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Chinatown Connections

Welcome Gateway Design Brief



Community Celebration in Kimlau Square, 2021(Mengwen Cao for NPR)

March 28, 2025

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Chinatown Connections Overview and Project Goal

Chinatown Connections is a three-part public realm improvement project designed to celebrate the cultural heritage of Manhattan’s Chinatown, improve multimodal circulation in the area, and support local businesses. Alongside beautifying Park Row and reimagining Kimlau Square, the City plans to build a Chinatown Welcome Gateway in the vicinity of the redesigned square to help showcase one of the most historic districts in New York City. Chinatown Connections merges the \$11.5 million Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) award from the New York State Department of State with \$48.3 million in New York City Capital to deliver these public realm improvements.

The New York City Economic Development Corporation (“NYCEDC”) is leading Chinatown Connections in partnership with the New York City Department of Transportation (“NYCDOT”). NYCEDC has procured Marvel as the Design Team Project Lead to oversee the reconfiguration of Kimlau Square and the creation of a Chinatown Welcome Gateway. The development of the Welcome Gateway will be led by an Artist to form part of the Design Team, collaborating on an overall vision aligned with the scheme of the proposed design. The artist should show a meaningful connection with the Chinatown community through personal or professional ties, and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the neighborhood’s cultural, social, and historical context.

Image 1: Existing Conditions of Kimlau Square



The Welcome Gateway will serve as a key gateway to Chinatown and be located in the redesigned Kimlau Square. The size and location will be informed by NYCDOT traffic studies, the Design Team’s insights, stakeholder input, and community feedback.

The following document summarizes the project’s context and guideposts for the Welcome Gateway design. It resulted from a 12-month community engagement period, including group discussions, tabling events, and two public meetings. The Welcome Gateway Subgroup was an important cornerstone of the community engagement process. Composed of 6 local stakeholders¹, the group provided valuable feedback and guidance to determine the principles, purpose, role, and impact the Welcome Gateway should ultimately embody and accomplish.

¹ The subgroup was composed of the following stakeholders: American Legion – Post 1291; Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong, Local Artist; Chinatown BID/LDC; Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association; Nolan Cheng; United Overseas Fujianese Association of America.

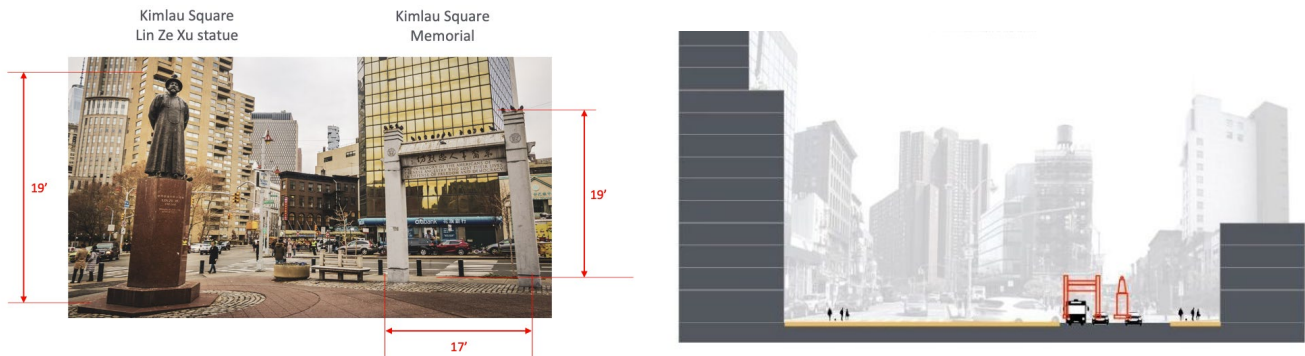


Kimlau War Memorial Dedication, 1962 (American Legion Post 1291)

