

CHINATOWN REIMAGINED

A Cultural Revival & Vibrant Streetscape

唐人街

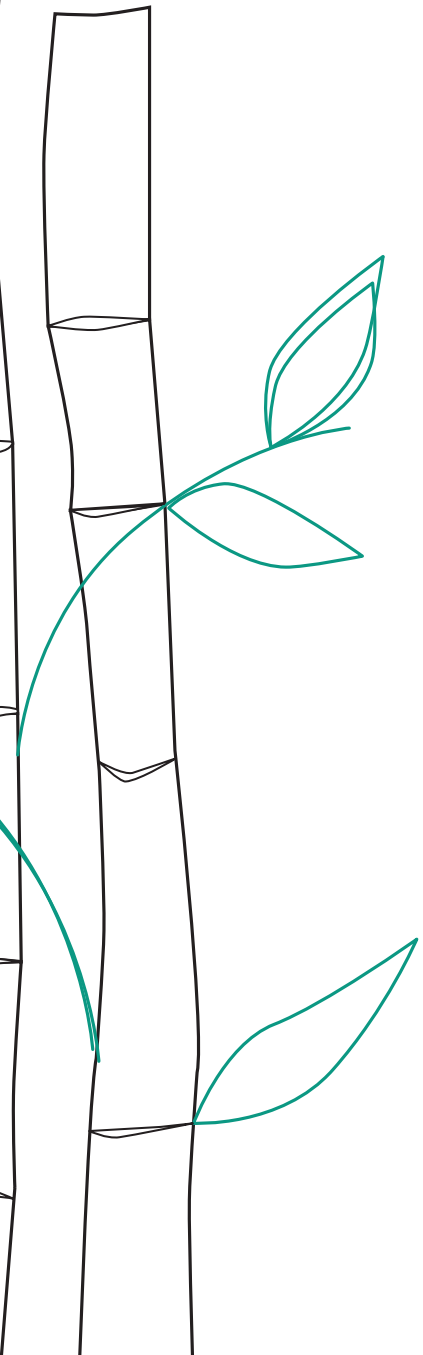
MIDTOWN
DETROIT

SMITHGROUP

The Journey of a Cultural Neighborhood

Before the 1950's, Detroit's Chinatown thrived in the neighborhood along Third Street and Michigan Avenue. This vibrant community served as the social and cultural hub for Chinese Americans in the city. However, in the late 1950's, the Federal-Aid Highway Act's "urban renewal" projects led to the construction of the John C. Lodge Freeway, which effectively erased Detroit's original Chinatown.



