



# CHINATOWN DESIGN GUIDELINES



Planning Department

CITY of BOSTON

# DESIGN GUIDELINES

These design guidelines provide direction as to how new projects can respectfully enhance Downtown’s unique and historic urban fabric, effectively activate the area and revitalize the public realm, and achieve sustainability and resiliency goals.

The guidelines are divided into 5 sections to focus on the following key areas:

1. Scale, Massing, & Articulation
2. Active Ground Floors & Loading
3. Public Realm
4. Climate Resilience & Sustainable Development
5. Historic Context

## How to use:

The guidelines are intended for City staff as well as developers, architects, and community members to help shape and evaluate projects in the area. They will be used and enforced when projects undergo the BPDA and BLC design review process, as outlined in this chapter. During this process projects must demonstrate with a context analysis and supportive materials how the project fulfills the five key sections covered in these design guidelines.

**SECTIONS 1-4:** General design guidelines that apply across all of Downtown.

**SECTION 5:** Additional location specific design principles and historic context to guide projects in each Downtown character area.

## Prioritizing Adaptive Reuse and Conducting Context Analysis:

While many of these guidelines provide direction for new construction, projects Downtown should foremost prioritize the adaptive reuse of existing buildings to maintain not only the area’s historic fabric and character but also lower embodied carbon and significantly further sustainable development. Demonstrating a clear understanding of a project’s context is critical. Projects should:

- a. Analyze the surrounding built context and public realm, consulting with the Office of Historic Preservation to identify key historic and cultural assets that the project will impact and enhance.
- b. Examine and refer to existing historic surveys and resources for the site and surrounding buildings, including:
  - Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) data and resources
  - Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS) data
  - National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) resources
- c. Create relevant elevations, site and context plans, massing studies, and street views that illustrate the project’s relationship to the surrounding context.



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TOW ZONE  
No Parking  
Parking  
2 Hour Limit  
4am - Midnight

STOP

STOP

Food Court

# Design Guidelines

## Historic Context | Introduction

**This chapter provides historic context and additional location-specific design principles for each character area. These more place specific guidelines overlap significantly with the general design guidelines that apply across Downtown, and they should be used together in shaping and evaluating projects.**

The historic districts, buildings, and public spaces of Downtown can be understood as an accumulation of layers over time. Nearly every style of American architecture and every decade since the 1700s is represented in its architecture. Taken as whole, Downtown Boston is a district rich in history. At the same time, each neighborhood displays characteristics that make it distinct. These traits might include block structure, street types, parcel size, building heights, architectural styles, historical eras, or building materials.

While this undoubtedly makes it a treasure, it does not make it a museum; it is a city that is very much alive, each generation adding its layers to the tapestry.

An understanding of this historic context should not be viewed as a ceiling that prevents creative growth but rather as a springboard to thoughtful development, respectful of its context while firmly of its place and time. The desire to protect historic buildings, landmarks, and cultural areas should be regarded not as an impediment but as an intelligent opportunity that can be leveraged to mold a better future.

### What is “historic”?

Within the study area, “historic” often refers to formally designated structures and areas, as well as often overlooked older buildings and sites that have architectural, cultural, and historical significance to an era or event. Areas like the Wharf District and the Ladder Blocks have some of Boston’s oldest buildings. Alongside

these sites there are also notable collections of modern and post-modern era structures, which, now seventy and thirty years old, respectively, should also be considered historic. In addition to buildings, historic site features such as granite slab sidewalks should be considered in evaluating historic context.

