vibrant German-Jewish culture remains visible in 2 extant synagogues, one at 8th and H Street (1897) and the other, the Shalom Synagogue, also known as the 6th and I Historic Synagogue.



1968 - 6th & H Streets NW

## BECOMING DC'S CHINATOWN

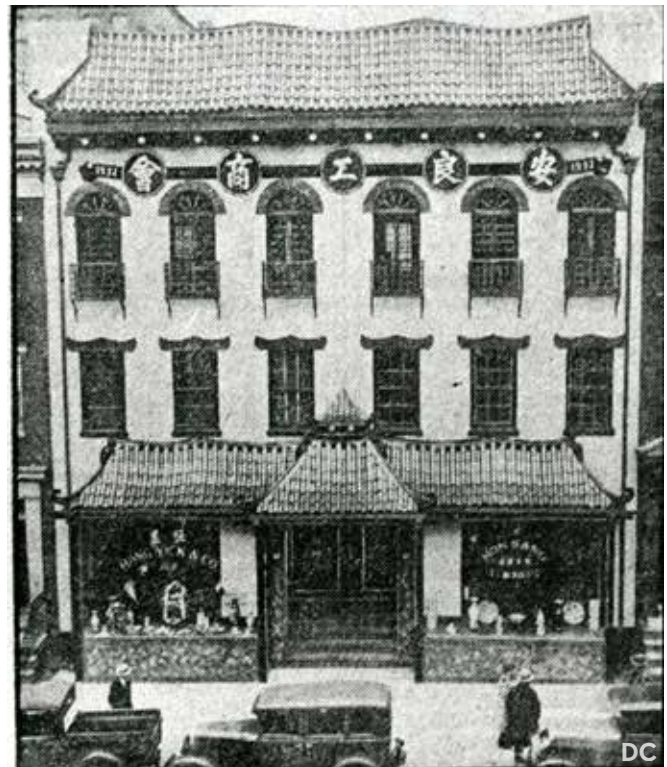
Chinese immigration to Washington, D.C. thrived in the 1880s and the community continued to expand in the Center Market in an area now known as the Federal Triangle. During the 1930s, the federal government razed the area, including the existing market and train station, to make way for new federal buildings in the Federal Triangle. Around the same period, anti-German sentiments during World War I led to Congress banning Germans from their community allowing Washington, D.C.'s Chinese residents to relocate to this area, now known as Chinatown. The community continued to thrive into the 1960s. African Americans began moving to the area in the 1950s and 1960s and many of the synagogues were converted to Baptist churches to support the now dominant population. Despite transitions, the neighborhood revealed and continues to provide a distinctive Chinese-American character. Today, the Chinese population numbers fewer than 600 people (16-30, 2006 Comprehensive Plan).



1951- 624 H Street



1968- 604 H Street NW Display Window



1931- H Street NW

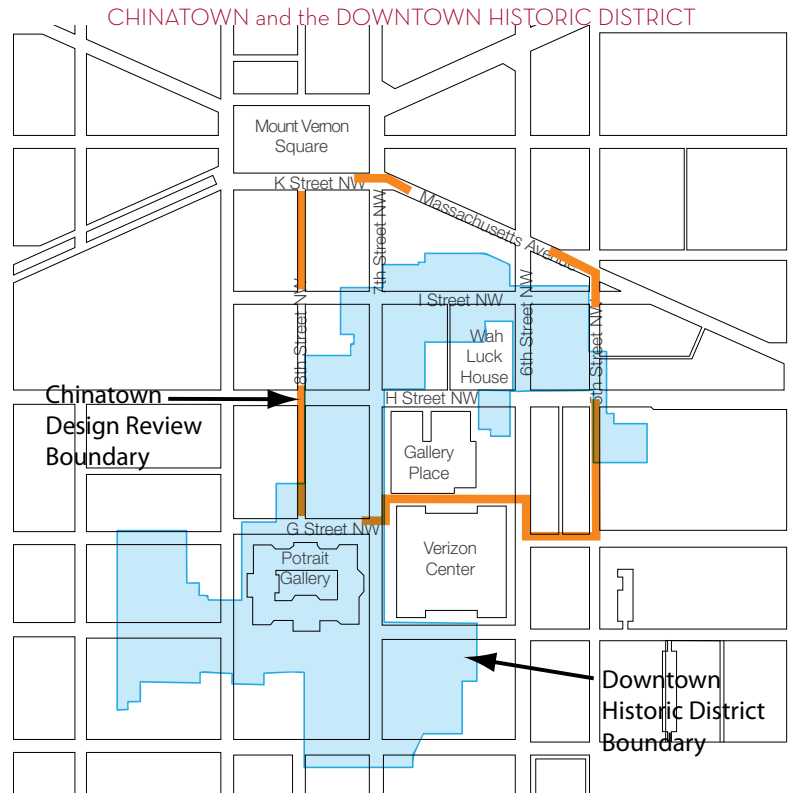


# 01 // Chinatown: A Place In The Present

Despite transitions, Chinatown continues to provide a distinctive Chinese-American character. Historic Preservation Law, Public Space Regulations, and Chinatown Design Review are in place to preserve the area's heritage so we can still experience the story of the area's development.

## PRESERVING THE CHARACTER

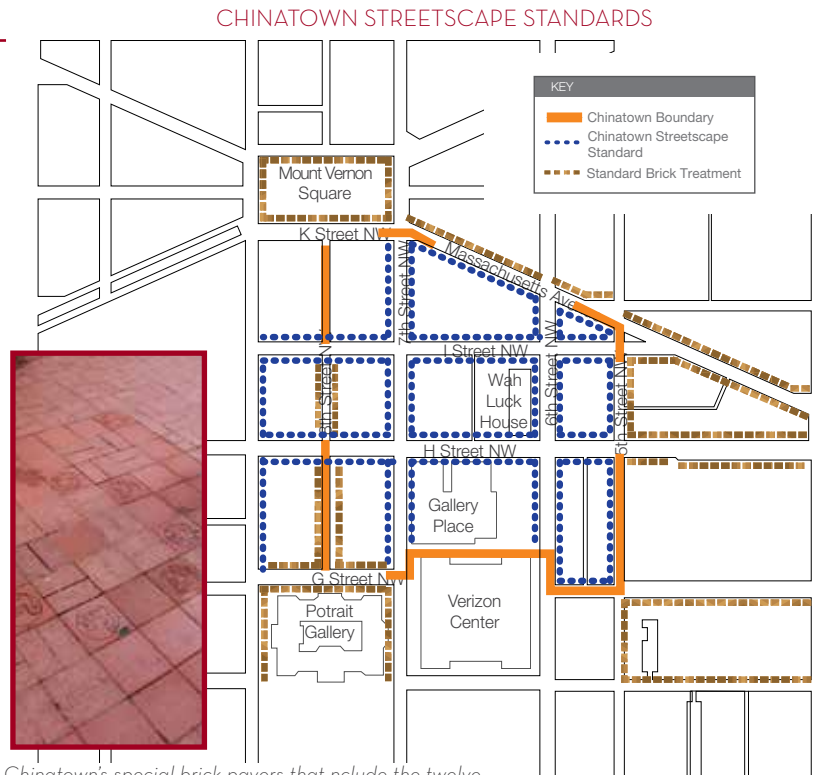
Today the remaining small commercial and residential buildings of Chinatown reflect the history and scale of the earliest residential and commercial building in the city. As an illustration of this, the cluster of four buildings at the southwest corner of 6th and H Streets were built in 1844 by a German baker and are one of the oldest surviving examples of urban residential architecture in the city. These federal-style mid-19th century buildings – subsequently enriched with a Chinese cultural layer – tell a story of how downtown DC developed. In order to maintain the visible record of the community's history, the District Government created the Chinatown Historic District. In addition, The DC Government developed regulations to encourage the continued expression of Chinese culture through design review.



## WELCOMING NEW DEVELOPMENT

In the past 10 years large-scale projects; including the Capital One Arena, Gallery Place, the Wah Luk House, and other high-rise office buildings have dramatically impacted Chinatown. Traditional Chinese businesses find it difficult to remain, and simultaneously, new Asian and other types of restaurants have opened at a very brisk pace. The Chinese Community Church has found a permanent home here, and the Chinatown Community Cultural Center has opened, offering an array of ways to experience and learn about Chinese culture, including language, martial arts, film, cuisine and traditional ceremonial dance.

Chinese banners, traditional street lamps, special sidewalk paving, and a continuing tradition of using Chinese characters on signage for all types of businesses distinguishes Chinatown and its fascinating history and its current cultural offerings.



Chinatown's special brick pavers that include the twelve animals of the Chinese Astrological symbols.