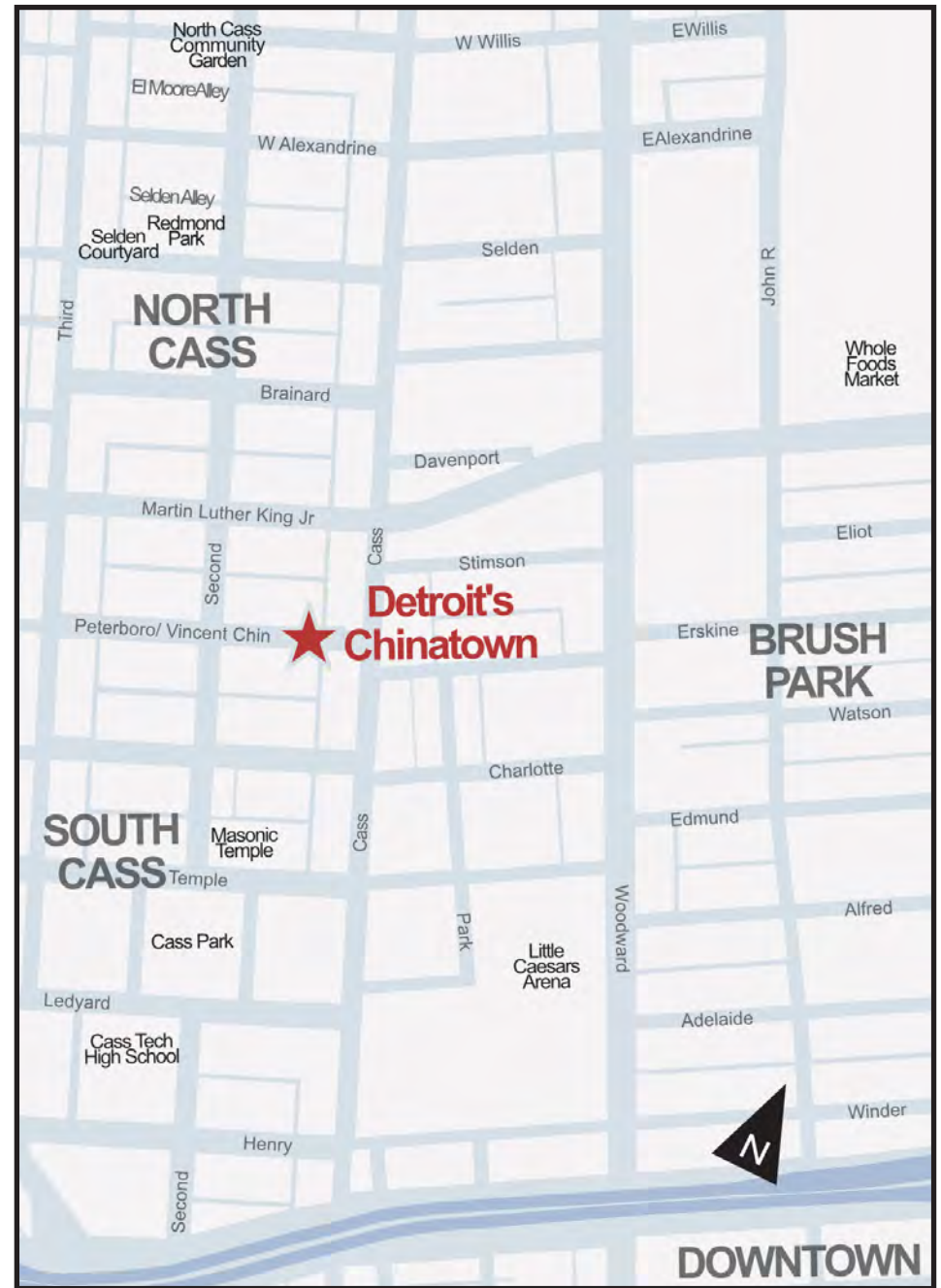


In the years that followed, community leaders sought opportunities to relocate. By the early 1960s, the new Chinatown emerged in Midtown's South Cass Corridor neighborhood at Cass Avenue and Peterboro Street. The Chinese Merchants Association building opened in 1963 and other Asian American organizations and businesses followed, including the Association for Chinese Americans, American Citizens for Justice, Chung's, Forbidden City, Shanghai Café, and Golden Dragon. The neighborhood was also home to a burgeoning creative community of artists, musicians, and poets.

For decades, historical landmarks along Peterboro preserved the spirit of Chinatown. Yet, in 2000 the closure of Chung's Restaurant marked the end of an era. More recently, the demolition of the influential Chinese Merchant's Association building on Cass Avenue sparked renewed interest in reimagining and preserving the legacy of Detroit's Chinatown.

There is a renewed momentum to bring Midtown's Chinatown back to life. Driven by the leadership of Midtown Detroit, Inc., the collaboration of neighborhood businesses and groups, and strong support from the State of Michigan and Senator Chang's office, a bold vision for Chinatown's future has taken shape. Now, the time has come to turn that vision into reality—ushering in a new era of transformation and cultural resurgence.

The new vision for Chinatown transforms the neighborhood into a dynamic, welcoming destination. Enhanced infrastructure - including wider sidewalks, universal access, decorative street lighting, landscaping, public art, and improved connectivity—will create a safer, more inviting environment. Thoughtfully designed nodes celebrate Asian cultural heritage, while activated public and private spaces foster community interaction and attract businesses, residents, and visitors alike.