The Welcome Gateway will coexist with two monuments currently located in Kimlau Square: the Kimlau War Memorial and the Lin Zexu Statue. Dedicated on April 28, 1962, the Kimlau War Memorial honors Lt. Kimlau and the many other Chinese-Americans who were missing in action, died in captivity, or prisoners of war. The monument was a gift from Lieutenant B.R. Kimlau Chinese Memorial Post 1291, and it is the only landmarked memorial honoring Asian Americans in New York City. The 18-foot-tall granite ceremonial gateway with a peaked roof was designed by Poy G. Lee (1900-1968) and serves as an example of a monument by and for the Chinatown community. The Square also houses an 18-foot-tall bronze statue on a pedestal of Lin Zexu or Lin Yuanfu, a Qing dynasty-era scholar-warrior. The over-life-size portrait statue was designed by Li Wei-Si and was dedicated in 1999.

The Welcome Gateway will contribute to a new Kimlau Square while thoughtfully honoring both existing monuments with respect and harmony. In doing so, the redesigned Kimlau Square will continue to be a space serving many community purposes and one of the most important gathering places in Chinatown.

Image 3: Scale Comparison of Current Monuments (Approximate)



Historical and Contemporary Significance of Gateways

Gateway precedents identified during initial research helped shape community engagement and design guidelines. Below is a brief selection of findings from precedent research, including details about the historical and contemporary significance of gateways worldwide.

A Welcome Gateway can have different meanings in various contexts. It may:

- Prepare you, a resident or visitor, for what lies ahead as a marker to move throughout a neighborhood
- Serve as a community gathering place
- Invite you to an experience, a rite of passage, a moment to notice
- Guide you toward a public space
- Serve as a welcoming symbol and homecoming
- Be the physical manifestation of heritage and cultural tradition.



Paifang in Mount Putuo Zhoushan, China (left) / Old Town Gateway, Shanghai, China (right). These examples showcase different designs and materials traditionally used in gateways in China, highlighting variations in ornamentation, structure, and materiality.

In Chinese culture, gateways have historically held significant importance as portals and heritage landmarks in public spaces:

- Wooden gateways have been used to demarcate boundaries or mark significant locations.
- Gateways are often elaborate and decorative structures with intricate carvings, inscriptions, and colorful ornamentations that have been placed to commemorate important events or signify entrances to prosperous commercial districts.
- Gateways have served as convergence points between the secular world and the sacred realm, symbolizing authority or as common features of temple complexes.
- Gateways vary widely between regions. For example, gateways in southern China often feature curved roofs with upturned eaves, while structures in northern China may have more squared-off designs.



These references highlight different interpretations of Chinatown gateways, showcasing a range of design approaches, materials, and urban integration strategies used to define and activate public spaces. Hing Hay Park, Seattle, WA (upper left) is an example of a more contemporary rendition that evokes ancient carving techniques and the concept of nature. The Millennium Gate in Vancouver, BC (upper right) celebrates the past and the present, adding traditional elements and inviting people to look into the new millennium. The Chinatown Gate in Liverpool, England (lower middle) is an example of a more traditional gateway design.

Chinatown gateways gained popularity throughout the 20th century, particularly in North America, serving a range of purposes²:

- They became an integral part of the urban cultural landscape.
- They attracted visitors and helped establish many Chinatowns as tourist destinations.
- They pay tribute to the heritage and traditions of Chinese culture, servicing as sources of pride and identity for the community.
- They act as beacons of light, symbols of unity, and guiding structures that restore and strengthen communities.
- They take many forms, such as wooden pillars on stone bases, stone or brick archways, circular moon gates, and patterns of natural elements.

² Adapted from Culhane, Kerri “Chapter 2: Paifang Problematic (Draft).”

Community Feedback



Columbus Park, located in the heart of Chinatown, is a gathering place for diverse community members (The Morningside Post, 2019)

Below is a brief selection from community members shared during public engagement moments over the last 12 months that shaped the design guidelines.