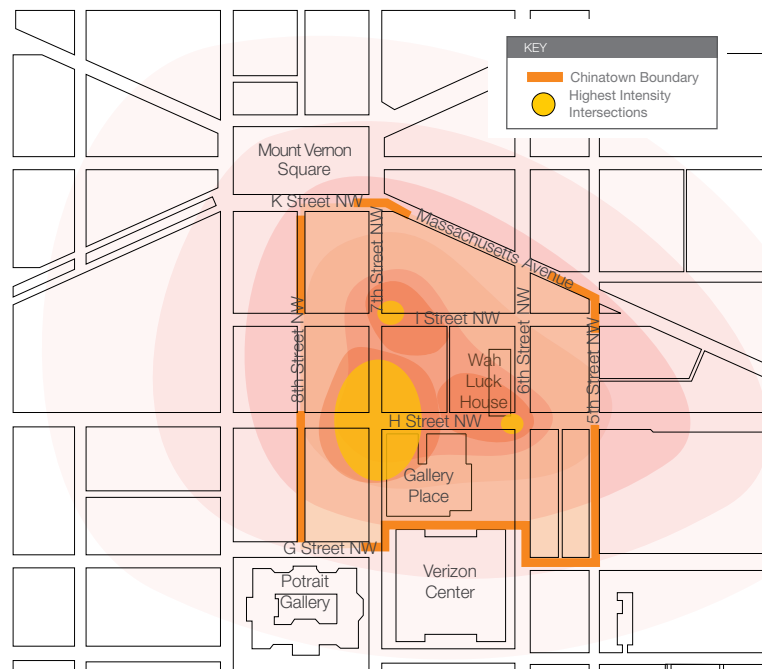
# 01 // Chinatown: A Place In The Future

The design review process aims to support the continued expression of Chinese culture in the businesses and cultural offerings in Chinatown. It requires the inclusion of Chinese design elements as new businesses come into Chinatown, as changes are made to existing structures and as new buildings are created.

## INTERSECTION INTENSITY

Chinatown's foremost cultural icon is the Friendship Archway at the intersection of H and 7th streets NW. This intersection is also the Gallery Place/Chinatown entrance to Metrorail and a crossroads of east-west and north-south movement. 30,000 people pass through H and 7th Streets daily on foot, and another 16,000 in cars. The intersection is dramatic because of the intensity of business activity and the vibrant color and signage. It is the center of Chinatown and its primary social space. This is the most important place to include Chinese design elements, cultural and commercial offerings, visitor information, and public space amenities.

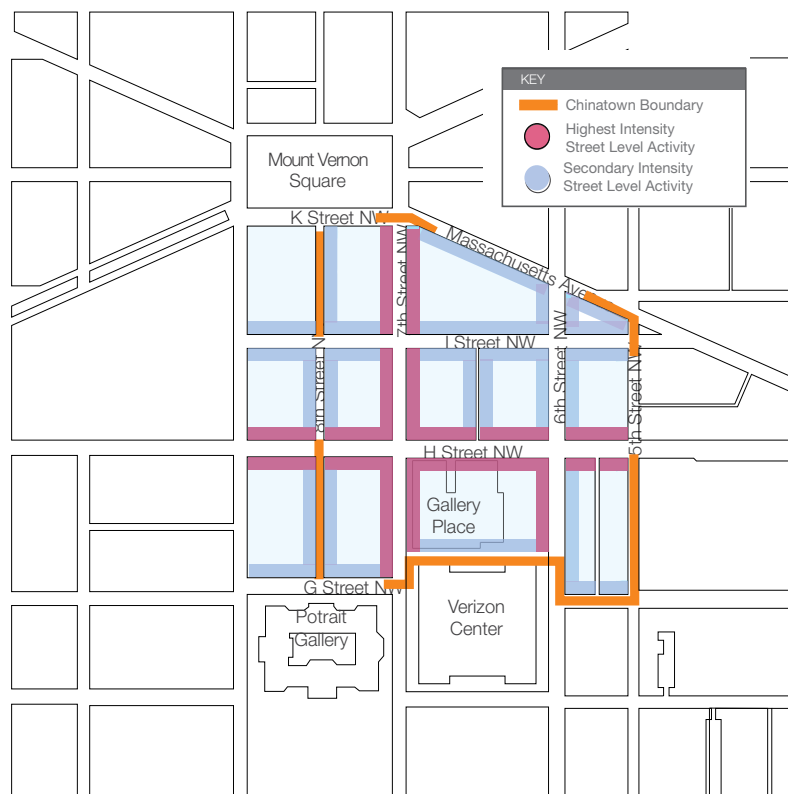
## INTERSECTIONS EMPHASIZING CHINESE CULTURAL ELEMENTS



## HIGH-INTENSITY STOREFRONTS + STREETSCAPES

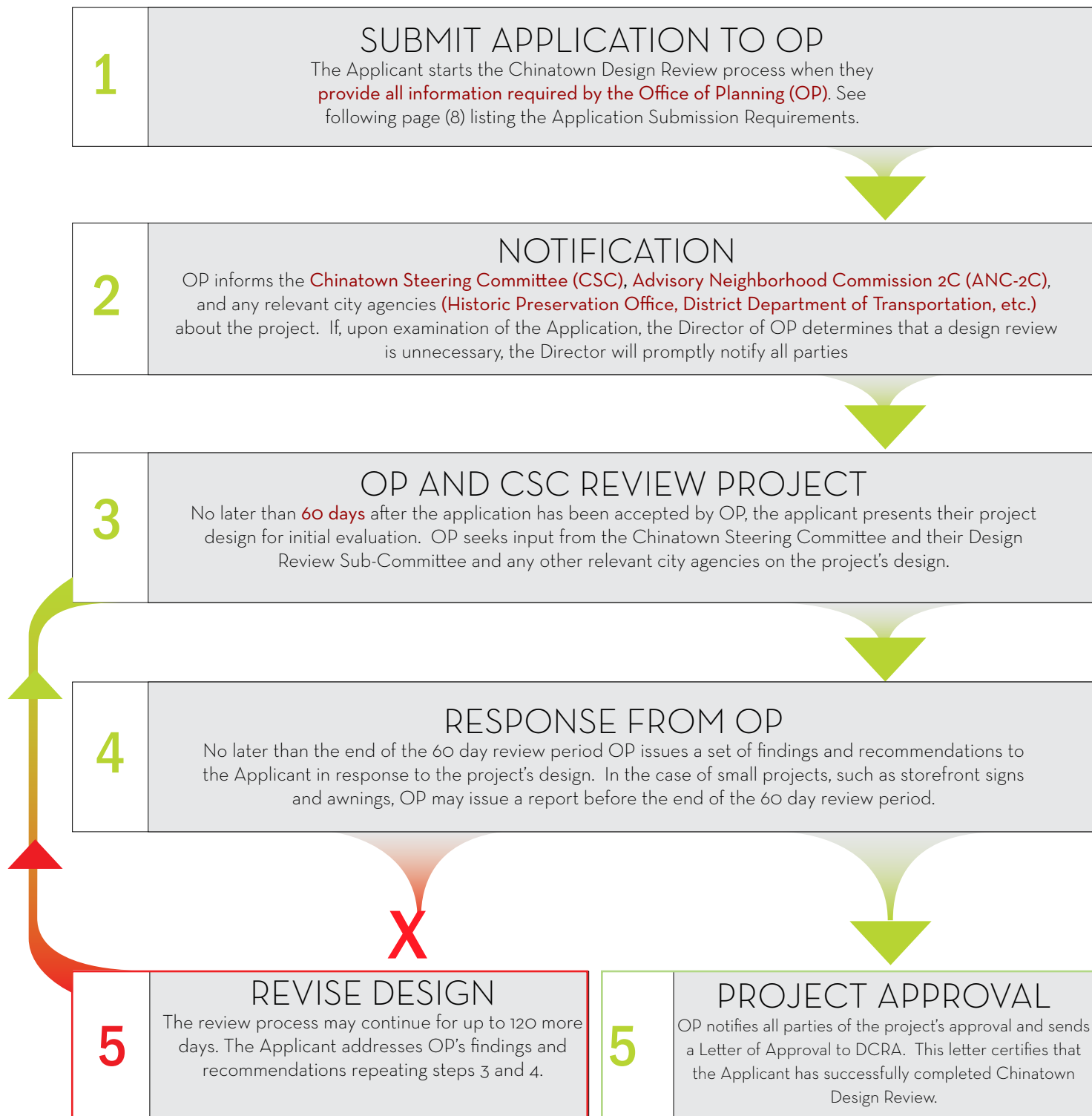
Street-level retail, restaurants, cafes, coffee shops, sidewalk selling, and vending – all contribute to the positive vitality and interaction we strive for in Chinatown. Welcoming streets, with a diversity of active storefronts and cultural and civic institutions, will increase business opportunities, solve nuisance issues, and improve the look and feel of Chinatown. The streets highlighted here show where it is most important for this type of environment to be created through Chinatown Design Review.

## IMPORTANT STREETS EMPHASIZING AND FOCUSING ACTIVITY





## 02 // Chinatown Design Review: How The Design Review Process Works



# 02 // Chinatown Design Review Application Submission Requirements

## APPLICATIONS, DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION

The applicant should provide the appropriate architectural drawings, sketches, and photographs of existing buildings and their sites to allow the Office of Planning to fully understand the nature and scope of the exterior changes and any significant design issues. Application requirements for the Chinatown Design Review Procedures will vary depending upon the complexity and scale of the project to be reviewed, and the specific requirements of the Office of Planning.

