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NIHONMACHI ALLEY  
PREFERRED DESIGN REPORT

July 2024

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Hai Japantown, 2023

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible through funding from the City of Seattle’s Neighborhood Matching Fund. Feedback, thoughtful conversations, and the dedication of the community were pivotal in shaping the preferred design. Their active participation and insights not only enriched the project but also ensured its alignment with the community’s vision.



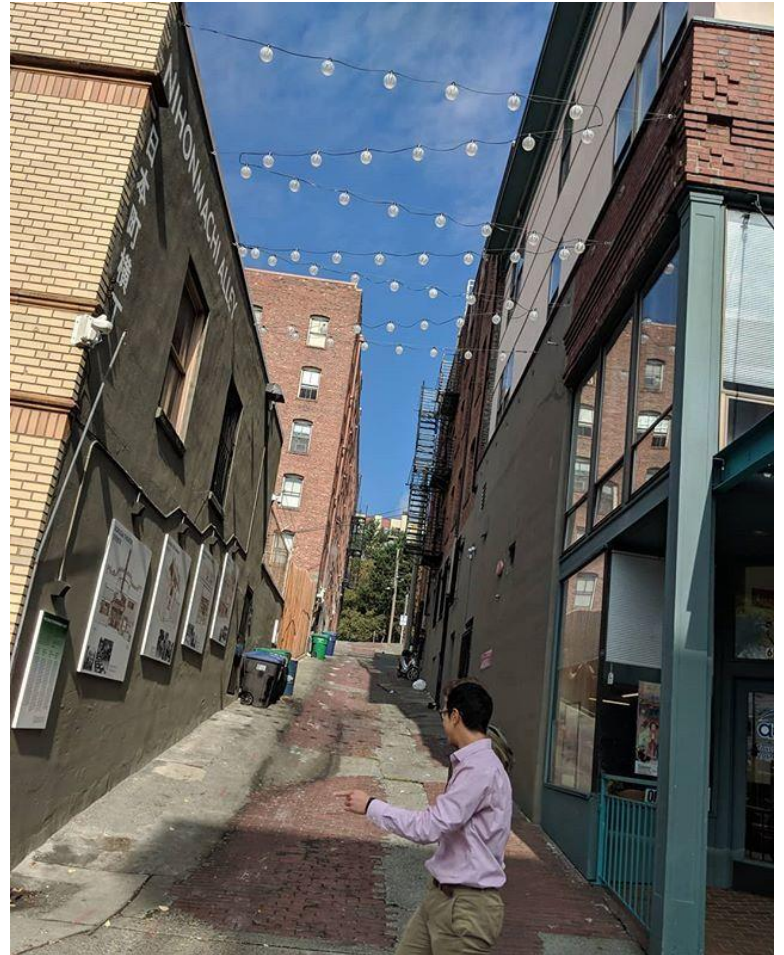
## INTRODUCTION

Nihonmachi Alley carries a multitude of roles for Seattle's Japantown. It is a community hub for local events with regional draw. The alley also provides utilitarian purposes for waste management and as a multimodal throughfare.

