

INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT

AN INVENTORY OF BUILDINGS AND URBAN DESIGN RESOURCES



HISTORIC SEATTLE PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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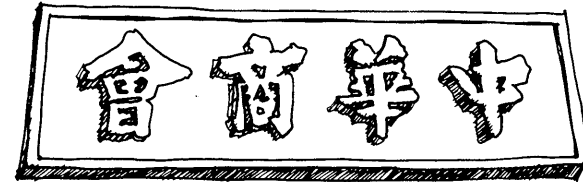
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SPECIAL CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Seattle's International District offers a unique example of the manner in which people of Asian cultures build and shape the physical aspects of their community within the context of an American city. The visitor walking through the International District is apt to ask "What physical characteristics of the streets and buildings are the result of the cultural backgrounds of the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and other ethnic groups that have lived there?" Also: "Which features are authentic, or play a meaningful role in the community's social patterns, and which are commercial stage settings for the outside visitor?" These questions are not only of academic importance but they are very germane to any future planning or building; for if one wishes to maintain the District's existing physical character and community structure, it is necessary to protect the key elements that give stability and identity.

A quick tour through the District reveals that its basic physical framework is typical of Seattle and other American cities. That is, the grid-iron street pattern lined with anonymous brick buildings and a scattering of wood frame houses is the result of standard American planning and building practices. The community's ethnic traditions are expressed in the District's townscape in two ways: (1) the manner in which the buildings are decorated and embellished by occupants and owners, and (2) the manner in which buildings' outside spaces are used and adapted by the community residents.

Perhaps the most obvious visual manifestation of the District's oriental cultural background are the many signs written in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. The calligraphy, which is still used on both brightly-painted panels denoting the location of prominent families, organizations, or businesses and also for posters advertising local sales or public events, is clearly an important visual tradition that should be encouraged to continue.



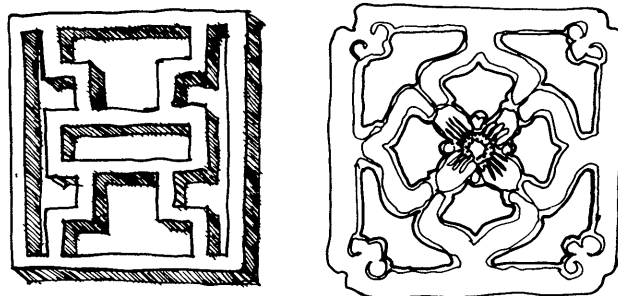
CALIGRAPHIC SIGN

Another common building feature unique to the International District are the many balconies located on the upper stories of the brick buildings. Belonging to either a private family or club, the balconies follow a tradition in Southern China of providing cool and pleasant outdoor living space overlooking the street actively below. Existing balconies merit conscientious maintenance and set an exemplary pattern for new apartment construction.



BALCONY OF CHINESE MASON'S HALL

Besides the balconies and calligraphic signs, there are a variety of other building details such as lights, ornamentation and facade treatments which have been added to otherwise anonymous brick buildings. Some of these details appear quite authentic, while others are less convincing in their attempt to give an Asian quality to their business. The International District Special Review Board is presently attempting to identify those types of architectural and design elements that are appropriate in the community. One category that does seem appropriate in a variety of situations are the designs drawn from traditional oriental lattice work. Examples of such designs can be found throughout the District in balcony railings, facade ornamentation and tile ornament, and opportunities exist for its use in new construction.



LATTICE WORK DESIGNS USED IN CERAMIC TILE AND FACADE TREATMENT.

A general physical characteristic of the District that deserves note is the small scale of its street furniture, signing, parks, shops, and restaurants. The fact that such elements relate more to the pedestrian than the automobile in their size and orientation is very important in fostering a sense of identity and community. With this fact in mind, the Special Review Board is making an effort to maintain the small, pedestrian scale of the King Street core.