## CHINATOWN DESIGN REVIEW SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

When a permit application has been referred by the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) to the Director of OP, the applicant submits to the Director digital files in the Portable Document Format (PDF) and up to four (4) hard-copies required for submittal for the DCRA permit application. The submittal required by the Director shall include the following documents:

- A completed Chinatown Design Review application provided by the Office of Planning;
- The name and addresses of all owners or their authorized agents;
- Plans and elevations indicating appearances and proposed uses and including dimensions, colors, and a general description of materials; and
- Any other information the Director deems necessary to perform design review.

## ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION FOR ANY MAJOR NEW CONSTRUCTION OR RENOVATION PROJECT

- If the project is within the Downtown Historic District, a statement is submitted setting forth the historic preservation constraints on Chinese design character and how Chinese design character has been accommodated within those constraints to achieve an appropriate balance between potentially competing objectives;
- A general circulation plan, indicating the location of vehicular and pedestrian access ways, the location, number, and dimensions of all off-street parking spaces and loading service bays, and the location and dimensions of the public spaces improvements; and
- A general statement of the approximate schedule of building construction.



**The Chinatown Design Review Procedures are inspired by the Chinatown Steering Committee, a Chinatown community organization, which advises the District Government on physical, economical and social impacts in Chinatown.**

## APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

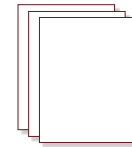
ALL PROJECTS SHOULD PROVIDE:



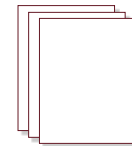
**Application and Supporting Design and Site Documentation**

+

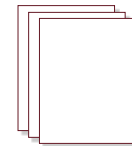
ALL PROJECTS REQUIRE (UP TO 4 COPIES):



**Chinatown Design Review Application**



**Proposed Project Design Objective Statement**



**Plans and Elevations**

+

ALL MAJOR NEW AND EXISTING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS REQUIRE (UP TO 4 COPIES):



**Statement of Historic Preservation Compliance (If Applicable)**



**Site Circulation Plan**



**Plans and Elevations**

## 02 // Chinatown Design Review: Frequently Asked Questions

The Office of Planning often provides assistance to applicants who do not know that there is a municipal regulation requiring architectural design compliance in Chinatown as a condition for obtaining a building permit or those who are unfamiliar with a design review process. Below we have assembled a list of questions and answers to some of the most commonly asked questions pertaining to the Chinatown Design Review Procedures.

### GENERAL DESIGN AND THE INCORPORATION OF CHINESE CULTURAL ELEMENTS

**1. So how much Chinese “styling” should I do to comply with the design review regulations?**

Generally, this is based on the scope and location of the proposed project, in addition to special circumstances and issues raised during the case by case design review. For example, is the project a major new construction project or is it a new business being put in an existing building? The amount of Chinese cultural reference and layering required is evaluated based on the adjacent buildings and the general surroundings: Is the project located on a commercial street with lots of businesses and activity or is it in a quieter residential area? Is the project adjacent to existing buildings with strong Chinese architectural character and style? In some parts of Chinatown, such as areas in the vicinity of the Archway, more intense Chinese character and style will be called for in both the architecture and the signage. In less intense areas, signage with Chinese characters and some figurative or abstract decorative elements that complement the identity and history of Chinatown will be adequate. See the map titled *Intersections Emphasizing Chinese Cultural Elements* on page 5 of this handbook.

**2. What is Chinese motif and decoration and how do I apply it to my renovation or addition?**

Chinese elements are architectural and artistic components that help intensify the identity of Chinatown and provide the DC community and visitors with the opportunity to experience Chinese culture.

**3. Should the design of the building or project look like traditional Chinese Architecture?**

It is mandatory to develop the project with Chinese architectural building elements and design features. However, both traditional and contemporary architecture and design, as long as they express information about Chinese culture, are supported by the Office of Planning (OP) and the Chinatown Design Review Sub-Committee.

**4. What materials and colors are required?**

Various materials are common in traditional Chinese architecture such as wood, glazed terra cotta, ceramic tile and stone. In addition, contemporary materials and creative approaches are also encouraged. The primary colors that are generously used in Chinese Architecture are red, yellow, green, and polychromatic. *The Fundamentals of Chinese Architecture and Style* section in this handbook on pages 17 and 18 discusses colors in Chinese design and their cultural associations.

**5. If I am a tenant and I am renovating the storefront, what type of Chinese architectural design and style is expected?**

At a minimum, Chinese architectural or decorative elements or motifs on the storefront and the use of Chinese characters in the signage are expected.

### SIGNS, BANNERS AND AWNINGS IN CHINATOWN

**6. What types of Chinese characters are required?**

Traditional Chinese characters. Simplified Chinese characters are discouraged.

**7. Can I make the sign non-illuminated?**

Yes, but OP encourages the use of up or down lighting to allow the sign to be visible from a bicycle or car at night.

**8. Can I make the Chinese characters smaller than the establishment name?**

Equal size English and Chinese are encouraged, unless the existing storefront sign band restricts this or additional Chinese cultural elements are incorporated into the design; such as ornamental brackets, lanterns, overall storefront design etc.

**9. What types of sign are not recommended?**

While artistry, innovation, and design variety are strongly supported; OP does discourage signs that are hand-painted single layer plywood signs with basic vinyl lettering, illuminated cabinet signs with vinyl lettering, and signs

that are temporary such as single faced vinyl banners with grommets.

**10. What materials should or should not be used for the signs?**

Signs that are made of durable and permanent materials that withstand weathering such as molded polyurethane or metal are strongly recommended. Signs that are made of materials such as untreated plywood and various fabrics that cannot withstand weathering over an extended period are discouraged.

**11. What materials are recommended for awnings and banners?**

Glass, canvas or metal awnings are encouraged. OP and the Design Review Sub-committee strongly discourage plastic internally illuminated awnings and vinyl awnings. Banners are very similar to awnings; as long as the material is durable and does not weather or fray, it will be reviewed.

**GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE APPLICATION AND THE DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS**

**12. Should we submit our project before or after filing for a permit with DCRA?**

OP is flexible on the time of submittal. You can submit before or during the building permit application process. However, we encourage you to initiate the Chinatown Design Review process prior to applying for a permit to save you time and money in the event that revisions are called for.

**13. At what phase of the design should we present drawings?**

During the Design Development phase, prior to the start of the Construction Documents phase.

**14. How long is the Chinatown Design Review process?**

60 days is the initial review period from intake at OP. An applicant can be permitted four (4) additional thirty (30) day extensions, for a total review period not to exceed one hundred and eighty days (180).

**15. If my project is in the Downtown Historic District, what should I do for the Chinatown Design Review?**

Schedule a meeting with both the Historic Preservation Division and the Urban Design representatives for the Chinatown Design Review at OP. This can be arranged through the Chinatown Design Review Program Manager.

**16. If I am only renovating a small portion of the building, does it require design review?**

Any renovation that requires a building permit for exterior construction will be referred for review by DCRA if the property is within the Chinatown boundary.

**17. If there is a design change after the Chinatown Design Review, what should we do?**

If the changes significantly alter what the initial approval was based on, another review would be necessary and input would again be sought from the Chinatown Steering Committee and the Chinatown design Review Sub-committee. In this situation it is best to consult Chinatown Design Review staff at the DC Office of Planning for direction.

**18. What is the Chinatown Steering Committee's role in the design review?**

The Chinatown Steering Committee serves as an advisory group to the District Government. The committee provides cultural, language and design input.

**19. What is the Chinatown Design Guide and how should I use it?**

It is a handbook that is intended to explain the District regulation and assist you in incorporating Chinese cultural elements into your project. Using the Chinese design features encourages in the manual will help in expediting the design review process.





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**03** // FUNDAMENTALS OF  
CHINESE CHARACTER AND STYLE

## 03 // Traditional Chinese Architectural Values

*The underlying values of traditional Chinese building culture remain the most important design inspiration in contemporary Chinese architecture and they provide a useful guide and inspiration in DC's Chinatown today. Basing new design on fundamental elements of Chinese building culture will contribute to the authenticity of the neighborhood and bring increased cultural vibrancy and uniqueness to DC's Chinatown area.*

### VALUE: STRUCTURAL HIERARCHY

Chinatown's Friendship Arch is a good example of structural hierarchy. Large supporting elements support medium sized elements and those elements support even smaller elements. As one goes higher and higher in the structure, the weight is spread out to more and more elements and each member becomes more intricate, reducing the amount of material needed. This simple idea is fundamental to architecture in general; however the Chinese culture emphasizes it and makes it visible rather than covering it.

### VALUE: REPETITIVE ELEMENTS

Repetitive elements – many, many small pieces – are often used to create patterns in Chinese architecture. This results in a decorative array that is distinct from applied decoration, since the repeated elements are typically a functioning component of the building, such as a rail, roof element, or eve support.

### VALUE: SPATIAL AND SENSORY INTENSITY

Intense visual variety occurs in public spaces and streets of Chinatowns throughout the world. Sensory stimulation is fundamental to the authentic cultural experiences in prominent Chinatowns of our memory. Once experienced, they are not forgotten, drawing visitors back again and again, for the excitement and the bustle of commerce. As one moves through these public spaces they are confronted with smells, sights, sounds, and tactile appeal, as well as the intense activity of a pedestrian-friendly ground floor and storefront.