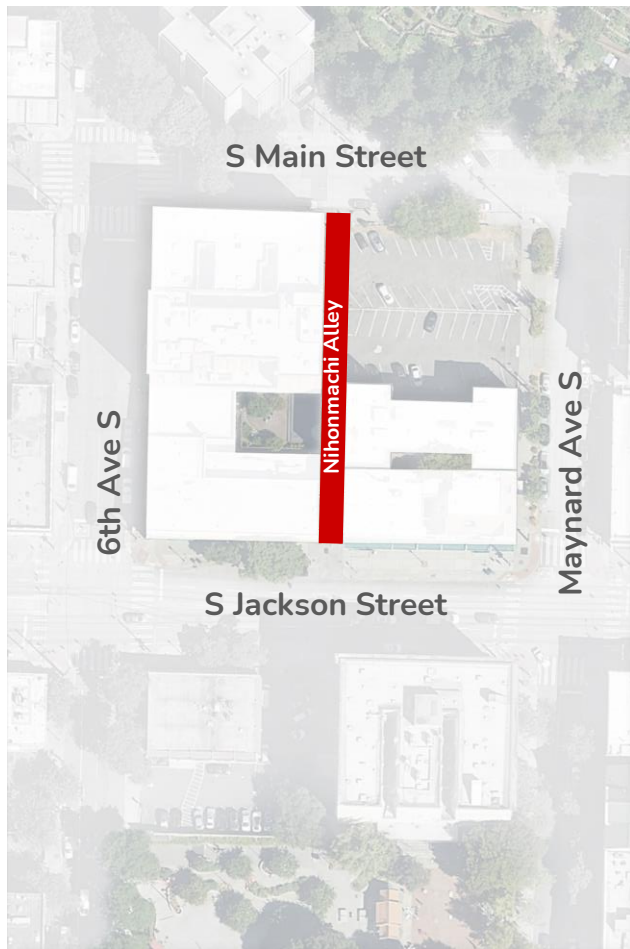
The purpose of this document is to present a design vision for Nihonmachi Alley. This plan is a culmination of conversations with the Japantown community of the Chinatown International District neighborhood, community engagement strategies for the duration of this project, and future aspirations to implement the preferred design alternative.

We want to acknowledge that this plan is built off the work of local community members, small businesses, and neighborhood advocates. The design vision for Nihonmachi Alley should be a long-term plan that celebrates the histories that have shaped this neighborhood.

This document is the starting point for future design and planning for further study, fundraising, and implementation.



Source: SDOT Flickr



Context



Green Space Context

## CONTEXT

Nihonmachi Alley sits within Seattle's Chinatown International District neighborhood. The site is bounded by S Jackson Street on the south, S Main Street on the north, and 6th Ave S and Maynard Ave S to the west and east, respectively.

The alley sits in Seattle's historic Japantown, or Nihonmachi, and is a key corridor directly linking four of the neighborhood's beloved open spaces: Hing Hay Park, Chiyo's Garden, Danny Woo Garden, and Kobe Terrace.

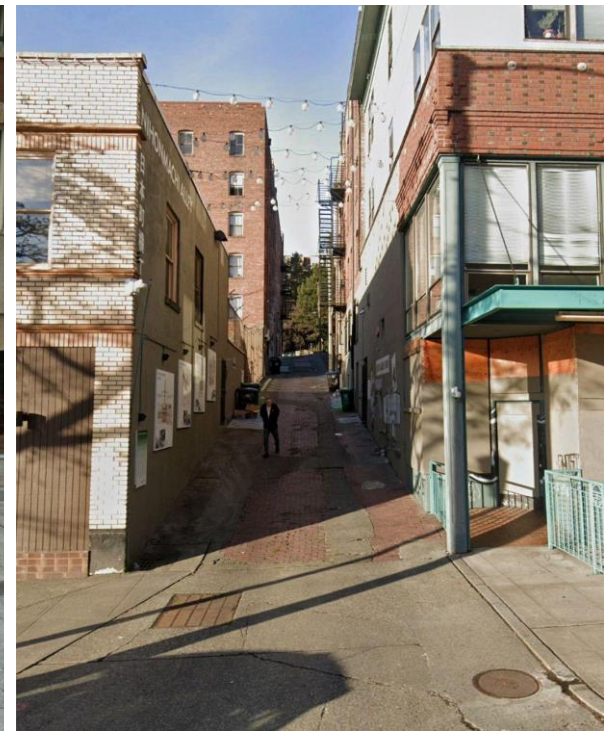
## EXISTING CONDITIONS

Nihonmachi Alley functions as a utilitarian space, lined with garbage, recycling, and compost bins that serve nearby restaurants, businesses, and residents. While community events are held here occasionally, on a regular day, service trucks drive through the alley to pick up waste, making it a bustling, functional corridor essential for the neighborhood's daily operations.