While the above features are important in creating a visual identity, more important to the community's social structure are the special activities to which the physical setting has been

adapted. The several halls and meeting places of the family and social societies located within anonymous-looking apartment or hotel buildings are an example of this. These family associations and "longs" have always played an important role in the community and their headquarters are often elaborately decorated. Often the only external indication of these spaces are the decorated balconies mentioned above. A more visually obvious manifestation of ethnic traditions are the many small shops offering special goods and services such as the import groceries on King Street, the herbalists, and the import trading companies.



TYPICAL SMALL STOREFRONT

There is an interesting reason for two named alleys in the District: Canton Alley and Maynard's Alley. During the periods of heavy Chinese immigration, many newly-arriving families were forced to find temporary housing in the back lots and rooms along the alleys of other residences, a pattern common in Asian countries. Maimen, attempting to deliver mail to these families, had a difficult time locating the proper alleys. Therefore, the alleys were given names to help solve the problem.



Of course there are several physical elements which are of special cultural significance. The Chong Wa Benevolent Society Building has served as a school and an important social and cultural center for Chinese families. The Wing Luke Memorial Museum, founded in memory of City Councilman Wing Luke, provides a cultural focus. The old Astor Hotel, a former Japanese community center, still has an auditorium with a stage backdrop decorated with the names of Japanese shops.

The long stairs up to the main floor of the Nichiren Buddhist Church are an interesting manifestation of a cultural tradition. The church appears to be a very ordinary western-style building, awkwardly situated so that the entry is elevated uncomfortably above the street level. In actuality, the steep stairway follows the traditional configuration of Buddhist temples in Japan.



NICHIREN BUDDHIST CHURCH

Another important element is the "Information Board" at the corner of King Street and 7th Avenue, which for years has served as a public information kiosk.

Two new parks have recently been completed which relate to the District's Asian character. Hing Hay Park, besides providing an excellent, heavily-used community focal point, also contains an authentic Chinese pavilion designed by a Taiwan architect. The shrine was a gift of the city of Taipei and was built in the Republic of China and assembled at the present site under the supervision of the architect.

Kobe Terrace Park features a fine Yuki Midoro, or "snow viewing lantern," which was a gift from the citizens of Kobe, Japan. The lantern is an unusually large and fine example of its type; there are few, if any, other such lanterns in the Western Hemisphere. As an urban artifact, it symbolizes the ties of friendship and trade with the people of Japan and the cultural origins of our Japanese-American citizens.



YUKI MEDORO

The history of the International District is characterized by alternating periods of settlement by Asian immigrants and their subsequent evacuation by local authorities. Many of these periods are punctuated by hostile racial discrimination and legislation. Thus, the District's history is primarily the story of the efforts of Asian-Americans and other ethnic groups to build a stable community despite opposition from dominant segments of society.

Seattle's first Chinese community or "Old Chinatown" was not located at its present site but centered on Second and Washington Avenues, at the heart of old Seattle. The Chinese came to Washington territory in the 1860's, nearly two decades after the first Chinese immigrants arrived in California, where they worked as laborers in mines, industries, laundries and on farms. When economic difficulties caused a severe shortage of jobs there in the 1850's, the resulting hostile and racist sentiments drove the Asians north where work was plentiful and laborers needed. Seattle's first Chinese settlers came to man the lumber mills, the fishing boats and to provide domestic service and help on the construction of the railroad. A few merchant and manufacturing shops were established as well as several boarding-houses which provided the immigrants with shelter and some sense of community.

During the 1880's, the four hundred Chinese living in the Puget Sound area met with forceful hostilities when a nationwide depression caused the total shutdown of hundreds of factories and mines all over the country. The completion of the Northern Pacific and Canadian Pacific Railroads threw thousands of white and Chinese men out of work, swelling the labor market in the Northwest in particular. The frustrated anger caused by this widespread unemployment was directed at the Chinese immigrant laborers.