This intensity sets Chinatown apart from other areas and can be further developed through intricate and elaborate designs, through the use of intense traditional Chinese colors and Chinese characters, by adding strongly vertical elements – including signs and banners – and with traditional styles of lighting and reinterpretations of traditional styles of lighting. Spatial intensity is also created by blurring the boundary between indoor and outdoor spaces, with markets extending outward for sidewalk selling and street vendors exposing visitors to their products even before they enter the stores.



*Structural Hierarchy and repetitive elements*



*Worldwide Chinatown's spatial and sensory intensity*

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#### VALUE: IMPORTANCE OF ENTRYWAY

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In traditional buildings the façade is often broken into an odd number of bays but an even number of columns so that the entrance is perfectly centered on the building. In addition a great deal of emphasis is placed at the entrance with both structural elements and applied elements. Round shapes, elaborate awnings, columns, color, special materials, and decorative elements are often used to create a bold and expressive visual impact at the entrance.

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#### VALUE: MEETING THE SKY

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The rooftops of existing Chinese-influenced buildings in Chinatown have visual drama at the very top. This is achieved through sculptural roof forms and towers, the texture of terra cotta tiles, and intense color and decorative details. In some cases mythical creatures including the dragon are silhouetted against the sky. Contemporary building designs have created a silhouette against the sky by stepped back terraces, detailed rail designs, trellises, special cornice treatments, and active recreation or garden roofs.

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#### VALUE: INSPIRATION FROM ANIMALS AND PLANTS, WIND AND WATER

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Chinese architecture draws inspiration from plants and animals, seeking to balance the man-made and natural elements to achieve harmony. Concepts like feng shui – a balanced harmony between wind, water, and built structure – plays an important role in the organization of a building’s architectural components and finds ways for a natural flow of space to be experienced. Traditionally, Chinese layouts bring natural elements, such as plants, wood and stones, into the building structure and place water elements at the building’s front.

Decorative images and patterns incorporated into Chinese building design are often inspired by natural elements or mythical creatures, such as the stylized water pattern or stylized dragons and lions.



*Importance of entryway*



*Meeting the sky*



*Inspiration from animals and nature*

# 03 // Chinese Decorative Motif

Traditional or contemporary decorative elements that contribute to the Chinese cultural identity of Chinatown need to be part of every project in Chinatown, including both renovations and new construction. Chinese-inspired – figurative or abstract – decorative elements can range greatly according to the design requirements and goals of individual projects. Creativity and variety are strongly encouraged ranging from elements that are integral parts of the architecture to permanent fixtures to applied decorative motifs.

## INSPIRATION

Creative integration of brackets and Chinese lanterns on building façade



Creative interpretation of Chinese pagoda

Granite engraving of Chinese artistic motif on column base



Granite engraving of Chinese characters motif on column base

Use of concrete Chinese motif insets on building façade



Decorative patterned motif inset into precast concrete panels

Example of carved Chinese motif



Decorative lighting fixture integrated into the building façade

INSPIRATION

Decorative patterned motif inset into precast concrete panels



Banner post with Chinese medallion motif

Chinese characters pin-mounted to building façade



Chinese medallions above storefront façade

Traditional decorative motif in precast at roof line



Chinese dragons integrated into the building address

Modern interpretation of Chinese balustrades



Banner post embellished with Dragon figurines

## 03 // Traditional Chinese Colors

The lavish use of color is a distinguishing characteristic of Chinese architecture. If understood and properly introduced in Chinatown projects, it can be a powerful way to fit into the cultural dynamism of Chinatown today. In traditional Chinese art and culture, black, red, blue-green, white and yellow are viewed as standard colors. These colors correspond to the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal and earth, taught in traditional Chinese physics and used to make color selections. In Chinese tradition, pure and strong colors bear important and deeply rooted symbolism.

On the façade of a Chinese building, every color has its customary place. Architects and designers should exercise sensitivity to the conventions of traditional Chinese color placement and make an attempt to extend these traditions to the present, even in highly contemporary applications. For example, red is not used for roofs, nor sky-blue for columns. Complementary colors are often boldly juxtaposed. For example, a shining orange-yellow roof is set against the blue sky and contrasts with the eave shadow where green-blue painted patterns offer a cold tone.



The term polychrome describes the use of multiple colors in one entity and the practice of decorating architectural elements, sculpture, etc, in a variety of colors. It can be useful in merging various building components into an attractive yet harmonious whole, for example the Friendship

Archway combines a great number of colors, yet appears perfectly pleasing as a whole.



### BLACK / GRAY AND BLACK



Black, corresponding to water, is a neutral color. The I Ching, or Book of Changes, regards black as Heaven's color. The saying "heaven and earth of mysterious black" was rooted in the observation that the northern sky was black for a long time. The Taiji symbol uses black and white to

represent the unity of Yin and Yang. Black may also be used during a funeral to symbolize the spirit's return to the heavens. A black ribbon is usually hung over the deceased's picture. Grey and black are the colors of the water element but also may be avoided because they signify loss of light and grief.



### RED



Red, corresponding with fire, is the color of happiness, symbolizing good fortune and joy. A red envelope is used for a monetary gift, given in Chinese society during holidays or at special occasions, because it symbolizes good luck. Red is strictly forbidden at funerals. In modern China, red remains a very popular color.



### GREEN



Generally green is associated with health, prosperity, and harmony.



## YELLOW/GOLD



Yellow corresponds with the earth and is considered the most beautiful color. The Chinese saying, “Yellow generates Yin and Yang”, implies that yellow is the center of everything, heralding heavenly glory and in Buddhism, freedom from worldly cares.

Associated with, but ranked above brown, yellow also signifies neutrality and good luck. Yellow is held as the symbolic color of the five legendary emperors of ancient China and traditionally the glazed yellow of building tiles were associated with the emperors, often decorating royal palaces, altars and temples. Yellow is sometimes paired with red in place of gold.



## WHITE



White, corresponding with metal, symbolizes brightness, purity, and fulfillment and is also the color of death and mourning. It is used predominantly in funerals and the ancient Chinese people wore white clothes and hats only when they mourned the dead.

Sometimes silver takes its place, as silver and silver paper is often offered to the deceased.



## ORANGE-RED



The orange-red color range, like red, also represents joy.



Blue symbolizes immortality. Dark blue is also a traditional color for somber occasions.



Blue-green, corresponding with wood, represents nature and renewal and often indicates spring. The color implies vigor and vitality.



## 03 // Basics of Chinese Characters

For the purposes of developing signage in Chinatown one needs to understand the basic concepts of the written language, and to work with someone fluent in the language to develop meaningful signage that communicates effectively to Chinese speaking people. Because Chinese characters have evolved phonetically as opposed to strictly ideographically, the characters may represent one thing on their own, but when used with others contain a completely different meaning. It is important to avoid misrepresenting a business because of a semantic failure.

There are 2 systems of characters commonly used in the Chinese language, one traditional and the other a simplified system derived from the traditional. The traditional system of characters dates back to the Han dynasty and is used in regions outside of the mainland such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau. The simplified version was developed by the People's Republic of China in the mid-twentieth century to distill complex glyphs to fewer strokes and to increase literacy among the masses.

Pinyin is a further simplification of the language for the benefit of English speakers.

### TRADITIONAL CHARACTERS

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Traditional characters have been affected by the simplification that occurred in the mid-twentieth century but have been stable since the 5th century. These characters are most common among emigrants from China and are considered the most beautiful and the richest in meaning. Traditional characters are often recommended for three specific reasons:

1. It is a sign of respect, avoiding offense in writing a proper name.
2. Traditional text can avoid semantic confusion where simplified characters may have alternate meanings.
3. Traditional characters are considered more decorative and are particularly appropriate for signs and calligraphic applications.

媽媽

“Mother”  
Traditional Characters

### SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS

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Through time and globalization, the simplified characters are growing more common among Chinese language speakers and these contemporary characters are the standard for communications and texts of today's mainland China. They were developed under the regime of Mao Zedong to improve literacy, simplify character structure and to reduce the number of standard Chinese characters.

There is a consistent methodology to the simplification process that includes decreasing specific strokes within characters and replacing components common to many characters with simpler ones. Characters that may have been redundant in meaning or in phonetic pronunciation were superseded by others and eliminated all-together.

妈妈

“Mother”  
Simplified Characters

### PINYIN

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Pinyin means “spelled sound” and was officially adopted as an international standard in 1982. This version of the Chinese language, typically spoken in the Beijing region of China, established a method of teaching pronunciation and improved literacy rates in the country at mid-century.

Pinyin is the Romanization of the Mandarin dialect -- a process of modification to make it easier for Westerners to learn to speak it as well as to understand the pronunciation of Chinese characters. This enabled the casual reader who is unfamiliar with the original script to pronounce the source language with reasonable accuracy.