Nihonmachi Alley also provides a clear pedestrian thoroughfare through the neighborhood, providing a quiet respite from S. Jackson St.



North Alley Entrance (from S Main St)



South Alley Entrance (from S Jackson St)

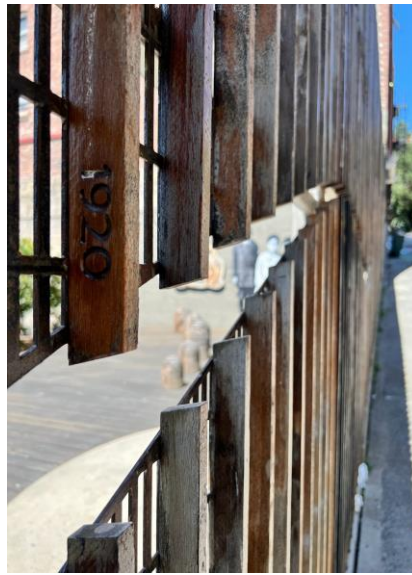


## PREVIOUS ALLEY IMPROVEMENTS

There have been previous improvements to the alley with a shared goal of revitalizing and beautifying Japantown while preserving its history. The alley features four informational panels on the westside of the alley near the South Jackson Street entrance, showcasing historic Japanese businesses—Kokusai Theatre, Maneki Restaurant, Sagamiya Confectionary, and Uwajimaya Grocers. These panels face a Day of Remembrance wheat paste mural of the Minidoka Internment Camp.

To aid waste management, three sections in the alley are painted with patterns and colors indicating where to place garbage, recycling, and compost, as part of a Department of Transportation and Seattle Public Utilities project.

These efforts throughout the years were made to ensure that the alley remains a vibrant and organized community space, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of Japantown.



Current state of the Nihonmachi Alley



# COMMUNITY FEEDBACK AND INPUT



## ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Community Engagement for Nihonmachi Alley project encompassed a wide spectrum of users and advocates, including neighborhood businesses, residents, community organizations, and community members. Centering the design process around the feedback and preferences of these diverse groups and individuals was fundamental. The City of Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) and Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) played crucial roles throughout the process, and will play a pivotal role in implementing the design vision plan.

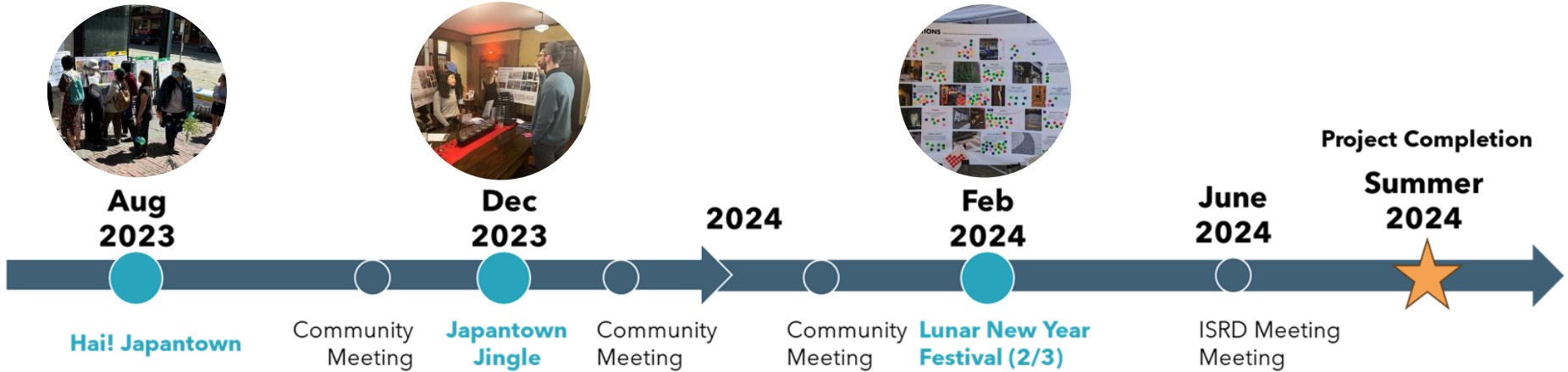
The engagement unfolded in three distinct phases: Understanding the Community Vision, Conceptual Designs, and Design Vision Plan Development. Each phase featured specific community engagement events and activities that consulted various users of the space. Subsequent design iterations were continually informed and enriched by community input. A full summary of engagement can be found in a separate document.