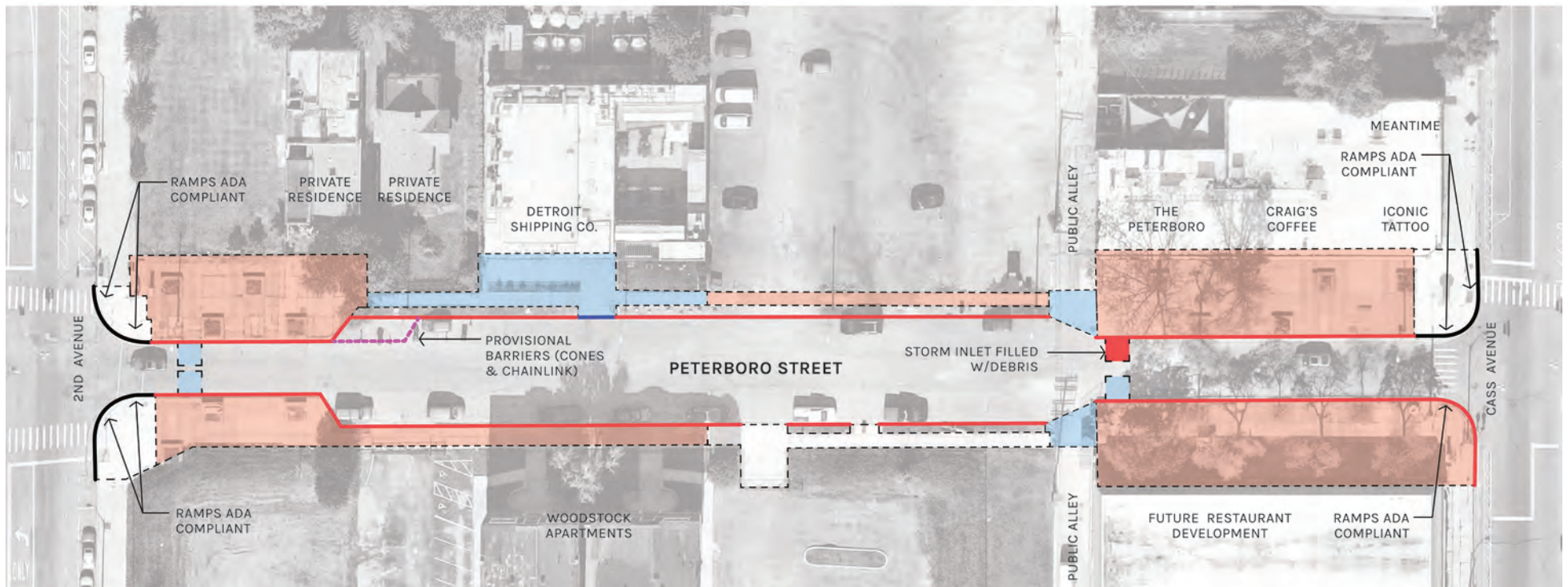


UNDERSTANDING WHAT EXISTS TODAY

A detailed assessment of material conditions helped inform where improvements were needed the most and what cultural relics could be salvaged and included with the redesign.



LEGEND			
	CONCRETE PAVEMENT		CURB
	GOOD / NEW		GOOD / NEW
	FAIR/ COMPLIANT		FAIR/ COMPLIANT
	POOR/ NON-COMPLIANT		POOR/ NON-COMPLIANT



MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Poor Pedestrian Experience and Failing Base Infrastructure

Sidewalks are in poor condition, with cracking, uneven surfaces, and weed growth that hinder access. Mid-block segments are narrow and sometimes discontinuous due to driveway crossings, many of which do not meet ADA or city standards.

Inadequate Lighting and Limited Nighttime Safety

Street lighting exists only on the north side of the roadway and is oriented toward vehicular visibility. Pedestrian sidewalks have limited illumination, reducing pedestrian comfort, safety, and the overall nighttime experience.

Insufficient Shade and Deteriorated Landscape Elements

Most of the corridor lacks shade and is fully exposed to sun. Existing canopy trees at the east end are in poor health condition. Decorative concrete planters are deteriorated—cracked, broken, or missing components. Unwanted vegetation is present, and the landscape design is inconsistent across the block.

Insufficient Public Street Amenities

Public street amenities are minimal, inconsistent, and generally in poor condition. Private amenities maintained by adjacent businesses are in better condition. Overall, streetscape elements lack consistency in condition, style, and planning.