By September 1885, after outbreaks of violence in Issaquah and Black Diamond, anti-Chinese sentiment was growing in Seattle and caused Mayor Henry Yesler to recommend the peaceful removal of all the Chinese in the city. Those who brought Yesler's proposal too leniently formed the Anti-Chinese Committee, demanding that the Orientals be driven out within the month. When the citizens of Tacoma succeeded in forcefully evicting the Chinese in their town, the tension in Seattle increased dangerously, inspiring the state's governor to send for state troops to protect the Chinese; which, in fact, they failed to do. When the steamer, the *Queen of the Pacific*, en route to San Francisco docked in Seattle on February 7, 1886, the anti-Chinese feelings had peaked. Chinese seamen and shop owners, within a few years some Chinese returned and along with the Native American Indians and Blacks created the multi-national and multi-racial character for which the International District is known.

Japanese immigrants soon arrived in Seattle to fill the vacancy left by the Chinese, taking over their dwellings and jobs as farmhands, domestic servants, laundries and shop owners. Within a few years some Chinese returned and along with the Native American Indians and Blacks created the multi-national and multi-racial character for which the International District is known.

During the next few decades, Chinatown grew slowly with new immigrants from China, Japan and the Philippines. New shops,

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The International District, also known as Chinatown, is unique in that it is a community with distinct ethnic cultural associations and social patterns which are reflected in its physical environment. Equally as important is the fact that the International District has a continuous history as a viable and lively inner-city community. Many Seattle residents now living both inside and outside the community have vivid memories of the life there from the 1900's to the present.

Because of the International District's unique role within the city, a meaningful description of its physical characteristics must acknowledge its historical, social, and cultural contexts. Consequently, this report has included a more extensive community history than in other community inventory reports, as well as a section on the area's special characteristics which are derived from the ethnic and cultural background of its residents. There is also listed on the map a special category of buildings that may not be of great architectural significance, yet which are important because of their historical or social role in the community. Historical information on this category of buildings was gathered by the staff and volunteers of the Wing Luke Memorial Museum.

The District is bounded on the north by Yesler Way and the Central Business District. To the west are the railroad lines and the Pioneer Square area. Dearborn Street and the industrial belt form the southern boundary. The I-5 Freeway structure cuts through the eastern portions of the community with 12th Avenue as the eastern boundary. Jackson Street is the main East-West arterial connecting the District with the Central Area and the pioneer Square District, and Fourth Avenue is the primary link north to the Central Business District and south to the industrial belt.

HISTORY

restaurants, hotels and boarding-houses grew up to accommodate this mainly male and single population. In 1910, the Jackson Street Regrading Project removed nearly two million cubic yards of soil from the rise just north of Dearborn Hill to the tidelands below. Chinese and Japanese merchants shifted their businesses to the newly-paved King Street area and their clientele gradually followed. Goon Dip, one of the area's leading businessmen established the Chinese Consulate offices in the Seattle and in 1914 built the Milwaukie Hotel, a keystone in the area's development.

The Kwong Yick Investment Company developed a commercial building in 1910 and another in 1915 in the 700 block of King Street, which housed several of the areas most important businesses.

In the 1920's two schools, the Chong Wa Benevolent Society and the Chinese Baptist Church were founded, establishing the permanency and cultural importance of the area. Growth was hampered, however, by legislation forbidding foreign-born Japanese to own land and foreign-born Asians from receiving American citizenship.

In 1941 the attack on Pearl Harbor incited widespread anti-Japanese feeling in the U.S. Public and military opinion doubted Japanese loyalty to the Allied cause and often accused the Japanese in America of being subversively responsible for the raid. "In the interest of national security," Executive Order # 9066, signed by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, called for the evacuation and internment of all West Coast Japanese, both American and foreign-born. Despite protests and formal petitions by the faculty members and students of the University of Washington, Japanese Seattlites were detained at Camp Harmony near Puyallup or sent to Idaho for the duration of the War.