Nihonmachi Alley Engagement Groups



## PROJECT TIMELINE



There were three key milestone events during the engagement process:

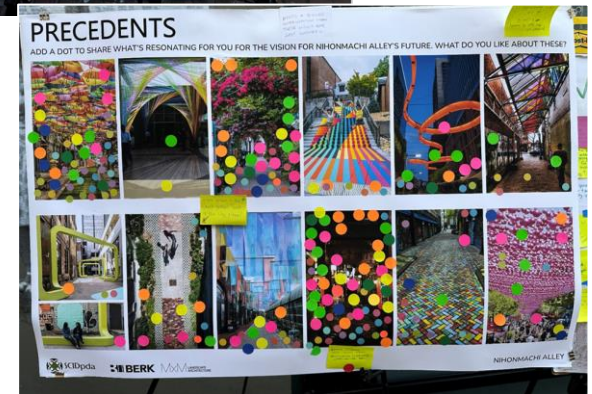
- Hai Japantown (August 12, 2023)
- Panama Tea House Holiday Open House (December 9, 2023)
- Lunar New Year Event (February 3, 2024)

In addition to these key milestone events, on-going regular meetings were held with SCIDpda, Japantown community members, International District Special Review Board (ISRD), and city entities (Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle Public Utilities) to build collective support, understand constraints, review designs, validate key themes, and ultimately ensure the design balances the utilitarian nature of the alley with community history and vision.

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY VISION

Community engagement began with a series of activities aimed at understanding the community's visions and laying the foundation for the design's direction. These efforts commenced with interactive activities and discussions, engaging community members in exploring different design elements for Nihonmachi Alley and the alley's role within the neighborhood. Over 150 participants engaged in activities, including an interactive dot exercise with photographic depictions of different alleyway design alternatives. Participants preferred honoring the unique history of the space, lean into multigenerational and artistic representation, incorporate atmospheric lighting and green elements.

Key themes emerged emphasizing the alley's role in cultural placekeeping and its potential as a connecting corridor linking Hing Hay Park, Danny Woo Community Garden, Kobe Terrace, and Chiyo's Garden. The community strongly supported cultivating the alley as a regional cultural hub, celebrating the Chinatown International District's diverse community and heritage. These insights guided the development of the conceptual designs, ensuring alignment with various community aspirations for a vibrant, historically resonant community space.



Hai Japantown Boards, 2023



## COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO CONCEPTUAL DESIGN ALTERNATIVES

Three conceptual design alternatives were developed based on distinct community visions. Several important themes emerged from vetting these designs with the community.

Cleanliness was a primary concern among community members, influencing a preference for practical designs that align with current alley usage. Opinions on planting and greenery varied widely, with some advocating for green spaces while others expressed concerns about maintenance challenges. Lighting was important for safety and improved visibility. Preserving the neighborhood's historical character, particularly its rich Japanese and Indigenous histories, was also a significant theme, alongside a strong desire for accessibility improvements for elders. See **Appendix** (pp. 26-29) for the design alternatives.