Māma

“Mother”  
Pinyin



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## 04 // ARCHITECTURAL GUIDELINES

# SIGNAGE

Signs with Chinese characters are the most easily identified building element and they communicate to residents and visitors that they have arrived in Chinatown. Every building or business has at least one – they are everywhere and they present a great opportunity for creativity and artistic expression in their design. Stores and restaurants typically have multiple signs with a wide variety of types and a diversity of designs. Their variety and design make them both a basic component of Chinatown’s character and an excellent opportunity for a merchant or resident to make a personal statement about their business or home. They range from temporary hand-lettered signs to animated, projecting vertical signs. The design and incorporation of Chinese characters and elements into these signs play an important role in defining and distinguishing Chinatown DC.

## PRINCIPLES

- Signs help create a dynamic and exciting street environment with creative use of light, and color, and the incorporation of Chinese characters.
- Chinese culture both abroad and in US Chinatowns includes a great variety of long vertical signs that extend to the upper levels of the building.
- A diversity of sign types and an abundance of signs set the Chinatown neighborhood apart from other downtown neighborhoods.
- Signs are designed to reinforce the fact that Chinatown is a pedestrian-oriented neighborhood and they incorporate elements that are Chinese and Asian in inspiration.
- Modern, historic, or traditional signs incorporate lights that take advantage of new energy-conserving solutions and technologies.



Vertical signs are characteristic of Chinatowns around the world.



Figurative elements incorporated into signs enliven building façades.



Brightly colored signs with Chinese characters are significant elements that define Chinatowns around the world.

## GUIDELINES

**The Size of Chinese Characters.** Incorporating Chinese characters and elements into the design of signs so that they are the same scale as the English language elements makes Chinese characters not appear as secondary.

**Using Pinyin.** These characters result in signs that can be read by the largest number of people and those from different regions of China.

**Relationship to the Building Façade.** Considering the architectural design of a building and its façade will result in a sign that is incorporated into the entire composition

**Sign Placement.** Positioning signs to avoid obscuring architectural elements of a building allows the architecture of the building and the layers of history to be revealed.

**Chinese Figurative Elements.** Adding, sizing, and incorporating Chinese cultural elements and characters into commercial business signs contribute to Chinatown's cultural identity and enhance the street-level experience.

**Residential Signs.** Identifying the main entrances of residential buildings with signs that incorporate Chinese cultural elements and characters that are less animated than those for businesses will help to distinguish between residential and commercial uses.

**Variety and Individual Expression.** Varying sign design of individual storefronts that are part of a large building allows businesses to express their individual identity and add to a dynamic and exciting street environment.

**Figurative Elements.** Incorporating channel letters, figurative elements, indirect and creative lighting creates signs that do not appear monolithic; internally lit box signs are discouraged.



*Figurative elements make signs more interesting and dynamic.*



*Incorporate Chinese design motifs into signs as a way to add to Chinatown's character.*

## HELPFUL HINTS

Gallery Place - Signs located on the 7th Street or H Street façade of the Gallery Place project are required to undergo an additional review intended to encourage larger and more innovative signs. Contact the DC Office of Planning for additional guidelines for Gallery Place.

Downtown Historic District - Properties located in the Downtown Historic District are required to be reviewed and approved by the Historic Preservation Office. Additional guidelines for the design of signs on historic commercial buildings are posted on the Office of Planning's website.

The District's sign regulations apply to Chinatown and are part of DCMR Title 12: Construction Code, Chapter 31A-Signs. District regulations define a maximum size for a sign based on the width of a building façade and the signs location, and allows for a wide range of sign types:



*Varying sign design for individual storefronts adds to an exciting street environment.*

# LIGHTING

Chinese culture has a long history of using light as part of building design and for celebrations throughout the Chinese year. Lighting – particularly lanterns, strings of lights, and colored light – add to the atmosphere created by the Chinese street lights that already define Chinatown. The lighting of façades, signs, and Chinese architectural features can be an inexpensive way to create a dynamic and inviting environment in Chinatown.

## PRINCIPLES

- Lighting is a powerful and relatively inexpensive way to accentuate distinct design elements of buildings.
- A wide range of lighting solutions – including direct and indirect, source and non-source, traditional and contemporary technologies – have a place in Chinatown and can be used to express Chinese culture.



Modern lights and new technologies can showcase contemporary Chinese design.



Decorative Contemporary Exterior Lighting effects can contribute greatly to the identity of Chinatown.



Lighting along roof lines - both traditional and contemporary - can be an inexpensive way to highlight Chinese architectural features and design elements.



Internally lit show windows and incorporating lights into the façade of a building can add secondary light in a way that complements neighboring buildings and public space.

## GUIDELINES

**Lighting Buildings.** Directing light toward the building façade or wall and not public space will accentuate architectural elements on the upper floors of a building and highlight historic façades, roof edges, store fronts, decorative details, signs, areas of intense color, and entrances.

**Lighting Constructed in Public Space.** Consulting with the Department of Transportation early in the design phase of traditional Chinese lighting elements that may involve public space – such as lanterns and festoons across alleys and streets – avoids unnecessary complications in the permit review process.

**Lighting For Pedestrians.** Lighting at the ground floor level that is secondary to streetlights and showcases Chinese elements and characters is a way to focus on pedestrians and incorporate it into the building's design.

**Lighting Window Displays.** Internally lighting show windows and storefront displays can be an effective way to invite long views into interior spaces and to add additional lighting and patterns to the sidewalk.

**Decorative Lighting.** Strategically using light in a way that complements neighboring buildings, adjacent businesses, diverse uses and residents will add to the vibrant street character of the area.



DC  
Chinese lantern street lights add to Chinatown's character.



DC  
Lighting buildings animates Chinatown's architecture and helps to create a dynamic streetscape at night.



DC  
Traditional Chinese forms can be inspiration for innovative and contemporary design.

# FENCES & RAILINGS

Traditionally, Chinese architecture incorporated decorative fences and railings around open walkways on upper levels of buildings, along raised terraces, at entrances and front steps, and as the focal points of gardens. In Chinatown today, fences and railings are more likely to be incorporated into roof terraces and green roofs, on balconies, at entrance ramps and steps, or around small front yards. While fences and railings perform an important and pragmatic function, they also present a great opportunity to express Chinese culture and enhance the character of Chinatown.

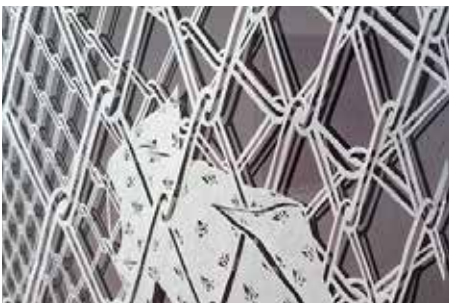
## PRINCIPLES



Gates and railings with Chinese designs often include geometric patterns.



Traditional Chinese fences and railings can inspire contemporary designs.



Modern materials and patterns can be used to create innovative and Asian-inspired designs.

- Fences and railings on buildings are specific architectural components with a utilitarian role that can be used to highlight Chinese art, symbols, and new and traditional Chinese design.
- Fences and railings located in public space have a stronger relationship to Chinatown's streets and park spaces than to the design characteristics of individual buildings.
- Fences and railings can be reinterpreted in contemporary design and also enhance the experience of Chinese culture.



Chinese symbols can be incorporated into any kind of fence or railing around a yard, tree box, or incorporated into the façade of a building.

## GUIDELINES

**Railings and Fences in Architecture.** Integrating railings into building façades is a way to add distinctive design elements that complement the overall building design and express Chinese art and culture.

**Railings, Fences and the Pedestrian Environment.** Including Chinese elements in railings at raised building entrances, exterior steps, and front porches focuses character defining features of a building in an area with the most pedestrian activity.

**Transparency.** Designing railing and fences that are either bold or refined and open or solid can convey information about Chinese culture; however, predominantly solid rails must have some level of transparency.

**Legibility from Street Level.** Incorporating railings at balconies and open walkways on upper floors that include bold Chinese design elements will ensure that they are easily seen from the street.

**Materials.** Using materials such as wood, metal, and stone or glass and space-age reinforced polymers in railings and fences can be used to communicate traditional or contemporary Chinese culture.

**Public Space Requirements.** Complying with the District’s public space regulations when designing fences surrounding landscaped front yards and that are in public space (i.e. 36 to 42” high and predominantly open) will result in fences that are designed as part of the continuous streetscape – however, subtle Chinese elements are encouraged.



Railings at building entrances are good opportunities to incorporate Chinese design elements.



Simply painting an ordinary railing with a color that is important to Chinese culture can reflect Chinese culture.



Bold patterns in balcony railings can evoke traditional Chinese designs and patterns.

# LANDSCAPES

Chinese gardens have traditionally been places for solitary or social contemplation of nature. As described earlier in this document in the section on *FUNDAMENTALS OF CHINATOWN'S CHARACTER AND STYLE*, the inspiration for Chinese gardens is often drawn from animals, plants, wind and water. In addition, classical gardens often incorporated architecture, painting, calligraphy, poems, carvings and plants. In an urban setting like Chinatown, there are few places to develop a Chinese garden as they are traditionally realized - but there are opportunities to create unexpected landscaped areas that incorporate classic and contemporary Chinese garden elements as part of new building design or renovation projects. These include roof gardens, terraces, and courtyards, as well as planters, tree boxes and balconies.



DC  
Planters at building entrances with tropical plants add to Chinese character.