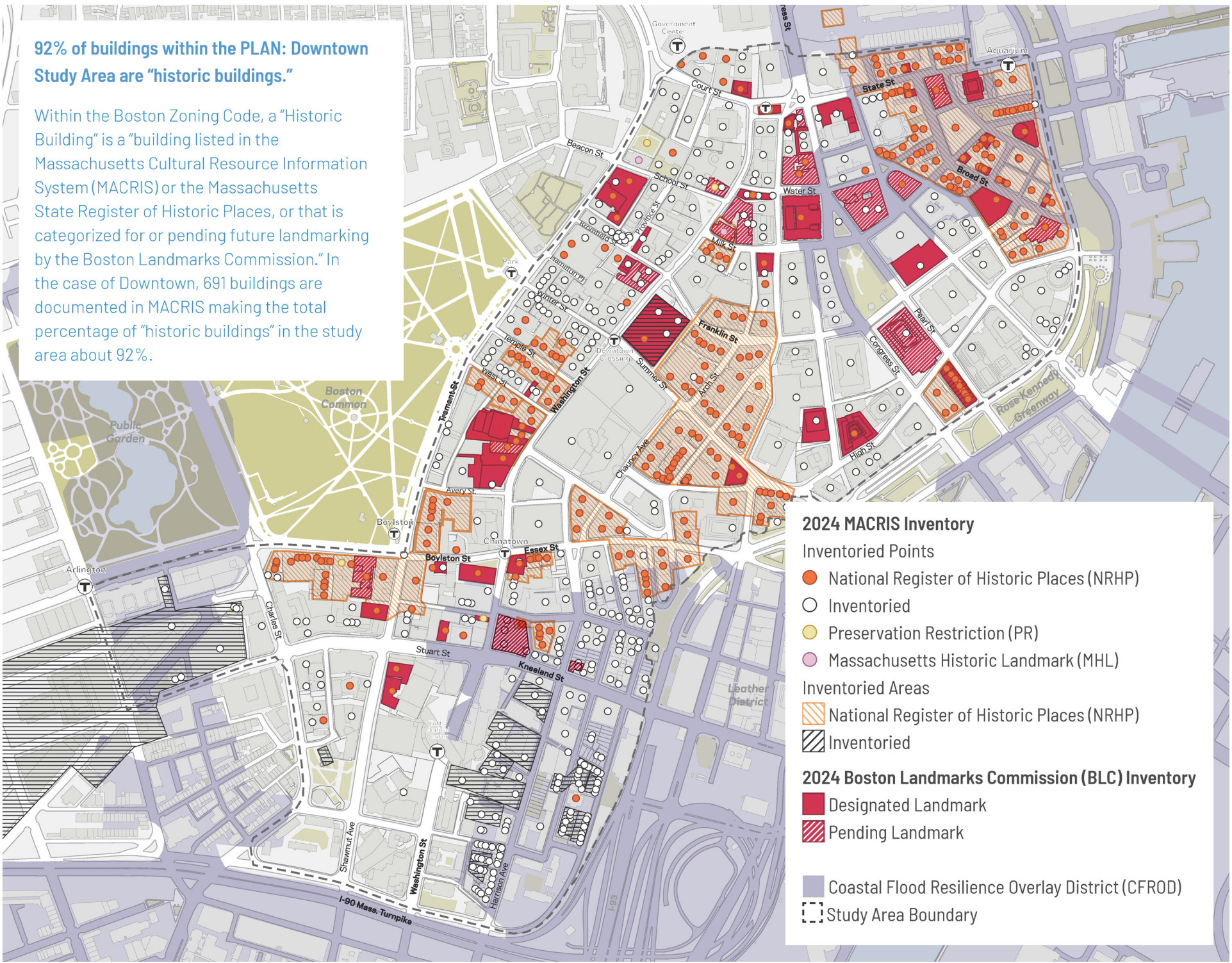
For the most part, the district’s historic buildings have been documented; however, work to expand and update surveys are necessary. When evaluating a site’s historic significance and conducting site analysis, refer to MACRIS survey information as well as BLC and NRHP resources.



Overlay of PLAN: Downtown study area and Character Areas on historic map of 17th century topography and 19th century streets

**92% of buildings within the PLAN: Downtown Study Area are “historic buildings.”**

Within the Boston Zoning Code, a “Historic Building” is a “building listed in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS) or the Massachusetts State Register of Historic Places, or that is categorized for or pending future landmarking by the Boston Landmarks Commission.” In the case of Downtown, 691 buildings are documented in MACRIS making the total percentage of “historic buildings” in the study area about 92%.



**2024 MACRIS Inventory**

Inventoried Points

- National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)
- Inventoried
- Preservation Restriction (PR)
- Massachusetts Historic Landmark (MHL)

Inventoried Areas

- ▨ National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)
- ▨ Inventoried

**2024 Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) Inventory**

- Designated Landmark
- ▨ Pending Landmark

- Coastal Flood Resilience Overlay District (CFROD)
- ▭ Study Area Boundary

## Design Guidelines

# Historic Context | Chinatown

### Proposed projects in Chinatown should enhance the rich historic urban fabric that has served as a social, cultural, and economic hub for generations of immigrants and their families.