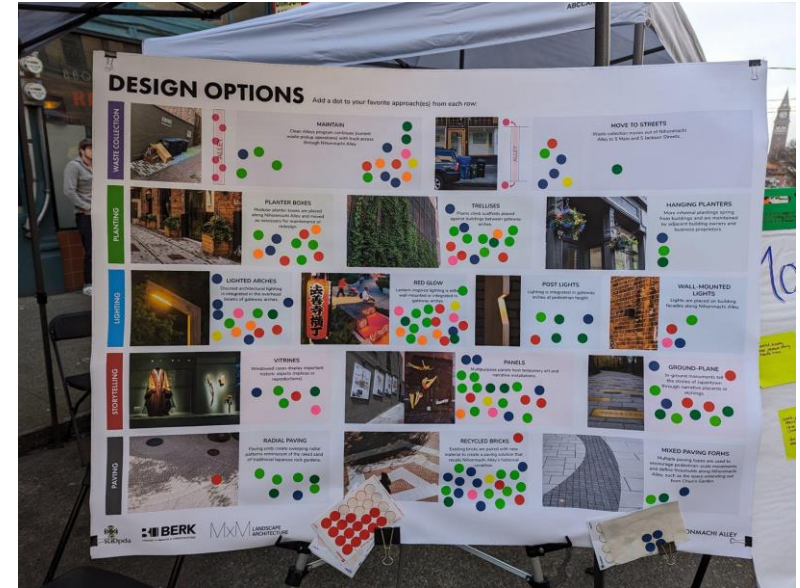


Panama Tea House Holiday Open House, 2023

## REFINING DESIGN ELEMENTS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Once input was received on all three design alternatives, the focus shifted to refining specific elements that resonated with community preferences. The consultant team gathered input through community events and door-to-door outreach to Japantown businesses, focusing on key design elements such as waste collection, plantings, lighting, storytelling, and paving. This process aimed to further develop the preferred conceptual design identified in previous engagement efforts.

Public safety remained a top priority for both businesses and residents, with a strong emphasis on maintaining cleanliness and trash placement in the alley. Community members preferred planting options are easier to maintain. Integrated lighting was highlighted as crucial for creating a clean and safe environment within the alley. Preserving existing panels and murals that convey the area's historical narrative was a shared priority. Accessibility concerns focused on ensuring level paving, with a strong community preference for recycled bricks to uphold the alley's historic character.



Lunar New Year Event, 2024



## CITY OF SEATTLE FEEDBACK

Throughout the design process, the consultant team engaged various City of Seattle departments, including the Department of Transportation, Department of Neighborhoods, Seattle Public Utilities, and Seattle Fire Department. Departments preferred the design chosen by the community because it aligns with current waste management practices and ongoing maintenance. Key themes we heard include:

- Design should keep horizontal and vertical clearance in mind
- Use robust materials for the alley
- Specific concerns around design elements, and how they will be installed on the ground
- Continue to engage SFD on design review to ensure fire trucks can get through
- Continue to engage the C/ID community and businesses.



View of Nihonmachi Alley from Danny Woo Garden



# PREFERRED ALLEY DESIGN

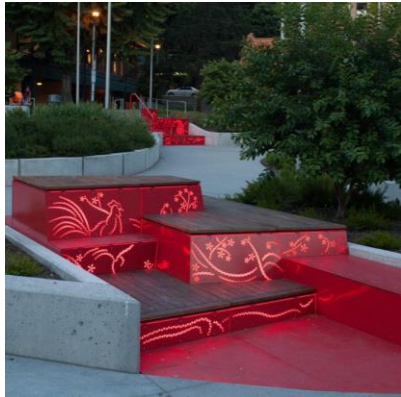
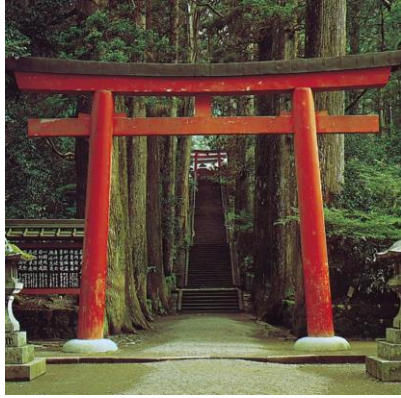


## GATEWAYS CONCEPT

The alley's context as a key linkage between neighborhood open spaces makes it both a connective corridor and a threshold gateway for people coming and going. Spatially extending the site's connections beyond its boundaries, we see that the alley sits along a series of linked gateways that welcome people to and through the neighborhood.