Plants like bamboo are immediately associated with Chinese culture.

## PRINCIPLES

- Elements in Chinatown's public space – such as sidewalk paving, streetlights, street trees, and other street furniture – must comply with design standards established for Chinatown in the Downtown Streetscape Regulations.
- In public spaces such as a park or front yard, landscape elements can add to the Chinese character already established as part of Chinatown's streetscape palette.
- Incorporation of Chinese garden elements into courtyards, roof tops, lobbies, and large public gathering places can recreate and reinterpret traditional gardens in contemporary urban settings.



Figurative elements of plants and animals that are important to Chinese culture can be used as iconic symbols for a streetscape or garden.



## GUIDELINES

**Chinese Features in Landscapes.** Incorporating classic and contemporary Chinese landscape elements such as towers, pavilions, kiosks, terraces, waterside gazebos, covered corridors, water features, and bridges will enhance the experience of Chinese culture in Chinatown.

**Urban Chinese Gardens.** Including Chinese garden features into interior and exterior spaces of new buildings is a way to create a distinct Chinatown experience – possible locations include roof gardens, terraces, open courtyards, lobbies, atriums, or other large gathering places that establish the general design character of a building.

**Plant Material and Trees.** Using traditional Asian plant material – such as bamboo, dwarf varieties of plants, and other shrubs or trees native to Asia – is a way to add a distinctive plant palate to landscapes in Chinatown.

**Landscaping the Smallest Spaces.** Adding Chinese garden elements in small yard spaces along the street will complement the Chinese character of public space, defined by red brick paving and Chinese-lantern street lights.



*Choice of materials and designs of landscaping around plazas can evoke Chinese culture.*



*Creative use of roof tops and terraces are excellent places for Chinese gardens.*



*Creating small Chinese-themed gardens in courtyards, building lobbies, or atriums adds to the Chinese culture of Chinatown DC.*



*Classic and contemporary Chinese elements add character to Chinatown's streetscape.*

# ENTRANCES

Entrances to a building often receive greater design treatment since they typically provide the first impression of a residence or business. The design and location of entrances built along Chinese design principles may include cultural significance and subtle design features not readily recognized by western culture, but that greatly contribute to Chinese design character. For example, according to Feng Sui design principles, screen walls at entrances or primary entrances at the sides of buildings can be intended to disrupt the path of demons believed to travel in straight lines. Door gods – another Chinese custom of decoration at the entry – are also displayed on doorways to ward off evil and encourage the flow of good fortune.

## PRINCIPLES

- The Chinese character of building entrances and storefronts is created by a layering of elements such as signage, lattice work, lighting, awnings, canopies, and building materials.
- Small design elements at building or business entrances reinforce traditional Chinese practices or customs and add to Chinatown's pedestrian experience.
- The design and function of show windows and doors provide areas of prominence on the ground floor; they can define or minimize the distinction between public and private space and contribute to a dynamic and sensory environment found in Chinatowns all over the world.



Simple references to Chinese architecture can have a big impact at building entrances.



Use of color and placement of Chinese symbols at entrances add to the pedestrian experience.



Traditional Chinese forms can be inspiration for innovative and contemporary design.

## GUIDELINES

**Location of Entrances.** Locating at least one of the building's or business's entrances – preferably the main entrance – on a public street, courtyard, or plaza that is connected to and visible from a public street, can reflect Chinese traditions and contributes to an active and interesting public environment.

**Activating Streets.** Positioning building entrances so that they contribute to active streets and building façades will avoid long stretches of ground floor areas with little activity or interest.

**Chinese Design Elements at Entrances.** Concentrating architectural details, lighting, and colors at building entrances is a way to emphasize their presence along the street.

**Chinese Design Principles.** Using location, material, color, and design of elements at the building entrance to illustrate traditional Chinese building practice and customs will allow passersby an additional experience of Chinese culture.

**Recessed Entrance Doors.** Recessing doors at building entrances so that they do not swing into the sidewalk is a requirement in the Construction Code and reduces conflicts between pedestrians and customers entering or exiting a business or lobby.

**Grade Changes Located On Private Property.** Constructing building entrances to be flush with the adjacent sidewalk requires any grade change needed to access the ground floor from the sidewalk to be accommodated on private property.

**Porches, Steps, Stoops, and Show Windows.** Using these architectural features can result in a dramatic ground floor treatment and also activates the sidewalk and street.



Elements at entrances like screens are immediately recognizable as being Chinese.



Small details at building entrances can have a big impact in communicating Chinese character.



More subtle references to Chinese architecture can be appropriate for entrances to lobbies and residential buildings.

# AWNINGS AND CANOPIES

Awnings and canopies are such a dominant feature of Chinese architecture that some Chinese buildings appear to be nothing but a collection of tiled roofs and canopies. Awnings and canopies designed in the Chinese style, often with tiles and curving roof lines, are iconic features that contribute dramatically to the character of Chinatown. Awnings can also be used to give the impression that buildings are long and low, a basic tenant of early Chinese building designs. On some projects in Chinatown DC, contemporary awnings and canopies have been constructed of modern materials – such as steel and glass – yet they draw their inspiration from traditional Chinese forms.

## PRINCIPLES



Patterns and bold colors on awnings add to Chinese character and an active streetscape.

- Awnings and canopies are iconic features of Chinese architecture that are immediately recognized as defining features of Chinatown DC.
- Awnings and canopies— in either traditional or modern designs or materials – are readily expected architectural elements used for meeting the Chinese cultural design requirements for rehabilitation or new work in Chinatown.
- Awnings and canopies are highly visible building components that offer a great opportunity for innovation and creativity.



Names of businesses and street addresses are allowed on awnings and add to the character of Chinatown.



Modern and contemporary awnings can be iconic building features that evoke traditional Chinese building principles.

## GUIDELINES

**Iconic Chinese Design of Awnings and Canopies.** Incorporating awnings and canopies that reference Chinese architectural forms into ground floor façades and at building entrances reinforces the pedestrian scale and Chinese character of Chinatown DC.

**Reinforce Horizontal Lines.** Designing awnings and canopies as integrated components of building façades can emphasize horizontal lines at both the ground floor and roof line.

**Materials.** Using permanent building materials for awnings and canopies such as glass, metal, wood, terra cotta tile, or other highly durable and high-quality materials helps to create an enduring image of Chinatown; vinyl awnings are not recommended.

**Existing Architectural Details.** Attaching awnings and canopies to existing building façades in a way that does not obscure or damage existing architectural details ensures that the late-19th and early-20th century architectural features and Chinese design details are visible.



Contemporary materials can be used to create Chinese-inspired awnings that function.



Elements that support awnings are also important for defining Chinese character.

## HELPFUL HINTS

The District's standard regulations for awning and canopies apply in Chinatown. More information is available in the DC Municipal Regulations Title 12: Construction Code, Chapter 32A Encroachments.



There are a variety of awnings in Chinatown regulated by the Construction Code.



Chinese character can be created by simple building elements like small awnings.

# WINDOWS

Architectural styles vary throughout China in response to its many cultures and climates, but in South-East Asia a common response to hot and humid conditions includes spacious rooms with many doors and windows. Historically, paper screens and wooden grids were used within these large openings to provide privacy or protection. These screens evolved into a very sophisticated form of applied art known as Chinese lattices. Latticework designs varied with geometric patterns, images from nature, or references from literature or opera. They are used as decorative elements on all parts of a building – but particularly at windows – and their design can vary from very simple to complex.

## PRINCIPLES

- There are a wide range of window types, sizes, shapes, and placement within traditional and contemporary Chinese building design that offer inspiration for new construction and rehabilitation.
- Grills and latticework with Chinese figurative elements, stylized abstract and geometric elements, and Asian-inspired decoration evoke Chinese culture in Chinatown DC.
- Large window openings and window walls in building façades conceptually blur the line between public and private space at street level and help to activate Chinatown's street environment.



Traditional Chinese forms can be inspiration for innovative and contemporary design.



Open windows at the ground level create an appealing relationship to the street.



Color and the design of the entire window opening and surround can be used to include Chinese symbols and elements such as railings and medallions.

## GUIDELINES

**Street-Level Windows.** Including large openings, preferably operable, in show windows and lobbies is an effective way to maximize the interaction between ground floor spaces and the sidewalk.

**Adding Chinese Decorative Elements to Windows.** Layering Chinese detail to a building façade with screens over predominantly open windows and using traditional Asian-design motifs or contemporary interpretations of building openings is a way to meet the requirement for Chinese cultural elements in new building construction or rehabilitation in Chinatown.

**Inspiration.** Drawing from geometric patterns, images from nature, or allegorical references to Chinese culture as the inspiration for the design of new windows at the storefront and throughout a building façade will communicate Chinese culture.

**Materials.** Using window materials that are compatible with the architectural design of the façade – including the retention of wood windows in historic buildings or using replacements that are consistent with historic photographs – will help to interpret the evolution of Chinatown from a traditional late 19th-century commercial area to Chinatown DC and the entertainment district that it is today.

**Upper Level Windows.** Incorporating bold patterns into screens or surrounds on windows on upper floors will add Chinese design elements to a building façade that can be easily seen from the street.



