

Executive Summary

The Vision for Japantown

The Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan (BNP) sets forth a 20-year vision for the community and neighborhood. As the City continues to change, and development pressures and the cost of living increase, the City's leaders realize that it is critical that the cultural character and resources that make Japantown special be identified, maintained and enhanced.

Japantown has been the cultural heart of the Japanese American community in San Francisco for over a century, serving a role that is unique to the city, region and country. As one of three Japantowns remaining in the country, the area's cultural and historical resources are widely appreciated and play a significant role in the history of San Francisco and the region at large.

Much of what makes Japantown a culturally-rich and recognizable place are the businesses and community-based organizations that are clustered around Post, Buchanan and Sutter streets. A unique mix of businesses offers Japanese, Japanese American, Korean and other culturally specific services, wares and food products that can be found in few other places in the United States, while cultural and community institutions continue to draw people from around the Bay Area on a daily basis.

Major transportation improvements, new development and land use changes are already proposed and being considered for Japantown; these investments must be leveraged sensitively to strengthen Japantown's cultural, commercial and social role and to help the community thrive. There is now a great opportunity to transform the often-negative results of previous changes to the neighborhood's physical fabric into "people-oriented" streets, plazas and parks.

THE VISION STATEMENT

By honoring Japantown's rich history, retaining and enhancing its resources and securing its future as the heart of the Japanese and Japanese American communities with increased housing opportunities, public realm improvements and economic and community development, Japantown will continue to thrive as a culturally rich, unique and vibrant neighborhood.

Goals and Supporting Objectives

Four overarching goals were developed with the community to achieve the vision for Japantown and guide this planning effort.

GOAL 1

SECURE JAPANTOWN'S FUTURE AS THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HEART OF JAPANESE AND JAPANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY.

- Promote Japantown's value and history.
- Promote a sense of Japan, in addition to the Japanese American culture.
- Enhance historic and cultural landmarks.
- Safeguard community-based institutions.
- Promote events that attract youth and families (to live, visit, and shop).
- Serve as the hub for the Japanese community in the region.

GOAL 2

SECURE JAPANTOWN'S FUTURE AS A THRIVING COMMERCIAL AND RETAIL DISTRICT.

- Preserve Japantown's livelihood, existing local and historic businesses.
- Encourage business development for new companies that reflect Japantown.
- Provide retail/restaurants that cater to youth, families, neighbors and tourists.
- Provide consistent sidewalk and public space maintenance.
- Generate demand outside of the immediate area.

GOAL 3

SECURE JAPANTOWN'S FUTURE AS A HOME TO RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITY-BASED INSTITUTIONS.

- Provide more mixed-income housing, especially for families and seniors.
- Provide economic support for community-based, non-profit organizations.
- Improve public space and parks.
- Maintain a livable neighborhood that reflects San Francisco's diversity.

GOAL 4

SECURE JAPANTOWN'S FUTURE AS A PHYSICALLY ATTRACTIVE AND VIBRANT ENVIRONMENT.

- Enhance the Japanese character.
- Increase the sense of safety.
- Improve the appearance and cleanliness.
- Reestablish pedestrian connections, social interaction and commerce between the neighborhoods on either side of Geary Boulevard.
- Provide quality recreational opportunities.
- Provide spaces that cater to youth and families.
- Strive to utilize sustainable technology and materials.

Neighborhood Context and Recommendations

Japantown as we know it today is located just north of Geary Boulevard, with the Fillmore District to the west, Western Addition to the south, and Cathedral Hill to the east. To honor the numerous cultural and historic resources of the community, the area is bounded by Steiner, California, Gough, and O'Farrell streets.

The Plan assesses and provides direction for all aspects of Japantown, including: land use, built form, public realm, circulation, businesses and community organizations and historic and cultural resources. To do this, a comprehensive understanding of how Japantown has become the neighborhood it is today is necessary.



The following pages summarize Japantown's important characteristics and provide a snapshot of the Plan's recommendations; each of these characteristics have influenced the neighborhood over the past generations, are interrelated, and will continue to play a role in the future of Japantown.