Failing Base Infrastructure

Pavement is heavily cracked and deteriorated. Curbs vary in type and height, with many in poor condition. Several older driveways are degraded, creating pedestrian safety concerns. Site utilities are generally in good condition, except for one debris-filled catch basin that is not functioning.

Missing Representation of Culture and History

As a historic site, Peterboro lacks visible cultural and historical elements that reflect Detroit's former Chinatown. The area offers limited interpretation or signage to remind visitors of the site's cultural significance and past identity.



Fair to Poor Pavement Condition at East Peterboro (Typ.)



Poor Pavement Condition at West Peterboro (Typ.)



Poor Pavement Condition at Mid-block (Typ.)



Degraded Planter at East Peterboro (Typ.)



Broken, Under-maintained Planter at West Peterboro (Typ.)



No Pedestrian Shade at Mid-block (Typ.)



Historic Chinatown Kiosk at East Peterboro



Degraded Benches at East Peterboro



Inadequate Lighting

Stakeholders: Community Shaping Tomorrow

Shared community authorship is vital to authentic public spaces. The streetscape design process incorporated multiple touch points with diverse stakeholders, local businesses and property owners, regional visitors, public entities, and the community that once called this place home.

Midtown Detroit, Inc. and its design team actively engaged local communities and stakeholders to help shape the future of Detroit's Chinatown. A public in-person community engagement session kicked off the pre-development process in spring of 2025, followed by an online survey drawing over 300 responses, framing the desired uses, outlining potential themes, and defining key areas of concern. Midtown Detroit, Inc. and its design team met with stakeholders in multiple small group sessions to better understand how Peterboro Street can fit into the larger neighborhood and build upon existing local businesses, redevelopment, and broader neighborhood programming. These efforts were dedicated to establishing the goals for the Peterboro Streetscape Project, marking the first step toward revitalizing Detroit's historic Chinatown.





GOAL 1: IMPROVE BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY

To ensure public safety and enhance the day-to-day pedestrian experience, four design strategies were identified.



Enrich the Streetscape with Amenities

Introduce site furnishings and public amenities—such as benches, restaurant seating areas, bike racks, and trash receptacles—to improve comfort, usability, and visual appeal.



Enhance Lighting for Ambience and Safety

Install upgraded lighting fixtures to improve nighttime visibility, create a welcoming atmosphere, and promote a sense of security.



Integrate Sustainable and Native Landscaping

Incorporate diverse, sustainable landscaping elements, including street trees, planters, and flower boxes. Prioritize native and adaptive plant species to support biodiversity, reduce maintenance, and enhance ecological resilience.



Expand and Upgrade Pedestrian Zones

Provide wider sidewalks and upgraded paving materials to improve walkability, accessibility, and the overall public realm experience.

GOAL 2: CREATE A UNIQUE CULTURAL AND EXPERIENTIAL DESTINATION

Beyond infrastructure improvements, the project aims to celebrate cultural identity and foster vibrant public spaces. Five strategies were developed with community input.



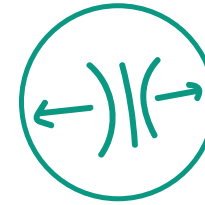
Prioritize Pedestrian Experience

Design a walkable, comfortable, and accessible streetscape that encourages exploration.



Foster a Welcoming Urban Environment

Create inclusive, energetic spaces that invite people to gather, dine outdoors, and socialize.



Design for Flexibility in Public Space

Incorporate adaptable areas that can accommodate events and programming of various scales.



Celebrate Cultural Identity Through Arts and Programming

Integrate meaningful art installations and cultural programming that reflect the community's history, spirit, and evolving identity.