*Architectural details surrounding windows is one place to incorporate Chinese design details.*



*Windows can be spaced to allow room for Chinese details on the upper floors of a building façade.*



*Traditional screens in large windows can provide inspiration for contemporary building construction and renovation.*

# BUILDING FAÇADES

The character of historic building façades in Chinatown is a combination of late-19th and early 20th-century construction plus the influence of changing uses and applied design details associated with the creation of Chinatown in 1931. The original design of these buildings followed traditional late-19th century American architectural practices that included a distinct ground floor, upper level, and roof line. In DC's Chinatown, Chinese design elements like tile awnings or canopies, signs, banners, window and door treatments, lighting, and Asian-inspired figurative elements were added during the 20th century once Chinese merchants and families moved into the area. The additive quality and layering of these Chinese features is a characteristic of these buildings, and the location of these cultural elements varies but is typically in one or more of the following locations: balconies, roof edges, entranceways, awnings, or in light fixtures, signage, or ornamentation at the base, on the window glass, or carved in stone.



The historic building façades in Chinatown are primarily vertical in orientation.

## PRINCIPLES

- Historic and modern buildings often have three-part façades – a ground floor, upper levels, and building top – that comprise the predominant character of buildings in Chinatown.
- The basic three-part façade of buildings and traditional building features provide an organizing framework for incorporating Chinese design elements, traditionally-inspired or contemporary. The vertical orientation of double-hung wood windows, signs, and bay projections used in historic late-19th century and early 20th-century buildings establishes the building form of residential and commercial buildings in Chinatown DC.
- Roofs including rails, covered terraces, roof edges, eaves, cornices, parapets, and other dramatic forms provide an exciting place to silhouette Chinese inspired features against the sky.



Historic and modern buildings in Chinatown follow a basic building arrangement that includes a base, middle, and top.



## GUIDELINES

### Ground Floor:

**Historic Buildings and Chinese Culture.** Protecting, restoring, and maintaining late-19th and early 20th century storefronts and ground floor levels in new construction and rehabilitation provides the traditional character and backdrop for an addition of the Chinese cultural layer.

**Concentrating Design Elements at the Street Level.** Including Chinese decorative elements at the street level of a façade - such as entryways that are level with the sidewalk; bay windows, porches, and stoops; a high percentage of glass in show windows, transom windows, and doors; and, recessed entryways with detailed floor surface of tile, terrazzo, or other similar decorative material – creates a ground floor façade that is pedestrian in scale.

**Contemporary Design and Materials.** Using Chinese-inspired contemporary materials and building methods that are compatible with existing historic building façades is an exciting design option that entirely new construction presents when they reinforce Chinese architectural character.

**Split-Level Entries.** Providing split level entries from the sidewalk to lower level spaces when it can be done on private property or when adjacent sidewalk widths can accommodate steps and ramps without impacting the flow of pedestrians continues a traditional building form that is particularly characteristic of the historic building pattern of Chinatown.

**Sensory Intensity.** Introducing Chinese cultural elements onto building façades in a way that defines a strong sense of center, layers design features onto traditional building forms, and uses Asian-inspired figurative or abstract elements adds to the sensory delight of Chinatown whether you are immediately in front of a building or several blocks away.

**Security Elements.** Incorporating any necessary security elements in a way that minimizes their appearance, such as security grates and retractable shutters that are more than 50 percent open and installed on the interior of a building façade, will ensure that they contribute positively to the street environment.



*Traditional building forms like shop windows add to the pedestrian scale of the street.*



*Below-grade entrances are characteristic of Chinatown DC.*



*The ground floor of commercial buildings in Chinatown typically have large storefront windows that are clearly differentiated from the rest of the building.*



*Rich details and color create an appealing experience on the sidewalk.*

## GUIDELINES

### Upper Levels:

**Decorative Chinese Elements.** Incorporating layers of Chinese elements and details – such as medallions, panels, banners, figurative elements, balconies, and lattice work – is valuable because it draws visual attention upward, and a vertical emphasis is part of the image of Chinatown.

**Window Openings.** As long as Chinese culture is expressed, designing the spacing, size, and configuration of fenestration and window walls with a traditional or contemporary approach are both acceptable for new construction in Chinatown.

**Shade and Shadow.** Using shade and shadow created by surface changes, projections, and Chinese details will differentiate sections of the building and increase visual interest on façades exposed to the sun.

**Activating Street Walls.** Blank walls provide an opportunity for incorporating murals and Chinese art, including abstract or figurative elements that reflect elements of nature; imagery from literature, art, or theater; or pattern work.



Details on upper façades should be bold so that they are easily seen from the street.



Banners extending to upper levels create a modern version of traditional verticality.



The upper levels of building façades are excellent locations for Chinese decorative elements such as brackets and banners.

GUIDELINES

**Building Top:**

**Traditional Elements at Building Tops.** Historical and contemporary interpretations of traditional building forms – such as towers, sculptural elements, decorative roof edges with curves, brilliantly colored tile, and covered walkways – offer ways for the building to meet the sky in a dramatic way.

**Figures Against the Sky.** Designing building tops with dramatic silhouettes and forms when viewed against the sky extends the drama and sensory stimulation of Chinatown all the way to the top of the building.

**Color and Materials.** Including intense color and polychromatic color schemes at the top of the building distinguishes Chinatown from other parts of DC.



*Traditional terra cotta tiles and sculptural figures against the sky.*



*Subtle design elements and symbols at the roof line can be Chinese in character.*



*Contemporary interpretations of traditional forms can add subtle Chinese character.*



*Bold colors and reinterpretation of traditional Chinese design features can become strong features of a building façade and create a dramatic roof line.*



*Cut-outs of traditional Chinese elements can create dramatic silhouettes against the sky.*

# MATERIALS

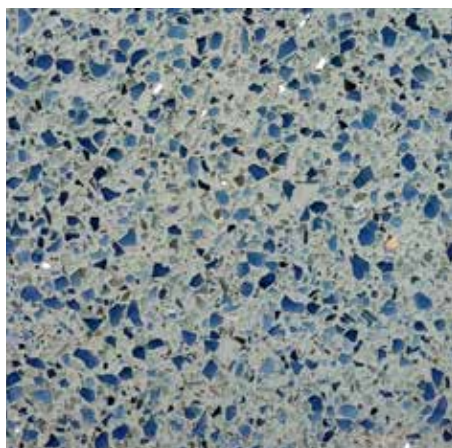
Chinatown DC is both a historic 19th and a contemporary 21st-century neighborhood; the choice of building materials used for a project depends on whether an existing building is being rehabilitated or if a new building is being constructed. Buildings that are part of the Downtown Historic District need care to ensure that compatible building materials are used that reflect traditional late-19th or early 20th century building practice, such as brick or stone, wooden windows, cast iron steps, or metal storefronts. On historic buildings, modern building materials can be used for signs or other architectural embellishments that reflect modern Chinese culture. When it comes to new construction or storefront rehabilitation in Chinatown, modern materials and creativity are encouraged. Both traditional and modern materials can be appropriate for buildings in Chinatown DC depending on the project. They reflect current building practices, including those associated with contemporary China.

## PRINCIPLES

- Brick, stone, metal, and wood are traditional building materials used in late-19th and early 20th-century buildings in Chinatown DC.
- Ultra-modern materials that are the product of industrialization and new technologies reflect modern and contemporary building practices used in China today and are common in contemporary projects.



Highly polished finishes give a contemporary and modern appearance to design elements.



Terrazzo floors and other modern finishes can represent modern Chinese building practices.



Material like brick are a traditional and can used in a contemporary way to create Chinese symbols and patterns.

## GUIDELINES

**Historic Materials.** Retaining, exposing, and replacing original materials on historic buildings through repair and restoration are the preferred approach when working on buildings in Chinatown, particularly in areas that are in the Downtown Historic District.

**Materials Traditionally Associated With Chinese Businesses in Chinatowns.**

Applying painted wood or marble to building exteriors were typical practices when 19th-century buildings were converted to house Chinese businesses in the first half of the 20th century, and these are materials that can be used to evoke that tradition today.

**Contemporary Materials.** Using highly reflective panels, artistic glass, patterned concrete, mass produced decoration, and engineered polymers to fabricate new façades or as accents on buildings can showcase contemporary building materials used in China today.

**Transparency.** Using large amounts of glass that allow views in and out of storefronts are ways to create a dynamic streetscape.



Ceramic tiles are a flexible building material that can be used to create intensely colored façades.



Terra cotta is an iconic Chinese building material used in awnings and roofs.

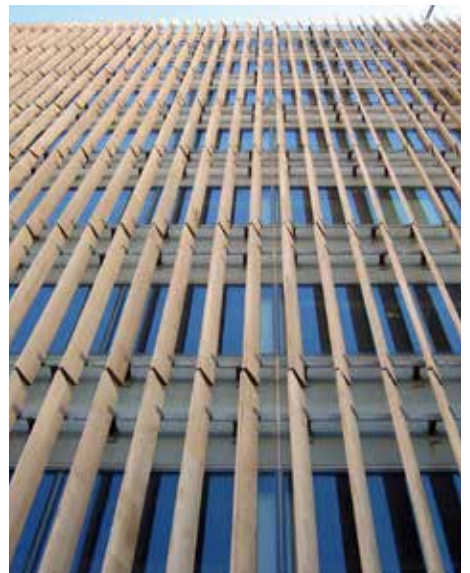
## HELPFUL HINTS

Examples of decoration in traditional Chinese buildings include:

1. Painted polychrome Dou Gong bracket sets and beams under cantilevered eaves;
2. Ceramic or brick wall surfaces decorated with flower patterns;
3. Carved marble balustrades; and,
4. Stone foundations or bases.