CHAPTER 2
RECOMMENDATIONS

Community Heritage

- Establish a Community-Based Body to Guide Preservation Efforts
- Recognize Important Properties of the Japanese and Japanese American Communities
- Seek Recognition as a National Heritage Area
- Encourage the Use of California Historic Building Code
- Develop a Façade Easement Program
- Develop a Japantown Community Land Trust
- Update Land Use Controls to Secure Japantown's Future
- Build on Japantown's Unique Public Realm to Secure Japantown's Character
- Consider Other Preservation Strategies Upon Further Study

Japantown has a rich and varied history. The historic and cultural development of San Francisco's Japantown, a significant Nikkei¹ community and neighborhood, overlaid on a neighborhood also home to European, Jewish, African American and Filipino residents, has resulted in a district full of historical and cultural properties.

In effort to enhance Japantown's rich cultural, social and architectural history, an important recommendation of this Plan is for the community to seek designation as a National Heritage Area, which can help preserve and promote Japantown's resources.

A number of recommendations, including using the California Historic Building Code, developing a façade easement program, and a establishing Japantown Community Land Trust, can help make retaining and improving properties with historic and cultural properties easier.



¹ Nikkei refers to people of Japanese ancestry.

CHAPTER 3
RECOMMENDATIONS

Community and Economic Development

- Establish an Organization to Oversee Implementation of the Better Neighborhood Plan
- Promote the District as a Regional Destination through Enhanced Marketing and Support for Community Events
- Provide Increased Maintenance, Beautification, and Security Services
- Increase Business Retention Efforts to Address Ongoing Pressures on Existing Small Businesses
- Recruit New, Culturally Appropriate Businesses to Fill Vacancies as They Arise and Achieve Desired Retail Mix
- Improve Access to Space for Community Activities
- Strengthen Community Organizations' Administrative Capacity
- Mitigate the Impact of Future Japan Center Construction
- Explore Strategies for Temporarily Relocating Japan Center Businesses During Renovation
- Retain the Japan Center's Character and its Roles as a Community Gathering Place, Showcase for Japanese American Culture, and Home for Culturally Appropriate Businesses

Though many of Japantown's community-based organizations and businesses are thriving and attract clientele from around the Bay Area, there is an opportunity to create coordinated support strategies to improve business stability and ensure the longevity of established community-based non-profits so they can continue to serve local and regional patrons. These strategies include consolidating resources of community-based organizations, building partnerships to attain new resources, increasing regional marketing, and forming a Community Benefit District that will provide an ongoing revenue source for improved maintenance, promotion and marketing for the neighborhood. The Plan addresses new development and existing revenue streams that can be leveraged to provide prioritized important community benefits and provide ongoing economic development. To ensure that these efforts can move forward, the Plan's main recommendation is to identify a community-based Implementation Organization that is representative of the breadth of Japantown's stakeholders and can implement the Plan's recommendations.



CHAPTER 4
RECOMMENDATIONS

Land Use

→ Update Zoning Controls South of Bush Street

- Create Zone 1 (Mixed Residential Zone)
- Create Zone 2 (Neighborhood Commercial Zone)
- Create Zone 3 (Regional Commercial Zone)

→ Activate Ground-Floor Spaces

- Improve Streets Frontages and Streets with Required Ground Floor Commercial Uses
- Protect Pedestrian- and Transit-oriented Street Frontages
- Promote Street Life with Outdoor Activity Areas

Land Use and Built Form

Japantown has a range of land uses and architectural styles that reflect the neighborhood's history and the community's adaptation to major government-driven initiatives. The heart of Japantown is comprised of the three mall buildings, Osaka Way (informally referred to as Buchanan Mall), and Post Street, all of which were shaped by redevelopment.

Commercial and Office

Locally-owned, family-run restaurants, retail stores, and service providers in Japan Center, Buchanan Mall, and along Post and Sutter Streets make up Japantown's commercial district. The anticipated redesign of two of the Japan Center malls has the potential to further strengthen the physical environment and commercial activity by opening outward onto Post and Webster streets and Geary Boulevard. Changes to land use and

height controls can help enhance and maintain the existing unique blend of retailers and community-oriented service providers and integrate opportunities for more housing.

Fillmore Street is another important neighborhood commercial street which serves the Fillmore District, south of Geary, and the Upper Fillmore area, to the north. This Plan recommends streetscape and wayfinding improvements to enhance this stretch of Post Street to link these two important commercial districts.