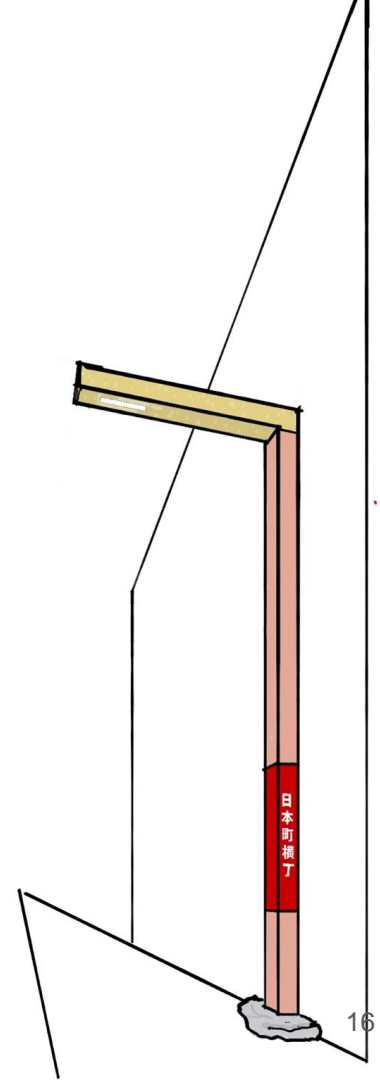
Temporally, the alley is also a gateway to the past. Thanks to the performances that occur at Chiyo's Garden, the preserved history at the Panama Hotel, and the interpretive panels in the alley provided by the Wing Luke Museum, the alley serves as a gateway for contemporary users to learn about the layered histories that still occupy and define this place.





## GATEWAYS INSPIRATION

The most famous Japanese gateway form is undoubtedly the torii gate, which is associated with Shinto's animist beliefs. The design for the alley is informed by, but significantly different from, this traditional structure. By grafting glowing lighting into the posts, the gateways pull in recent public space improvements from Hing Hay Park. By using Japanese joinery to attach the post to the lintel or beam, we celebrate the profound tradition of craft that is synonymous with Japanese culture.







## GATEWAYS INSPIRATION

The wood construction of the gateways draws from both sides of the Pacific Ocean: Japan and the Pacific Northwest. Western Red Cedar posts root the descendents of Issei immigrants in the Pacific Northwest, while horizontal Japanese yellow cedar beams point, intentionally, across the Pacific. The team also discussed incorporating Coast Salish adze carving on the posts to reflect that this is “twice stolen land:” once through colonization, and again via forced incarceration during World War II.

## WORKING WITH THE EXISTING BUILDINGS

When considering where the gateways might be located along the alley, the design team considered the extant historic fabric and available clearances of the adjacent buildings.

This study found nine potential locations for the gateways that create a rhythmic arrangement based off the surrounding historic structures of the alleyway. When adjacent to Chiyo's Garden, the gateways are only proposed on the east side of the alley.