Ceramic tile on the exterior of commercial buildings provide intense color and can be highly reflective.



Wood is a material that evokes tradition but can be used in contemporary ways.





# 05 // APPENDIX:

## DOWNTOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

Chinatown's historic character is closely tied to the late 19th and early 20th century buildings that make up the Downtown Historic District. This designation requires a separate review of exterior alterations by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) to ensure that important characteristics of historic buildings are preserved. The Office of Planning's Historic Preservation Office can review and approve many types of work without referral to the HPRB for building permit applications for any type of exterior work or site features within the Chinatown area of the Downtown Historic District. The Chinatown Design Review takes into consideration the preservation constraints for historic buildings and encourages applicants to achieve an appropriate balance between potentially competing objectives.

It is acknowledged that buildings in the Downtown Historic District will be adapted and altered over time to accommodate new uses. The purpose of historic review is to ensure that when buildings are renovated and repurposed, character-defining features of historic buildings are preserved and alterations are compatible with the character of the structure and district. Chinese design motifs on these buildings reflect the "layering of history" and also contribute to the evolution of the neighborhood. New work should complement the architectural features of historic buildings.

Preservation of the exteriors and storefronts of these buildings will continue their contribution to the unique historic character of the downtown DC. Any building renovation or alteration that is intended to meet the design criteria for Chinese design character within Chinatown, no matter the planned use, must retain the overall design integrity of the historic building by protecting the original features and materials and respecting the traditional design elements.

### Preserve Original Façade Elements

Preservation of traditional façade elements found on existing buildings creates patterns along the face of the block that contribute to the overall historic character of the area. These elements may include but are not necessarily limited to:

- Storefront windows, including their component parts such as bases and trim;
- Recessed central entrance areas or angled entrances on corners;
- Transoms above entrance doors and storefront windows;
- Sign bands;
- Cornices, corbelling, front parapets and other decorative roof treatments;
- Vertical window patterns, shapes, and window sills;
- Pilasters and decorative brick or stone.

New elements that attempt to replicate historic elements, unless documented to have been present on the building, should be avoided. Do not apply theme designs that alter the original character such as coach lanterns, mansard roofs, wood shakes, non-operable shutters, and small-pane windows if they cannot be documented historically.

While it is not required, recreation of missing façade elements, when supported by documentation such as old photographs, may be appropriate. Where exact reconstruction is not practical, new simplified contemporary interpretations of the original details may be appropriate as long as the scale and character of the original detail is replicated. Preservation or restoration of ornamental cornices, belt courses, pilasters, window arches and frames are particularly encouraged. Adding elements with much more elaborate ornamentation than was originally found on the building façade is discouraged.



H Street NW, 1980



600 block of H Street, NW



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## CHINATOWN DESIGN REVIEW COORDINATION WITH HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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### Scenario 1: Applicant starts the Permit Application process at DCRA prior to Chinatown Design Review

1. When permit application is filed at DCRA Permit Center, the project is flagged for Chinatown and Downtown Historic District review.
2. Applicant is directed to Historic Preservation desk at Permit Center.
3. Historic Preservation staff advises applicant on whether project meets Historic Preservation review standards. Historic Preservation identifies constraints for project, if any, based on initial proposed design.
- 4a. If applicant is unaware of the Chinatown review process and has not incorporated Chinese design elements, Historic Preservation staff provides filing and review information and directs applicant to schedule review meeting with the Office of Planning Chinatown review staff prior to filing.
- 4b. If applicant has incorporated Chinese design elements, Historic Preservation staff accepts filing and forwards to the Office of Planning Chinatown review staff.
5. If Historic Preservation constraints are identified, applicant provides written description of how the historic preservation constraints affect the Chinese design character as part of submission.
6. Applicant follows steps 5-6-7 below.

### Scenario 2: Applicant starts the Chinatown Design Review prior to the Permit Application process at DCRA

1. Applicant contacts the Office of Planning Chinatown review staff to schedule preliminary review of design proposal.
2. The Office of Planning Chinatown review staff coordinates meeting with Historic Preservation staff and applicant.
3. The Office of Planning and Historic Preservation meet with applicant to review proposal for consistency with Historic Preservation and Chinatown standards, and to identify any Historic Preservation constraints.
4. Applicant submits design proposal at DCRA Permit Center addressing any constraints and incorporating Chinese design features.
5. The Office of Planning forwards Technical Report to the Chinatown Steering Committee for review.
6. If review comments are favorable by the Chinatown Steering Committee, the applicant applies for a permit. If additional review comments are presented by the Chinatown Steering Committee, applicant revises and reapplies to address concerns.
7. Permit application approved by Historic Preservation and the Office of Planning Chinatown review staff.

For more information on the historic preservation design review process, please visit the Office of Planning's website at <http://www.planning.dc.gov>.

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## MUNICIPAL REGULATIONS: CHINATOWN DESIGN REVIEW

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The DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) is the Agency within the District of Columbia government that issues Building Permits. The Permit Service Center reviews all permit application and refers all applications whose address is within the Chinatown boundary to the Office of Planning for the Chinatown Design Review Process.

The Director of Planning is required to review projects that DCRA identifies as located within the designated boundaries of Chinatown. Once an application is reviewed for completeness at DCRA, the Plan Review Coordinator will refer the project to the design review staff for Chinatown Design Review. The Office of Planning design review staff consults with the Chinatown Steering Committee prior to preparing the Director's approval or disapproval.

For more information visit the DCRA website: <http://dcra.dc.gov/dcra/cwp/view,a,1343,Q,602122,dcraNav,133408|.asp>

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## MUNICIPAL REGULATION: GALLERY PLACE PROJECT GRAPHICS

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A review process has been established related to the placement of outdoor graphics and visuals for the Gallery Place Project located in Chinatown, including, but not limited to: banners, digital screens, digital video monitors, theater marquees, fixed and animated signs for commercial establishments located within the project, projectors for projecting static and moving images onto the Gallery Place Project, interactive kiosks, and images projected onto the façade of the Gallery Place Project. For more information on the Gallery Place Project Review Procedures, visit our website at <http://www.planning.dc.gov>.

## MUNICIPAL REGULATIONS: DOWNTOWN STREETScape REGULATIONS

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The Downtown Streetscape Regulations were adopted in 2000, and were a collaborative effort of the Downtown BID and the Department of Transportation. Chinatown falls within the area covered by the Downtown Streetscape Regulations. To reinforce Chinatown as a special place, the regulations identify specific red brick pavers and ornamental light fixtures to be used in the area.

## RESOURCES

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### Office of Planning Historic Preservation Office

1100 4th Street, SW, Suite E650  
Washington, DC 20024  
[www.planning.dc.gov/hpo](http://www.planning.dc.gov/hpo)  
(202) 442-7600

Historic Preservation provides procedural, technical, and design guidance regarding repairs, alterations, additions and new construction affecting historic landmarks or properties within historic districts.

### Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

1100 4th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
[www.dkra.dc.gov](http://www.dkra.dc.gov)  
(202) 442-4400

DCRA regulates business activities, land and building use, construction safety, rental housing and real estate, alcoholic beverage control, and occupational and professional conduct within the District.

### Department of Transportation

2000 14th Street, NW, 6th Floor  
Washington, DC 20009  
[www.ddot.dc.gov](http://www.ddot.dc.gov)  
(202) 442-4670

DDOT is responsible for managing the use and occupancy of the city's public spaces. The Public Space Management Administration issues permits for outdoor seating and vending areas and manages their compliance with District regulations.

### Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs

[apia.dc.gov](http://apia.dc.gov)  
(202) 727-3120  
441 4th Street, NW  
Suite 805S  
Washington, DC 20001

Advises the Mayor, the DC Council, and the District government on the views, needs, and concerns of Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) in DC; organizes and facilitates for the API community programs on public safety, human rights, economic development, housing, employment, social services, public health, transportation, education, and multicultural development.

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**Department of Housing and Community Development**

1800 Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20020  
[www.dhcd.dc.gov](http://www.dhcd.dc.gov)  
(202) 442-7200

DHCD provides funds for community and economic development projects including storefront improvements in eligible areas.

**Chinatown Community Cultural Center**

616 H Street NW Suite 201,  
Washington DC 20001  
Phone: 202-628-1688  
[www.ccccdc.org](http://www.ccccdc.org)

The Chinatown Community Cultural Center (CCCC) seeks to promote and preserve Chinatown and its cultural identity while celebrating the rich Chinese culture, history, language, and heritage deeply embedded in this community.

**National Main Street Center**

National Trust for Historic Preservation  
1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.mainstreet.org](http://www.mainstreet.org)  
(202) 588-6219







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