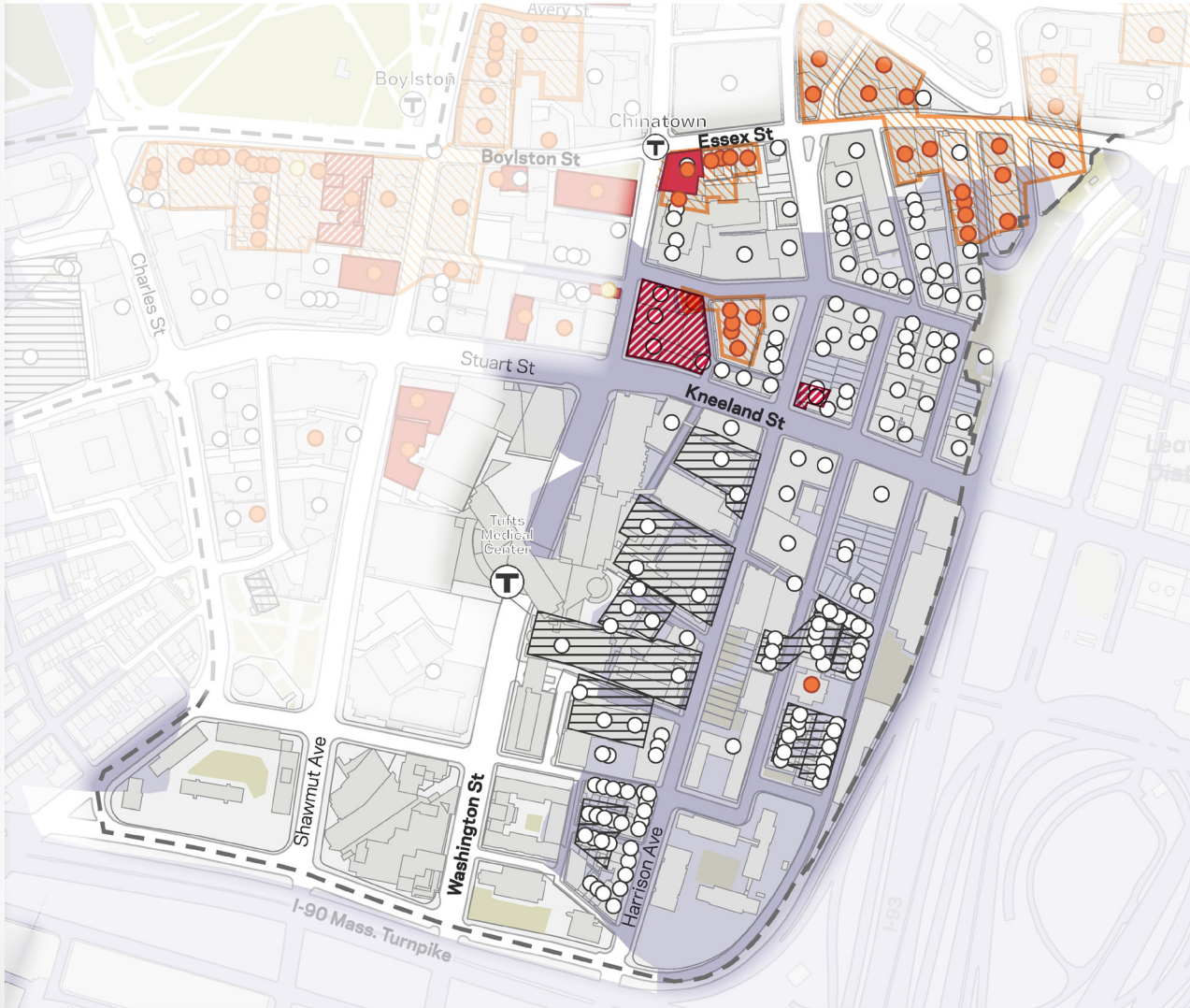
Today, Chinatown covers several distinct areas defined by its vibrant mix of uses, building types, street patterns, and layered history. These areas include:

- The dense and active Essex St and Washington St corridors
- The mixed-use Chinatown core centered around Beach St and Harrison Ave
- The clusters of historic rowhouse blocks dating back to Chinatown's beginnings
- The large modernist-era blocks, including residential tower developments south of Kneeland St

Chinatown first emerged in the 1870s in Boston's South Cove area, a section of Boston Harbor filled in to make way for railroads and row houses. Unlike the fan-shaped street patterns of Downtown to the north, the South Cove area featured a regular street grid, which remains visible today in the long, narrow blocks south of Essex Street between Harrison Avenue and Albany Street. Over time, some row houses in the area were replaced by larger blocks of garment industry mercantile buildings and light manufacturing structures, especially along Essex Street and Kneeland Street. South of Kneeland, much of the fine-grained, 19th-century

fabric was replaced with modernist blocks, including Tufts Medical Center, the Josiah Quincy School, and large-scale residential towers. Tufts Medical Center also replaced some of that smaller-scale urban fabric, although this hospital use has been in the community for over 100 years, originally as the Boston Dispensary dating back to 1796. Today, the built environment of Boston's Chinatown reflects a rich mosaic of building types, materials, scales, storefronts, open spaces, and cultural spaces, underscoring the neighborhood's rich history and the need for thoughtful design guidelines to preserve its unique character while guiding future growth.





**2024 MACRIS Inventory**

Inventoried Points

- NRHP
- Inventoried
- PR
- MHL

Inventoried Areas

- ▨ NRHP
- ▨ Inventoried

**2024 BLC Inventory**

- Designated Landmark
- ▨ Pending Landmark

- CFROD
- ▭ Study Area

## Chinese Family, Village, and Merchant Associations have played an integral role in the history and development of Boston's Chinatown since its beginnings in the late 1800s.

Chinese Family, Village, and Merchant Associations have played an integral role in the history and development of Boston's Chinatown since its beginnings in the late 1800s. They formed largely as a result of anti-Chinese hate, and grew as more immigrants moved into Boston through the 1900s. A notable association, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), was first established in 1890, and became fully incorporated in 1923. CCBAs were also established in major cities across the country, and served as a unifying force for the many emerging family, village, and merchant associations. These associations provide a social and financial support system, rooted in stabilizing both new immigrants and longtime residents and businesses.

Boston's Chinese Associations also have ties to other cities across the United States. Associations that are established in multiple cities will occasionally meet at regional or national conferences, sharing ideas and experiences from their respective Chinatowns. Associations participate and contribute to the Chinatown community through scholarships for students, mutual aid, social gatherings, and providing residential units and commercial spaces. They also hold philanthropic relationships with community organizations, schools, and nursing homes.



10 Tyler Street, 1997 (source: MACRIS)



77 Harrison Avenue, 1979 (source: MACRIS)

These associations own one or more properties within Chinatown, often to have space for meetings and events, but also as a source of income through renting out generally low cost housing units and commercial space. Owning their own properties means associations are able to keep their roots in Chinatown, directly serve their members, and provide services to the broader Chinese community in perpetuity. These properties are spread throughout the neighborhood, but most prominent in the commercial core of Chinatown, around Beach Street, Harrison Avenue, Tyler Street, and Hudson Street. The buildings are most commonly four or five stories, sometimes with a small commercial space on the ground floor



Yee Fung Toy Association of New England

and/or garden level. Buildings that house the primary office for the association have distinct Chinese signage on the first or second floors, and can be seen interspersed throughout the neighborhood.

Family, Village, and Merchant Associations have always been an integral part of Chinatown's history as key anchors in the community. They will continue to be an important part of Chinatown's future as the neighborhood remains a hub for social and cultural connectivity, and as these associations seek to empower their communities economically and socially.



Chinese Masonic Lodge

# Design Guidelines

## Historic Context | Chinatown



1

## Find mixed-use growth and adaptive reuse opportunities along Chinatown's Essex Street edge and Harrison Avenue gateway.