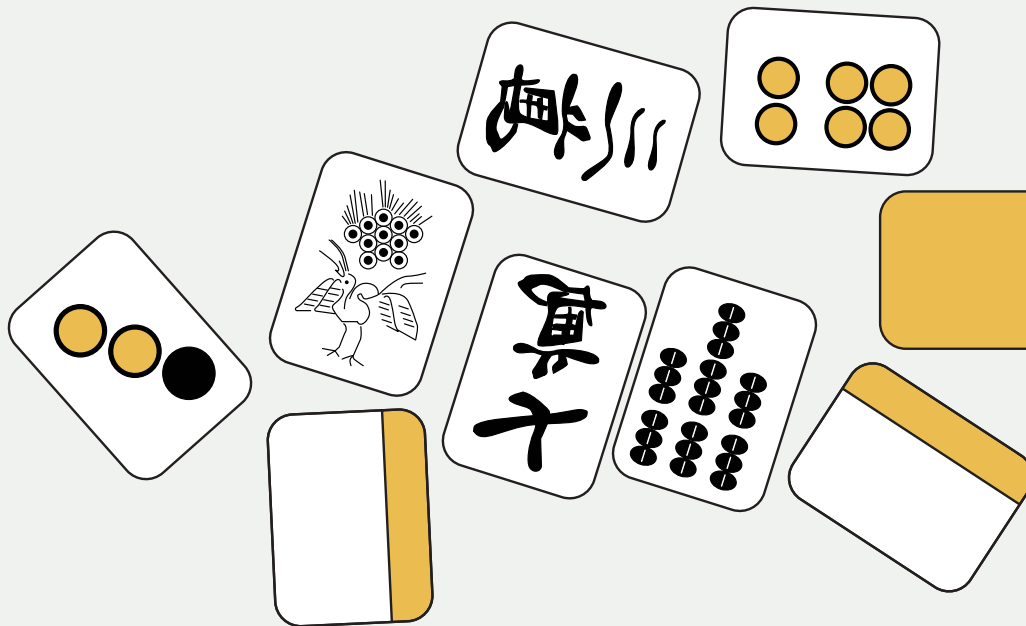


Plan for Future Growth and Integration

Ensure compatibility with future developments—such as restaurants, retail, and residential spaces—while maintaining flexibility.

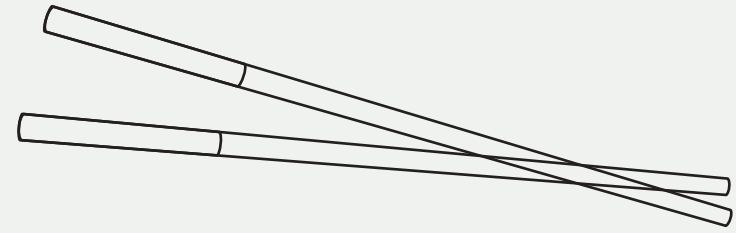


With initial input and project goals in hand, the design team developed three initial concepts and visual palettes, integrating a balance of circulation, cafes, public space, and landscape. Opportunities for art, cultural expression, and heritage interpretation were highlighted as important to the vitality and success of the streetscape. These concepts were featured at the first Annual Detroit Chinatown Block Party in summer of 2025 and received feedback from hundreds of festival-goers. Ultimately, the community selected a hybrid of the three concepts.



VISUALS THAT INSPIRED THE COMMUNITY

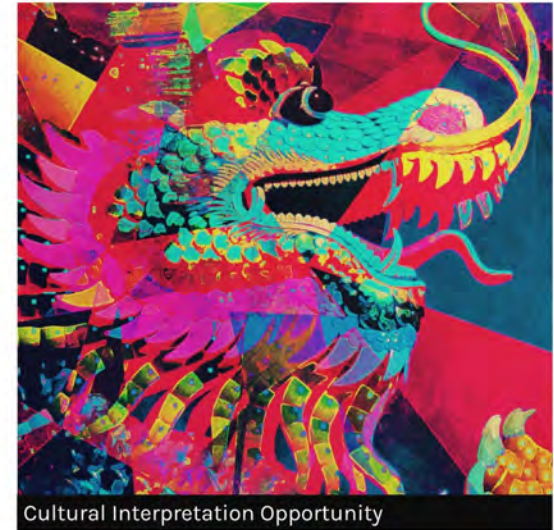
Festival-goers were asked to identify inspirational images that spoke most to their image of Detroit's Chinatown. Below are images that were most favored by the community.



Gateway Element Opportunity



Amenity Lighting



Cultural Interpretation Opportunity



Movable Planter



Raised Planter w/wo Seating



Special Seating Opportunity

SOUGHT AFTER OPPORTUNITIES

The community was also asked to identify programming that the new streetscape could provide opportunity for. Below are images that were most favored by the community.