Residential

The existing residential property takes many forms: single-family homes (mostly north of Bush Street); low- to mid-rise apartment buildings (sprinkled throughout the Plan boundary) and a few residential towers (concentrated along the Geary corridor and south of

Sutter Street). New housing should be accommodated by reverting some of the single-use structures back into mixed-use structures with commercial and/or office at the ground level and residential above. Large parcels flanking Geary Boulevard (a major transit corridor) offer opportunities for new housing development. Careful attention to their design, including appropriate building design which enhances the ground-level experience, residential towers at specific locations, and mid-block pedestrian connections within superblocks, are essential in creating a livable neighborhood.

Institutional

Japantown is home to a significant number of non-profit organizations, in the form of churches and youth and elder service providers. Updates to land use controls will be necessary to ensure that they are allowed and encouraged in the future.

CHAPTER 5
RECOMMENDATIONS**Built Form**

→ Update Building Heights

- Increase Heights Along Geary Boulevard
- Increase Height at Gateways
- Increase Ground-Floor Heights for Commercial Uses
- Require Step Backs in Japantown's Commercial Core

→ Improve Large Parcel Design

- Improve Tower Design
- Require Mid-block Pedestrian Connections

→ Apply Japantown-Specific Design Guidelines

- Form and Structure
- Roofs
- Materials and Ornamentation
- Landscaping, Open Spaces, and Public Art

→ Apply San Francisco's Citywide Design Guidelines

- Site Design
- Massing and Articulation
- Façade Treatment
- Ground-floor Design
- Parking and Access
- Private Open Space

Design Guidelines

Design guidelines specific to Japantown and the Citywide design guidelines, can help ensure new development is compatible with the neighborhood character, as well as improve the ground level experience throughout the neighborhood. Without being overly restrictive, a set of Japantown-Specific guidelines can be helpful in retaining the special cultural character of the neighborhood. The citywide guidelines (which have been drafted to protect and enhance San Francisco's neighborhoods) will complement the Japantown-Specific guidelines to ensure that renovations and new development improve the public realm and built form of Japantown.



CHAPTER 6
RECOMMENDATIONS

Public Realm

- Improve Connections between Existing Open Spaces and Facilities through Design and Maintenance
- Encourage Crime Prevention through Design and Maintenance of Open Spaces
- Activate and “Green” Existing Open Space
- Design and Construct Webster Street Linear Park to Complement the Existing Open Space Network and Provide Additional Usable Open Space in The Heart of the Neighborhood
- Prioritize Post Street for Streetscape Improvements
- Improve Lighting, Tree-Planting and Neighborhood Amenities on Residential Streets
- Improve Lighting and Signage on Streets Bordering the Neighborhood’s Open Spaces
- Encourage the Transformation of the Geary Corridor into a Neighborhood-Serving Boulevard
- Connect East-West Streets to the Proposed Webster Street Linear Park
- Connect Japantown to Fillmore Street
- Make Alleys More Livable
- Mark Japantown’s Entrances with Gateways
- Provide Neighborhood Orientation Signs
- Provide Directional Signs
- Integrate Interpretive Signs with Existing Public Art
- Place Signs at Transit Stops

Japantown is in need of an improved public realm that celebrates the neighborhood’s rich historic and cultural character and provides better connections to other neighborhoods. Two already well-used open spaces in the heart of Japantown’s public realm—Peace Plaza and Buchanan Mall—should be enhanced to meet the community’s needs for usable public space and activate the spaces with lighting, landscaping, informational kiosks, vendors, weekend markets, and outdoor dining/seating opportunities. A new linear park along Webster Street should provide the community a much needed play space for children and more opportunities for gathering. In addition, the streetscape of the entire neighborhood should be improved to strengthen the sense of place and make it more people-friendly.

Today, Japantown’s abundant resources can be easily overlooked by visitors. The community and city as a whole can benefit from Japantown’s identity enhancement. Better signage and wayfinding can improve Japantown’s visibility, as well as enhance everyone’s understanding of the area’s historical and cultural sites and resources.