- Chinatown is a vibrant ecosystem cultural home not only to its residents but to a wider population of Asian diaspora.
- Chinatown is the birth of the East Coast Asian American movement;
- Chinatown holds the immigration and tenement history of NYC;
- The neighborhood is not monolithic but an amalgamation of different histories and communities, centuries of history;
- It is home to many family associations that bring property ownership stories and create means for people to come to the neighborhood ;
- Chinatown is the home of diverse businesses;
- It reflects waves of new immigrants, languages, dialects, food , and migration;
- A Gateway is a sign of respect for the community a visitor has been entering since the old days;
- We don't want to feel isolated and disconnected; we want to feel pride and belonging;
- A Gateway in Chinatown honors our history and traditions, bridging the past and the future.

Design Guidelines



Pell Open Street Chinese Food Festival (Chinatown BID, 2024)

The following guidelines are parameters for the selected artist as they propose a Welcome Gateway design. These reflect input from the community engagement process and the working group meetings held with Gateway subgroup members. During the first engagement opportunities, subgroup and community members identified themes and values associated with the Welcome Gateway. Below is a brief summary of the main takeaways from the engagement process.

To be a successful project and fully represent community visions, a Chinatown Welcome Gateway should:

- Function as a representation of the existing community, while also encouraging visitors and those new to Chinatown to come and experience it.
- Embody an authentic representation of Chinatown community.
- Allow for the surrounding space to be used for different community uses, such as gathering and resting.
- Integrate into the larger vision of expanding public space and improving pedestrian safety in and around Kimlau Square.
- Consider contemporary design elements, such as lighting and sound, that work cohesively with a traditional aesthetic.
- Respect the community's cultural and historical identity

The themes and values that emerge from the engagement process were workshopped into four design guidelines, reflecting community visions, expectations, and feedback:

1. Celebrate Heritage

The Welcome Gateway design should honor Chinatown’s rich cultural heritage, celebrate its diversity, and foster a sense of belonging.

- Reflect on Chinatown’s past while celebrating its present and future, showcasing the neighborhood as a vital hub for Asian Americans on the East Coast of the U.S.
- Celebrate the diversity within Chinatown, including its various stories, languages, dialects, foods, and experiences. The design should foster a sense of belonging for all community members.
- Avoid using design elements based on oversimplified representations of Chinese American culture.
- Design elements should be respectful of the community’s cultural heritage and deeply researched. They should generate a true sense of community pride.
- Respect the existing monuments in Kimlau Square, including the Kimlau War Memorial Arch and Lin Ze Xu Statue, by proposing a design that both honors and is harmonious with these pieces.

2. Gathering Space

Design the Welcome Gateway as an integral part of the community, creating a surrounding space that invites community members to gather, rest, and celebrate.

- Aspire to allow for rest and relaxation and flexible spaces surrounding the Gateway that can adapt to various community events and gatherings, such as the Lunar New Year Parade.
- Incorporate design features, such as lighting, visible signage, and space demarcation, that promote long-term maintenance and ample community use as intended.
- Understand that the Gateway is not a standalone piece but is deeply connected to its surrounding area and the Kimlau Square redesign. The artist should consider working hand-in-hand with the Chinatown Connections design team.

Spaces for gathering and celebration:



Japantown Plaza, San Francisco, CA (left) / Hing Hay Park, Seattle, WA (right)

These examples illustrate how public plazas and parks serve as cultural gathering points, blending traditional design motifs with contemporary urban spaces.



Lunar New Year Parade at Kimlau Square (left) / Union Square (right)

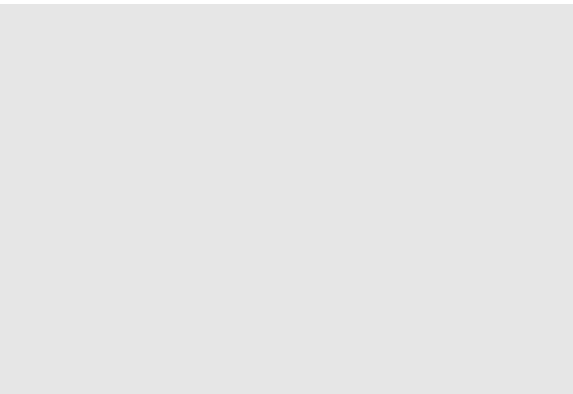
These images showcase how public spaces transform during cultural celebrations, reinforcing the opportunity to design a Gateway that allows the use of surrounding space for hosting events and creates symbolic spaces to gather, relax, and celebrate.