Daily Hangout (Public Seatings)



Outdoor Dining (Private Seatings)



Weekend Market



Block Party



Enhanced Pedestrian Experience



Gateway Experience



Cultural Interpretation Opportunity

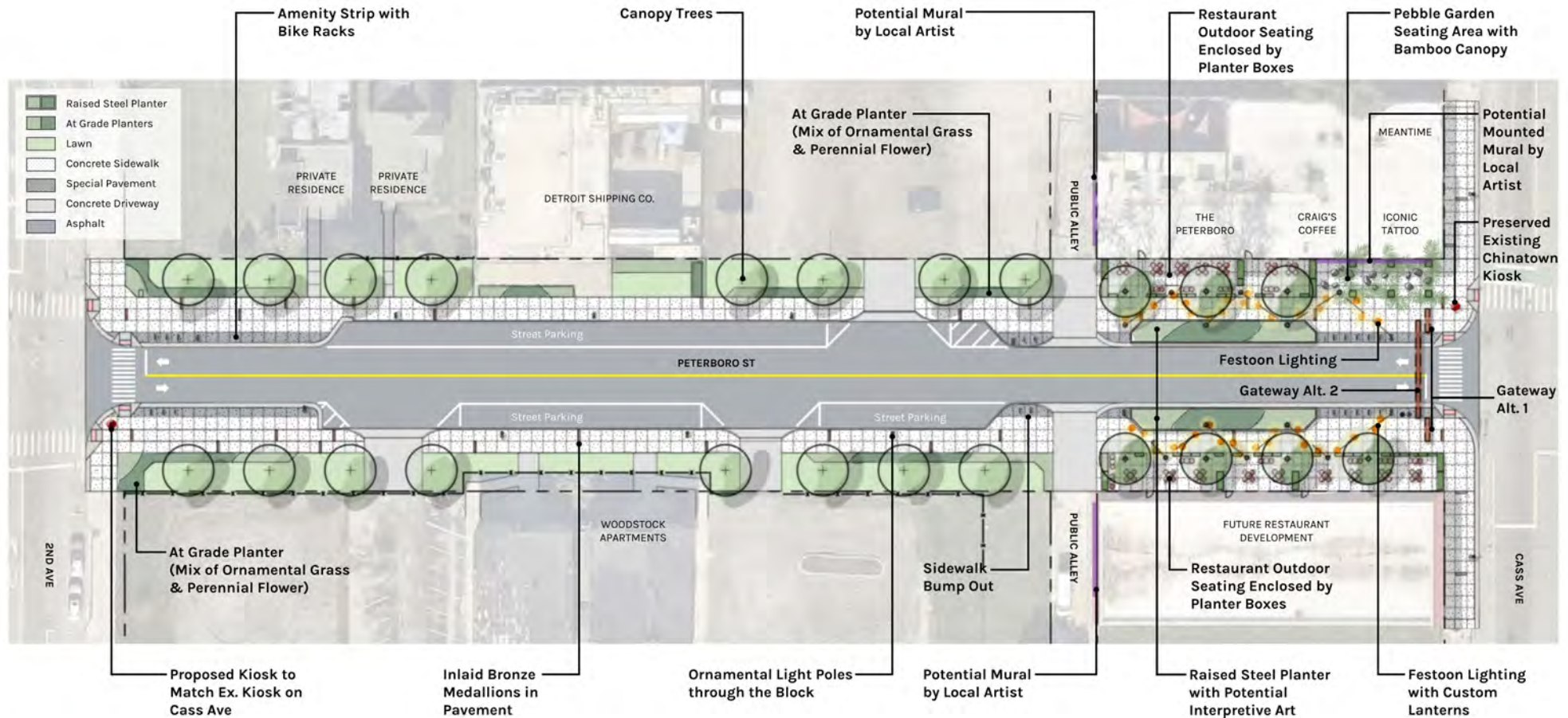
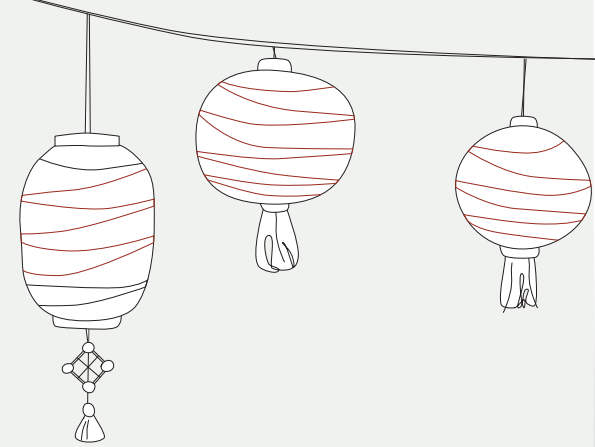