CHAPTER 7
RECOMMENDATIONS

Transportation and Circulation

→ Improve Circulation for All Modes

- Prioritize Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility at Key Intersections
- Remove Two Travel Lanes on Webster Street
- Re-Envision Post and Sutter Streets

→ Increase Education and Enforcement Programs

→ Improve Transit Access and Efficiency

- Coordinate with the Transit Effectiveness Project
- Consider Re-routing the 1BX-California Express
- Coordinate with Geary Corridor Bus Rapid Transit Project

→ Improve Parking Management

- Coordinate with SFpark Programs in Japantown
- Price On-street Parking Meter Rates to Meet Demand
- Determine Feasibility of a Parking Benefit District to Capture Increased Meter Revenue
- Provide Additional Parking Regulation
- Provide Additional Bicycle Parking
- Improve Parking Supply Management
- Encourage and Maximize Mixed-use Development to Incorporate Structured Parking with New Commercial and Housing Development

- Consider the Opportunity to Increase the City's Revenue by Providing New Structured Parking Under Geary Boulevard
- Set New Requirements for New Residential Development
- Provide CarShare and Secure Bicycle Parking in Off-Street Parking Areas

→ Enhance Personal Safety and Wayfinding

The neighborhood as a whole has numerous pedestrian conflicts, including street widths, insufficient cross times, poor signage, and disregard of pedestrian, bicycle and vehicular rules of conduct.

Webster Street and Geary Boulevard, two of the major streets in Japantown, were doubled in width in the 1960s as part of redevelopment. Both streets serve vehicular traffic well, but their streetscape does little to support pedestrian activity or neighborhood connectivity. Webster Street is one of the neighborhood's more difficult streets to cross and divides Japantown's more active public areas to the east from Fillmore Street. The Plan proposes to reuse the excess lanes for new neighborhood-serving open space.

Even more noticeable, Geary Boulevard's width and tunnel creates a significant barrier between Japantown and the Fillmore District, making it a hazard to cross. This Plan is coordinated with the Geary Corridor Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project underway, which aims to improve the Boulevard's overall character, transit service, lane configuration, intersection design, sidewalk widths, and overall walkability. Together the two plans will address how Geary can be improved to lessen the divide between the two neighborhoods and increase the feeling of comfort and safety along the Boulevard.



CHAPTER 8
RECOMMENDATIONS

Japan Center

- Ensure that Japanese-oriented Retail is the Centerpiece of Any New Development on the Japan Center Site
- Allow for Residential Development of Sufficient Height and Density in New Development on the Japan Center Site to Ensure that it is Financially Feasible
- Ensure that the City Participates in the Funding of a Reconstructed Parking Garage, which Includes Sufficient Spaces for Retail Shoppers and Other Visitors to Japantown
- Include Sufficient Parking to Serve New Residential Development, Balanced with a "Transit Oriented" Approach
- Include Existing Businesses in the Retail Mix of a New Retail Center
- Ensure that Any New Development Opens Up to the Neighborhood
- Integrate and Enhance Peace Plaza as a Central Community Gathering Space in the Redesign
- Integrate Japanese-influenced Design Aesthetic in the Center's Redesign
- Work with the Developer to Encourage Provision of Affordable Housing in the Neighborhood
- Work with All Parties to Create a Fair and Balanced Public Benefits Package

The Japan Center Malls, occupying the blocks between Fillmore, Laguna, Geary and Post, are the cultural and economic heart of Japantown, past, present and future. From the beginnings of Japanese-American settlement in this part of San Francisco, to the reconstruction of these blocks by the Redevelopment Agency in the middle part of the 20th Century, through the present, this has been the center of the community.

One of the primary purposes of this Plan is to make recommendations for the future of the Japan Center properties east of Webster Street. The properties were purchased by a new owner in 2006, who began discussions with the community and the City about the future of the center.

Short term improvements versus Long-term Reconstruction

One of the most difficult issues in grappling with the future of Japantown is the issue of "improvements" versus "reconstruction."

While interior upgrades to the buildings and minor exterior improvements are certainly possible and indeed advisable, significant renovation of the existing mall buildings is unlikely to be feasible. The main reason for this is that any major structural changes to these buildings would trigger the need to reconstruct the parking garage underneath.

There will be a point in the future when the mall buildings will require more significant change than simply cosmetic improvements that would not trigger the need for a garage reconstruction. The buildings, with their inward focus and blank walls facing the community's major pedestrian areas, are not consistent with modern standards for successful urban retail centers.

All of these topics are interrelated and define Japantown as we know it today. The following chapters address each topic in more detail, drawing on what makes Japantown special and how to maintain and enhance its strengths for generations to come.