3. Multifaceted Experience

Ensure the Chinatown Welcome Gateway is not a monolith but an interactive experience that extends beyond its physical structure. The Gateway should create an engaging and multifaceted experience that resonates regardless of its size.

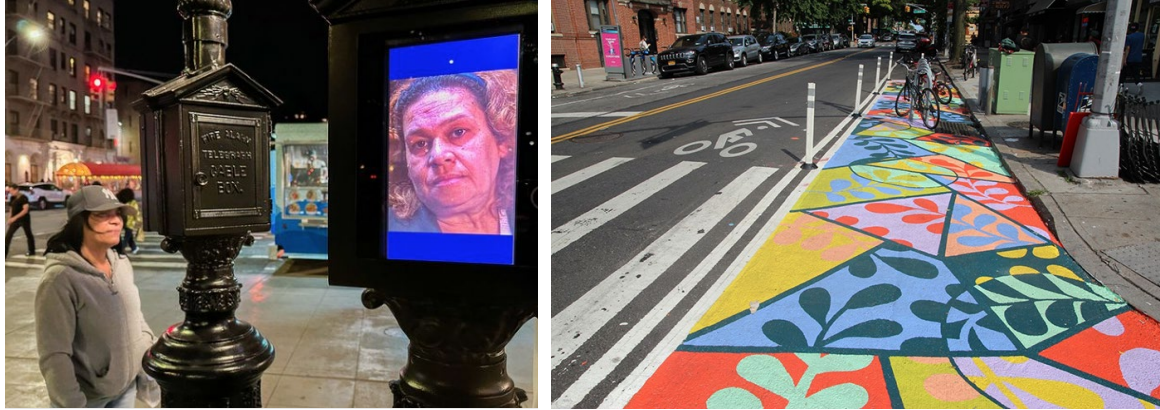
- Utilize murals, interactive facades, and other cityscape elements surrounding the Gateway to extend its presence, widen the Gateway's reach, and encourage visitors to explore Chinatown in depth.
- Include spillover elements to widen the Gateway's reach and create a sense of wonder, encouraging visitors to discover more.
- Use varying heights, sizes, and unexpected features in the Gateway design. The Gateway does not necessarily need to be a single structure. Consider repeating shapes, integrating digital elements, and using creative urban design strategies to maximize the scale and immersive experience of the Gateway. Consider that temporary art could be displayed on-site to pay tribute to the dynamic nature of Chinatown.

Examples:



Life Underground, Tom Otterness, 2004 (left) / The Gates, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1979-2005 (right)

These projects demonstrate the power of scale, materiality, and artistic placement in shaping an immersive experience, enhancing spatial perception, encouraging exploration, and evoking a sense of wonder.



Temporary Installation at 300 Ashland, Brooklyn, NY (left) / NYCDOT Street Art Program (right)

These examples highlight the use of temporary and site-responsive artworks to transform public spaces, allowing for evolving artistic expressions that engage the community, adapt to changing urban conditions, and bring contemporary creativity into everyday life.

4. Guiding Symbol

Design the Welcome Gateway to be a clear and recognizable symbol in Lower Manhattan that serves as a prominent entry point and wayfinding feature for Chinatown visitors.

- Ensure the design is culturally authentic to the Chinatown communities, generating connection and pride.
- Incorporate modern and non-textual wayfinding elements (e.g., color-coded paths, symbolic markers) that visually guide visitors through Chinatown without relying heavily on text.
- Ensure that all design elements, especially those related to wayfinding and orientation, are culturally competent and reflective of Chinatown’s rich history and community values.