Art Display



Reviving the Spirit of Chinatown

Driven by input from the community and stakeholders, the vision for the new Chinatown sets the stage for a range of neighborhood uses, while prioritizing a safe, comfortable, and engaging pedestrian experience. Wide sidewalks lined with street cafes are maximized to support adjacent businesses and enliven the space with activity.



Peterboro Street will serve as a cultural destination and the missing connection between Downtown, Brush Park, and the North Cass Corridor. Just footsteps away from Little Caesar's Arena and emerging residential and commercial developments, Chinatown is poised for its next chapter.



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A Walk Through Chinatown Reimagined



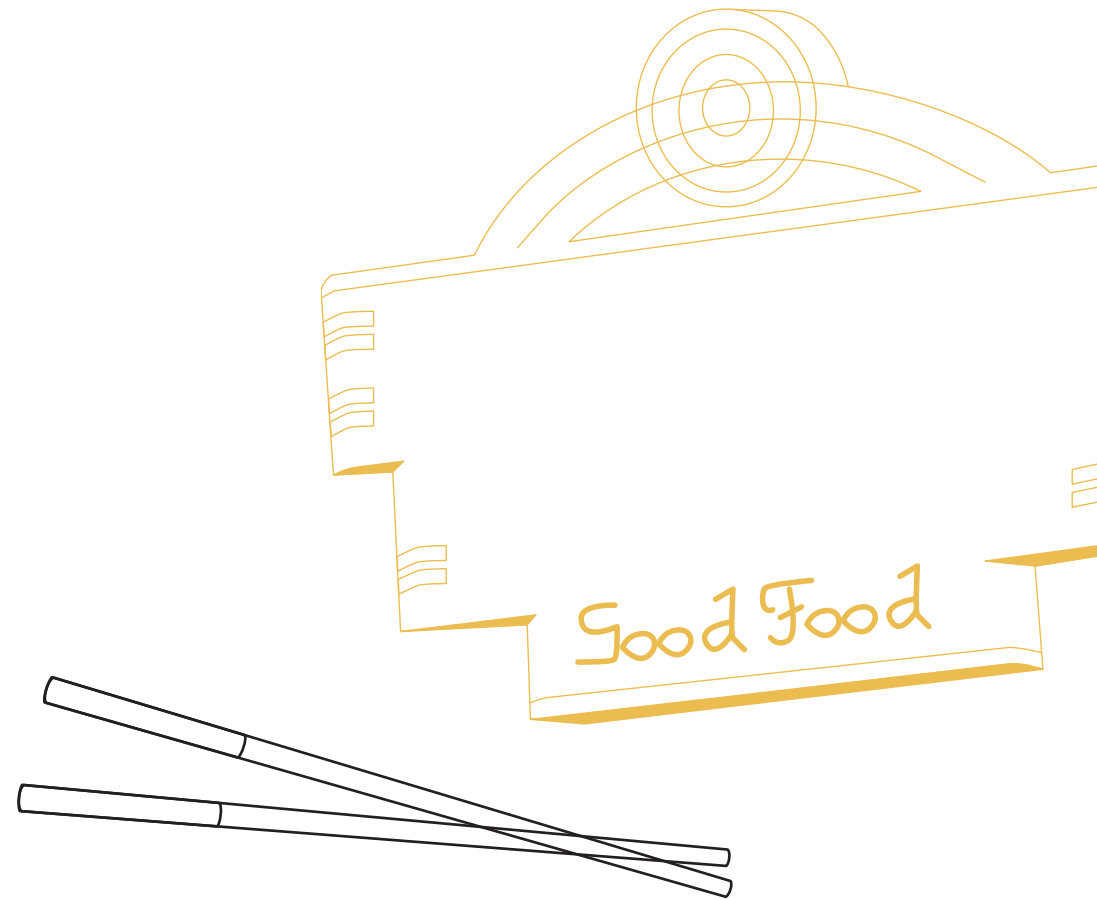
Today, a passerby in the Cass Corridor could easily overlook the few remaining traces of historic Chinatown at the corner of Peterboro Street. Tomorrow's Chinatown will create a vibrant destination—one that invites residents and visitors alike to explore, celebrate, and invest in the neighborhood's enduring cultural legacy and dynamic future.