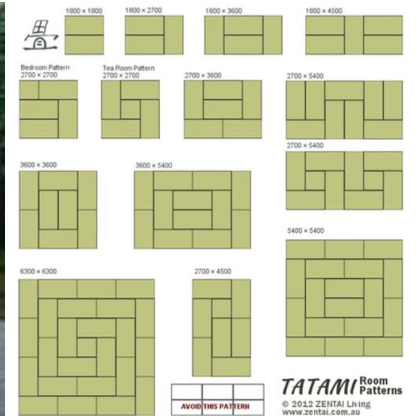
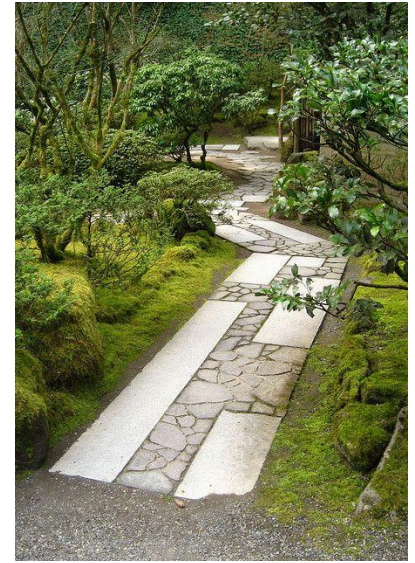
## PAVING

The paving design for the alley combines both the durability of poured-in-place concrete and the tactility of Japanese paving schemes, which can offer a smaller, more intimate scale.

Inspired by the mat configuration of traditional tatami rooms, the design proposes reusing the existing brick pavers by creating brick “stepping stones.” For most of the alley, these are located along the edge of the paving, but adjacent to Chiyo’s Garden, these amalgamations spill across the alley organically to invite people to gather and celebrate.

Another paving accent occurs at the base of each gateway element where a taller plinth stone raises the wood base above the pavement surfacing and provides some level of protection from the various vehicles moving through the alley.

On the following pages, examples of how these paving configurations come together.



S Main Street

PANAMA HOTEL

NP HOTEL

“Tatami” brick stepping stones  
crafted from reclaimed brick

Concrete drive aisle

Stone Plinth  
Gateway





S MAIN STREET

S JACKSON STREET

MAYN SUITES

ITSUMONO

PANAMA HOTEL

NP HOTEL

CHIYO'S GARDEN

KOBO AT HIGO



## ARTIST'S RENDERING

Looking up the alley (north), the transformed space encourages people to meander and explore.

On the next page, the same view transforms at night to envelop visitors with a warm glow as internally lit elements from the gateway posts and overhead lights create a well-lit atmosphere for all users.

