Chinatown

A Joint Workshop of the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee
And the Urban Design Panel
Sense of place

*Genius loci* literally means genius of place. It is used to describe places that are deeply memorable for their architectural and experiential qualities.

Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1982

Maya Lin, designer
Traditional architecture employs a tripartite, or base-middle-top, format.

The base of a traditional building is usually designed to express its structural support of the upper stories and the transfer of those loads to the ground. A masonry base is typically *rusticated*—the stones and mortar joints are shaped in a way that suggests the base is quite heavy and thick. The top of a traditional building is symbolically a crown or hat that announces on the skyline the building’s purpose or spirit.
Chinatown

Heritage building

Building bay width

Strong vertical definition

Upper massing above principal facade

Upper street facade

Lower street facade including ground floor storefront

New building

Cornice line

Recessed balcony

Window pattern

Ground floor storefront
The proportions of a building are an aesthetic statement of how it was built.

Traditional architecture (built prior to the advent of modern construction methods in the late 1800s) tends to have short structural spans and vertical window proportions. Modern buildings more often have long spans and horizontal window proportions.

The vertical proportions of traditional buildings were due to the length of a stone or wood lintel (the supporting beam over an opening) being limited to what could be found, fabricated, and lifted into place by hand. The only way to make a large window when its width is limited is to make it tall.

Contemporary steel and concrete construction methods allow long structural spans, so windows in contemporary buildings can have any proportion. Often they are given horizontal proportions, however, at least in part because this distinguishes them aesthetically from traditional windows.
A good building reveals different things about itself when viewed from different distances.
Traditional buildings have thick exterior walls. Modern buildings have thin walls.

Traditional architecture uses the exterior walls to support the weight of the building. The walls must be thick because they receive heavy loads from the floors, roof, and walls above them, which they then transfer to the earth. The exterior walls of the twelve-story Monadnock Building, for example, are six feet thick at the base.

Most modern buildings employ a frame of steel or concrete columns and beams to support structural loads and transfer the building’s weight to the earth. The exterior walls are attached to and supported by this frame, and therefore serve as a barrier against the weather only. Thus, the walls can be much thinner than those of traditional buildings, and—despite appearances—they usually do not rest on the ground. When brick or stone is used to clad a skyscraper, for example, the masonry walls are not piled up on the ground for forty stories, but are supported by the superstructure every story or two.

Monadnock Building, Chicago, 1891
Burnham and Root, architects
A static composition appears to be at rest.

Static compositions are usually symmetrical. At their most successful, they suggest power, firmness, conviction, certainty, authority, and permanence. Less successful examples can be unengaging and boring.
Chinatown Images (East Pender Street)

Chinese Benevolent Association Building (108 E Pender Street)

Mah Society Building (137 E Pender Street)
Chinatown Images (East Pender Street)

Yue Shan Society Buildings (33 E Pender Street)
Chinatown Images (East Pender Street)

May Wah Hotel Building (258 E Pender Street)
Chinatown Images (East Pender Street)
Chinatown Images (East Georgia Street)

Jia Mei Market (293 East Georgia Street)
245 E Georgia Street
137 Keefer Street
137 Keefer Street
231 E Pender Street
239 E Georgia
221 and 251 Union
Chinatown photos
189 Keefer Street
What happened?

CHAPC non-support
UDP Support
Chinatown Character Advice to Developers and Architects