Bold reds and traditional blue greens demand the attention of the passersby. You're conjured to stop and admire Asian themes perched on the wide, accommodating sidewalks. A once forgotten corner kiosk now stands proud amongst a backdrop of vibrant murals, golden Ginkgo trees and bamboo planters. Banners hang from light posts like proud flags, signaling to visitors they've arrived at their destination. This gateway at the corner of Peterboro and Cass is truly a celebration of what was and what will be the future Detroit's Chinatown.

As you continue onto the sidewalks of Peterboro Street, you can rejoice as a spectrum of detail unveils itself. You stumble upon a bronze plaque in the ground. It commemorates a restaurant; once a staple of this former, bustling streetscape. A woman walks her bike to a bike rack with Chinese-inspired motifs. There's a thoughtfulness that energizes you and makes you feel proud to be here.

Walking beneath a canopy of lanterns, you begin to realize how accommodating and multi-faceted the streetscape has become. Neighborhood residents spark a conversation in the calm of a bamboo grove while an adjacent sidewalk cafe jingles with the sound of plates and utensils. Where the sidewalk is wide, it floods with a tourist group; some study the bold Chinese characters on the kiosk with excitement. All this happens safely as cars and trucks are slowly guided through defined paths and parking areas.

The evening turns to night as the sun sets down upon 2nd Avenue. All of a sudden, a new Chinatown emerged. The street glows under a warm blanket of light, cast down from tall, decorative lamp posts. Pedestrians circulate along paths dappled with the whimsical glow of Chinese lanterns. Neon signs glow along storefronts. Life inside the local businesses, shops, and restaurants, now visible from the street, fizzles into the late hours of the night.



Morning comes and it's perfect weather to wander with a coffee. Passing Peterboro Street, you're intrigued to find a different scene. Where there was an arrangement of planters and seating, there's now merchants selling art and hand-crafted goods. You learn the pop-up event is one of several that occur throughout the year.

This continuous stream of energy is contagious. You feel inspired to learn more, to get plugged in, or to share your experience with friends and family. This is a place of excitement. This is a place of opportunity. This is a place for new beginnings. This is a place for you. This is Detroit's Chinatown.

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Partnerships: A Legacy of Collaboration

Renewed activity on Peterboro Street will catalyze investment, supporting the activation of vacant lots and invigorating the streets with life and activity throughout the year.

To be successful and sustain a vibrant Chinatown community over time, it's important to plan for maintenance, security, and event programming. Partnerships with Midtown Detroit, Inc., adjacent property and business owners, governmental departments, and others active in the Chinatown streetscape activation will be critical to this coordination.

Neighborhood groups, with the help of the State of Michigan & Senator Chang's office, kick-started this exciting project and will continue to play an active role in Chinatown's future. As Peterboro Street continues to grow and evolve, these groups will be involved in coordinating events and providing continuous feedback to maintain authenticity and redevelopment throughout the district.



TIMELINE

2024

Funding Award – Midtown Detroit, Inc. was awarded \$1 million from the State of Michigan to kickstart the streetscape improvements to Peterboro Street to reimagine Detroit's Chinatown.

2025

Public Engagement and Concept Development – Midtown Detroit, Inc. and stakeholders gather to gain insight into the past, present and future vision for the reimagining of Chinatown.

2026

Schedule – 12 Month Fundraising :
3 Month Documentation : 3 Month
Reviews + Bid : 3 Month Construction
(Potential Completion Fall 2027)

Unveiling of an honorary street sign in memory of Vincent Chin





Good Food

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For more information please contact Midtown Detroit, Inc.
info@midtowndetroitinc.org
www.midtowndetroitinc.org