Essex Street forms the northern edge and serves as a gateway to the Chinatown neighborhood, particularly where Harrison Ave widens at Essex Street, encompassing Phillips Square. This Essex Street edge presents opportunities for both the reuse of historic mercantile buildings and the redevelopment of several vacant parcels. These efforts can help the transition between larger Downtown blocks to the north and smaller-scale urban fabric of Chinatown's commercial core more gradually, while still encouraging the preservation of these post-industrial



2

buildings. There are several late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century buildings clustered along Essex Street that offer key opportunities for adaptive reuse. Some of these buildings have already been converted into apartments or new offices and are officially highlighted as part of the Textile National Historic Register District. Additions to buildings and facadectomies, where a building's facade is preserved with a new structure behind or within it, such as that of the Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center, provide further opportunities to increase density while preserving historic facades. Adaptive reuse is encouraged, but redevelopment may be preferred when the cost of renovations or facadectomies is significant. Redeveloping underutilized parcels along Essex Street can also help fill gaps in the historic urban fabric with contextual stepbacks that mitigate height impact and tie new development to the scale of neighboring historic buildings.



**2024 MACRIS Inventory**

- NRHP
- Inventoried
- PR
- MHL
- ▨ NRHP
- ▨ Inventoried

**2024 BLC Inventory**

- Designated Landmark
- ▨ Pending Landmark
- CFROD
- ▭ Study Area

# Design Guidelines

## Historic Context | Chinatown

### Maintain the small scale, rhythm, and vibrancy of facades and storefronts in Chinatown's mixed-use core.

Chinatown's mixed-use core is primarily situated south of Essex Street, and mostly along Beach Street and Harrison Avenue. This area is characterized by its vibrant mix of ground-floor shops and restaurants and highlights the range of building types in Chinatown, from larger mercantile buildings concentrated west of Harrison Ave to smaller row buildings east of Harrison. The brick, mixed-use row

buildings, most prominently lining Tyler Street and Hudson Street, feature ground-floor and half-basement commercial spaces that activate the sidewalk and offer a wide range of uses, including restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, beauty salons, travel services, and community associations. Many of these buildings span multiple parcels, with narrow storefronts, stoops, and entryways that break up the facade. Larger commercial buildings with wider street frontages maintain the dynamic facade rhythm established by smaller buildings and shop spaces through careful facade articulation. New projects should preserve the scale of ground-floor commercial spaces, using signage, fenestration, and facade elements to continue the fine-grained storefront patterns that enrich the area.