Examples:



NYC Chinatown Visitors Information Booth (left) / High Line Surrounding Signage (middle) / MTA Subway Light Globes (right)



Freedom Trail Markers, Boston, MA (left) / Central Park Audio Guides (right)

These examples highlight different strategies to embed wayfinding systems into a built environment installation. From iconic design to illuminated markers and integrated signage, these elements ensure clear navigation while reinforcing the space's unique identity.

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Budget

The New York State Department of State (NYS DoS) has allocated \$2,500,000 to fund this project through the Chinatown Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI). The DRI funding has a matching fundraising requirement that will be administered through the Chinatown Partnership. The total anticipated project budget may increase up to \$5,000,000 dependent on fundraising outcomes.

Artist Eligibility Criteria

Selecting a designer will be heavily informed by the community engagement process but will likely include the following criteria:

- At least 18 years of age and legally authorized to work in the U.S.
- Level of artistic professionalism and demonstrated artistic practice
- Ability to collaborate with a design team

Interested artists will submit a statement of approach and provide examples of past work highlighting relevant experience. In their application, DCLA and the Selection Panel will consider:

1. The artist's deep and meaningful connection to the Chinatown community through personal or professional ties and/or a thorough understanding of the neighborhood's cultural, historical, and social context. The artist should be able to convey this understanding through their previous work or through a demonstrated commitment to learning and integrating this knowledge into their design process.
2. The artist's previous experience working closely with communities, particularly in projects where the community felt genuinely included in the process. Past projects should illustrate how the artist has successfully engaged with the community to create work that resonates with local values and aspirations.
3. The artist's capability of creating a design that generates a strong sense of belonging and pride within the Chinatown community. The work should not be perceived as an external imposition but as a heartfelt representation of the community's spirit. This sense of authenticity and connection is key to securing local support and donations for the project.

Selection Process

NYCEDC, in partnership with DCLA, will follow a structured multi-phase selection process for this public art commission through the NYC Percent for Art Process. The artist will be selected through an artist/architect collaboration model, ensuring integration within the Kimlau Square redesign.

Through this approach, artists do not enter the process with a preconceived proposal. Instead, they are selected through a charrette (design/planning activity) that emphasizes compatibility with the design team and the potential to realize their artistic vision through successful collaboration.

An Artist Selection Panel of voting and advisory members will be formed by DCLA.

In accordance with local law, Voting Panelists consist of the DCLA Commissioner or Designee (serving as Panel Chair), one representative each from the Percent for Art program (DCLA); the design agency (NYCEDC); the sponsor agency (NYCDOT); and the design team (Marvel), as well as three representatives of the public who are arts professionals and knowledgeable about public art, the project, and the community in which the project will be located.

The panel will also consist of Advisory Panelists, including stakeholders such as the Chinatown Connections Working Group and Gateway subgroup members, local organizations and community groups, elected officials, community board representatives, members from the Public Design Commission, and program staff from DCLA, NYCEDC, and NYCDOT.

Selection Process Summary:

- An open call informed by this design brief will be made public to attract artists to express interest. DCLA will use the call as part of the curatorial process to develop an artist pool for the Artist Panel meeting.
- A public meeting will be held, to review past works from artists under consideration presented by DCLA. Voting and Advisory Panelists narrow the list together and identify finalists.
- Each artist finalist will participate in a design charrette (a collaborative design planning activity) with the design team to discuss their creative practice, working process, and artistic approach and brainstorm possibilities for the project. Panelists (including community members) attend the charrettes virtually and may submit questions to be moderated by DCLA and integrated into the conversation.
- At a meeting following the charrettes, the design team, in conversation with the project team and panel members, will decide which artist is best suited to collaborate on this project. Community members will provide input into the discussion and share preferences.

Acknowledgments

This document was developed by the Chinatown Connections Welcome Gateway Subgroup Committee, consisting of the following community representatives:

- Gabe Mui, American Legion – Post 1291
- Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong, Local Artist
- Wellington Chen, Chinatown BID/LDC
- Raymond Tsang, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
- Nolan Cheng, Community Leader
- Kenny Chan, United Overseas Fujianese Association of America

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