The post-war monetary reimbursements that were provided were minimal and could not absorb the material or personal losses sustained by the Japanese-Americans. Many families could not or preferred not to return to Seattle. The result was a depletion in the wealth and population of the International District leaving a majority of elderly, poor, and single men.

In recent years, the construction of I-5 cut through the area, destroying homes and businesses, and it now acts as a barrier between the eastern part of the neighborhood near 12th Avenue and the west. A further disruption to the communal and cultural continuity of the International District is the planned construction of the domed stadium which has introduced problems of traffic congestion, and land speculation.

There is the possibility that the newly-generated influx of people into the city will infuse commercial and cultural interest into the International District. This could result in a rejuvenated economy that would be capable of supporting restoration of buildings and further expansion of cultural and community facilities. If realized, these prospects could insure the continuing life of a district that is among the oldest and historically dynamic in Seattle.

Sources:

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Morgan, M., *Skid Road* (New York, 1960) pp. 67-107
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GENERAL DESCRIPTION (CONT.)

community services, and residential amenities. Unfortunately, this pattern is being threatened by the deterioration and closure of much of the existing housing. Recent changes in fire, safety, and health requirements of the building codes and increased construction costs have made it more difficult for landlords to maintain inexpensive housing. Moreover, the maintenance of many buildings has been neglected to the point where rehabilitation would require excessive rents beyond the means of the existing residents. Without sufficient housing opportunities, the area's local retail services and businesses will be hampered by the lack of local patrons. The proximity of the Kingdome has introduced other use patterns as well. Although some new subsidized residential units have been built and more have been planned, it becomes increasingly important to keep the original hotels and apartments operating in order to provide continuity both in the physical environment and in the social patterns of the local residents.

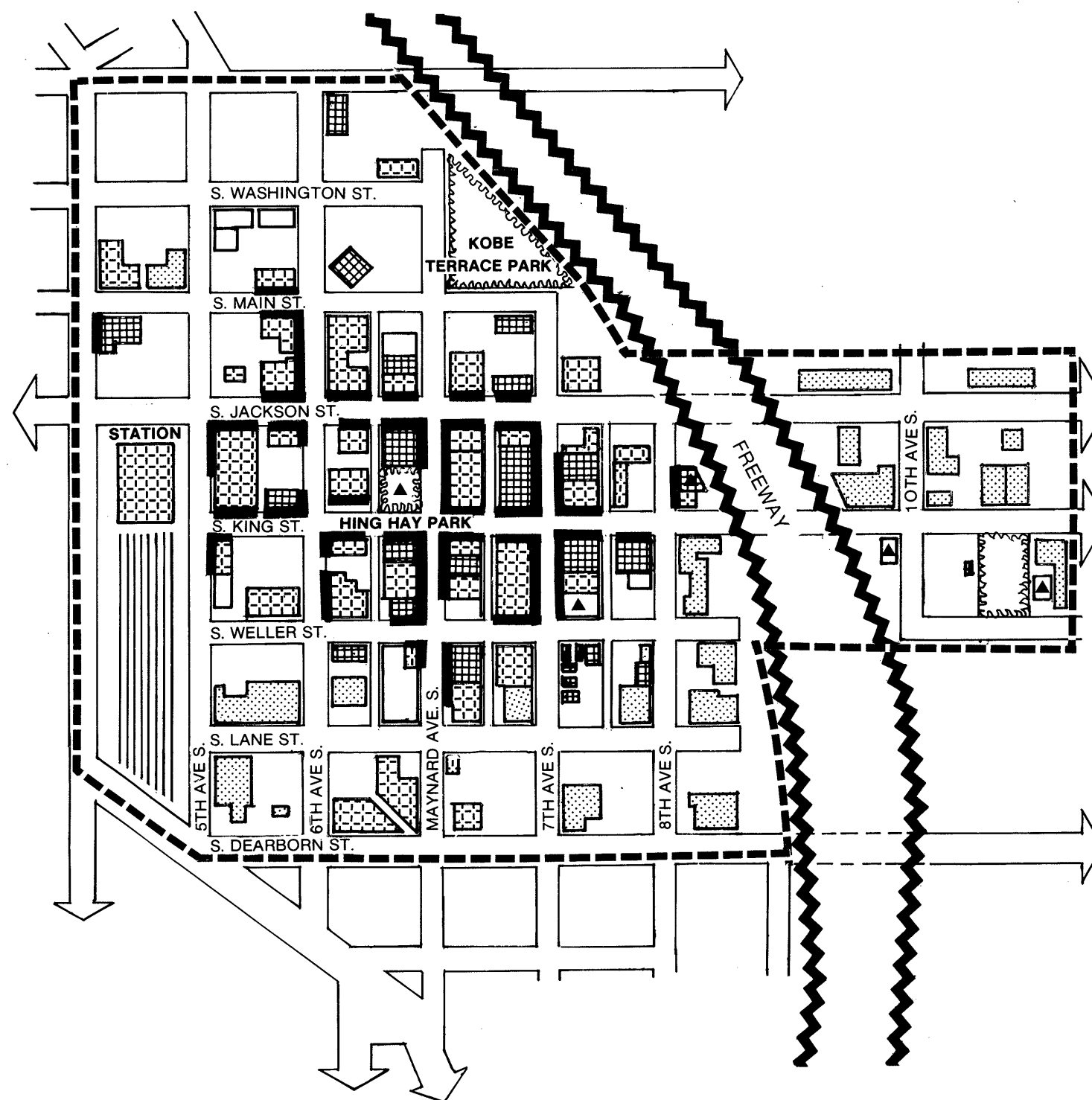
The area's commercial structure is quite diversified with the local businesses ranging from tiny corner groceries for a local clientele, to restaurants and Asian specialty shops serving the entire city, and also a variety of light industries. This diversity of commercial enterprises is certainly an asset, especially since the smaller community-oriented shops and services are concentrated close to the center, while the residential areas and the industrial activities are located around the periphery.