1



2



3



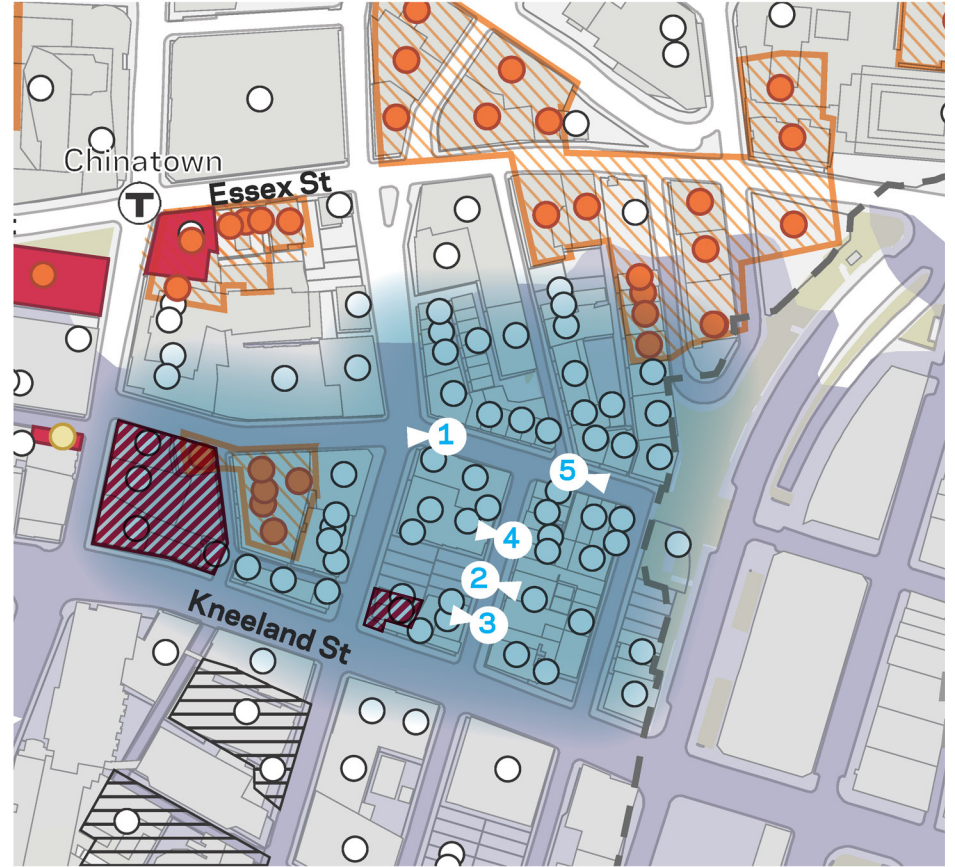
4



4



5



**2024 MACRIS Inventory**

- NRHP
- Inventoried
- PR
- MHL

- ▨ NRHP
- ▨ Inventoried

**2024 BLC Inventory**

- Designated Landmark
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- CFROD
- ▭ Study Area

# Design Guidelines

## Historic Context | Chinatown

### Maintain the scale and character of the clusters of historic rowhouses throughout Chinatown.

Chinatown's rowhouses date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with many originally tenements for the neighborhood's immigrant workers. Areas with some of the most contiguous rowhouses include blocks south of Kneeland Street along Tyler Street and Harrison Avenue. Located on narrow, small parcels dating back to the area's original street grid, the rowhomes range from four to five stories and, unlike the mixed-use row buildings north of Kneeland, are predominantly residential with small rear yards. Some of the rowhouses along Harrison Avenue and Tyler Street have small commercial ground-floor uses, while other secondary streets like Johnny Court, feature shorter single-family and two-family rowhomes. Other notable rowhouse areas include blocks within the more mixed-use core, like Oxford Place and a portion of Oxford Street. Any alterations or small additions to historic rowhouses should prioritize maintaining the scale and character of these historic brick structures through their narrow width and built form.