There are several recent developments which undoubtedly have an impact on the District. The most unpredictable impacts are those caused by the new Kingdome stadium. It is still too early to ascertain what long-range effects the stadium will have on the District, although it appears to have increased land speculation and real estate prices in the area; also, parking and traffic problems on Stadium use days are evident.

Another, more positive development is the establishment of a special review board which is reviewing and controlling new physical changes such as signage, bulk and scale requirements for development in an effort to maintain and enhance the District's unique characteristics. There is also a street improvement program scheduled for 1977, and plans are being laid for a new community center in the Bush Hotel.

As stated earlier, the International District has a unique set of physical and social qualities which provide a wide range of directions for the future. Because of its existing residential orientation and neighborhood-oriented businesses, it has the potential to become a very attractive inner-city residential community, drawing families back into the area and serving as a model for the revitalization of other areas. Because of its colorful historical and ethnic associations, the International District could become a more vital tourist center. New businesses and commercial activities could be attracted to the area, taking advantage of the proximity to the Central Business District and the industrial belt. Development of these potentials may not be entirely desirable, but do indicate the variety of alternatives available.

On the other hand, there are a number of problems. Deterioration and closure of existing housing threatens the community's residential core. The impacts from the Kingdome pose presently unidentifiable problems, although it is recognized that new developments often function to the detriment of existing conditions. Obviously, future plans must be sensitive not only to the area's physical characteristics but also to its social context. Thus there are many problems which require important decisions and much work by the community leaders, city planners, and local residents of the International District.



VISUAL STRUCTURE MAP

LEGEND

- Residential or Residential and Commercial Uses
- Retail Service or Office Uses
- Industrial or Warehousing Uses
- Parks
- Pedestrian Oriented Streetscapes
- Community or Pedestrian Oriented Facilities