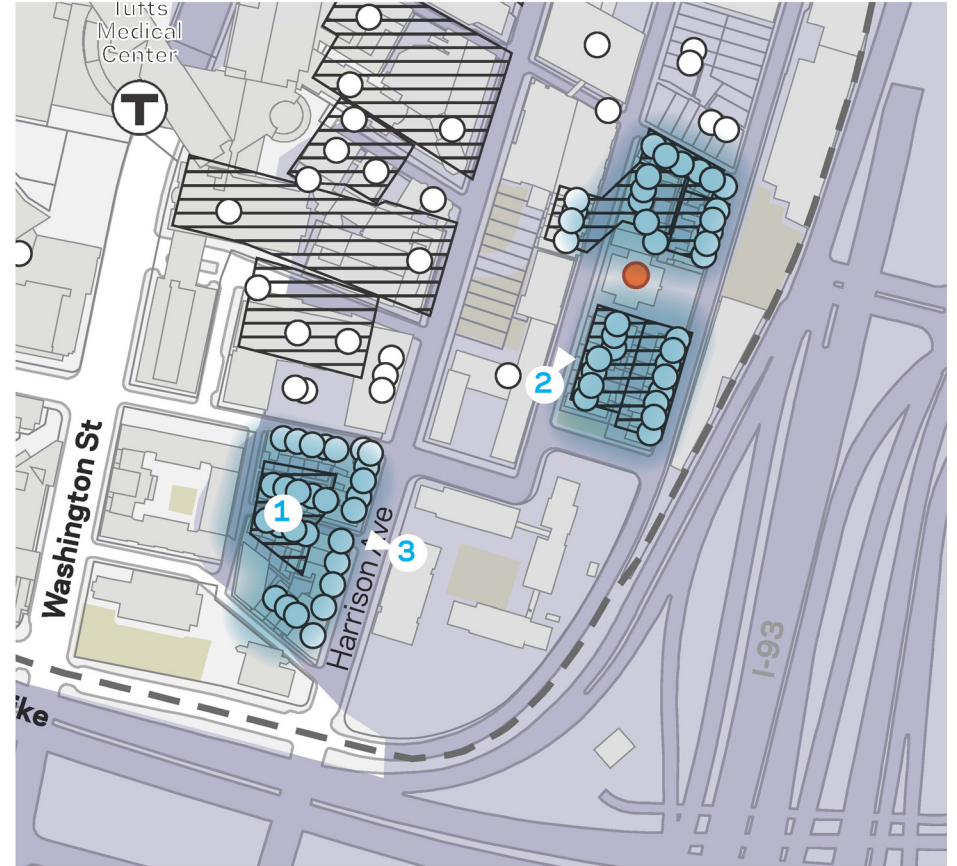




2



3



**2024 MACRIS Inventory**

- NRHP
- Inventoried
- PR
- MHL
- ▨ NRHP
- ▨ Inventoried

**2024 BLC Inventory**

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- CFROD
- ▨ Study Area

# Design Guidelines

## Historic Context | Chinatown



**Find opportunities to pair new residential growth with the creation of new community spaces and improved public realm in Chinatown's larger-scale residential area south of Kneeland.**

The residential area south of Kneeland Street comprises more recent, large-scale housing developments characterized by large parcel sizes and mid- to high-rise buildings, with most having been built over the past 50 years. While developments in this area are predominantly residential, some ground-floor spaces accommodate small-scale commercial and community uses, similar to Chinatown's more mixed-use core. Community-based organizations, such as the Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC) and the Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Association (CCBA), have initiated and developed several of these properties, and include both affordable and market-rate options. As the area continues to grow, projects should look for opportunities to expand the public realm and introduce community open spaces alongside any large-scale development, like One Greenway Park. Ground floors should continue to host small-scale community and commercial spaces, especially along Harrison Avenue, Washington Street, Tremont Street, and Shawmut Avenue. Large blocks should also be broken up with ground floor amenity and green spaces for residents and the community.



2023 Hudson Street Stoop installation, Dancing Dragons by artists Katherine Chin & Parke MacDowell

## Work with artists, Chinatown organizations, and the community to identify opportunities to include public art and integrate features in site and building design that highlight the history and culture of Chinatown.

From small-scale additions to large-scale developments, projects in Chinatown should explore opportunities to feature art and cultural spaces that reflect the history of the area and the existing community. Art, murals, and local artifacts should be incorporated into projects as key public features, located with attention to visibility.

Notable examples of public art and expression in Chinatown today include the “Where We Belong” mural by Ponnapa Prakkamakul at Oxford and Essex Street, and the “Tied Together by a Thousand Threads” mural by Shaina Lu on the facade of 15-25 Harrison Avenue. Murals along Tyler Street also showcase how local murals can activate storefronts and blank facades.

Spaces for community and cultural expression should expand into open spaces whenever possible, especially on larger sites such as those south of Kneeland Street. The Hudson Street Stoop project is also a good example of a rotating public art initiative by ACDC working with Chinatown residents and local artists to create an inclusive interactive installation on One Greenway Park.



2023 Hudson Street Stoop installation, Dancing Dragons by artists Katherine Chin & Parke MacDowell

## Design recommendations for Chinatown

- a. Find mixed-use growth and adaptive reuse opportunities in the northern portion of Chinatown, along Essex Street and parts of Harrison Avenue
- b. Maintain the rhythm, scale, and vibrancy of facades and storefronts in Chinatown's mixed-use core.
- c. Maintain the scale and character of the clusters of historic rowhouses throughout Chinatown.
- d. Find opportunities for new residential growth paired with new community spaces and improved public realm, especially in the large blocks of Chinatown's residential area south of Kneeland.
- e. Work with artists, Chinatown organizations, and the community to identify opportunities to include public art and integrate features in site and building design that highlight the history and culture of Chinatown.
- f. Sites within the Coastal Flood Resilience Zoning Overlay District must follow the City's climate resilience policies, requirements, and Coastal Flood Resilience Design Guidelines.

"Where We Belong" mural in Chinatown  
by Ponnapa Prakkamakul at Oxford St.  
and Essex St.

ESSEX ST

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WHERE I BELONG

ONE WAY

DO NOT ENTER



THE CITY OF TORONTO...  
"Where I belong" is a common expression for the immigrant experience. It's a phrase that can mean many things to many people. It can mean a place where you feel safe, where you can be yourself, where you can find community. It can mean a place where you have built a life, where you have made friends, where you have found love. It can mean a place where you have found a sense of purpose, where you have found a way to contribute to the world. It can mean a place where you have found a home.