CONCRETE PAVING

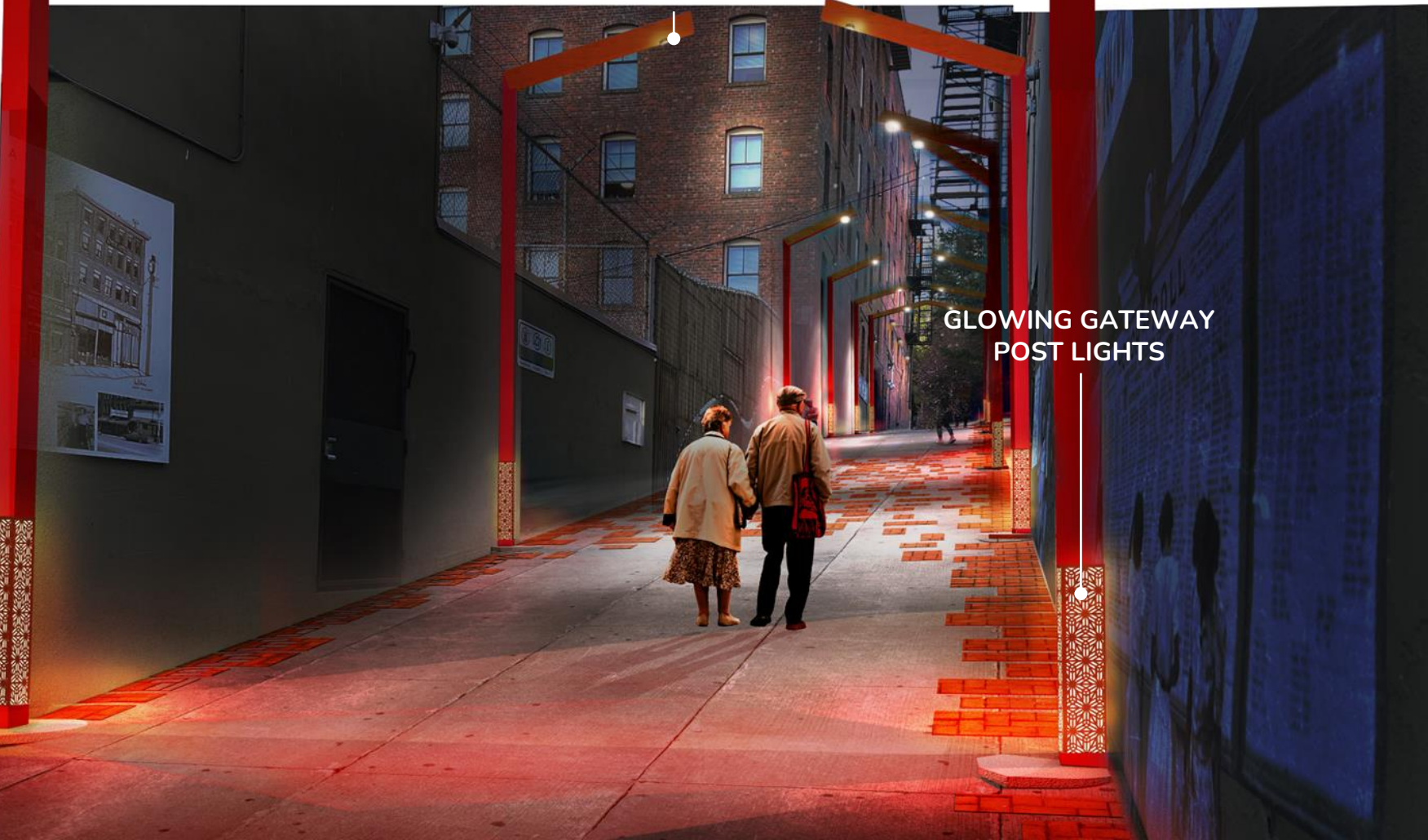
GATEWAYS

"TATAMI" BRICK INLAYS



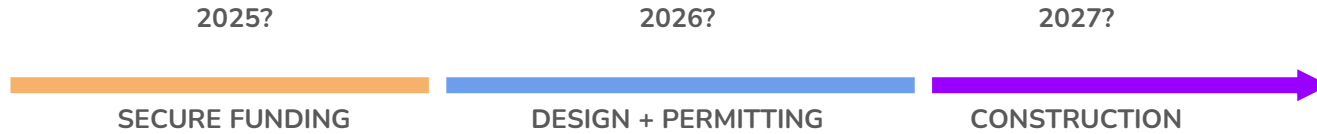


## GATEWAYS LIGHTS



GLOWING GATEWAY  
POST LIGHTS

## NEXT STEPS



SCIDpda will lead additional engagement efforts to ensure community members have an opportunity to review the plan. The Design Vision Plan was a first step in understanding how Nihonmachi Alley can be a regional cultural hub for the Asian Pacific American community in Seattle, and help bring visibility of the many stories that helped shape Japantown, and the greater Chinatown International District community as a whole.

With regards to next steps, funding needs to be secured to explore a conceptual design for Nihonmachi Alley. Additional engagement, along with continued partnership with local businesses, and residents in the Chinatown International District neighborhood is essential to ensure community input is reflected in the final design. The City of Seattle should continue to be active partners with SCIDpda to ensure trash service and clear travel pathways are maintained during this process.



## IMPLEMENTATION

A main objective of the Design Vision Plan is to ensure SCIDpda can use this document to help secure additional funding to move the preferred alternative to a conceptual design. The consultant team recommends that SCIDpda pursues funding for the entire conceptual design, rather than a phased approach.

Potential funding sources include Seattle Department of Transportation Neighborhood Street Fund Grants, Sound Transit, and USDOT Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grant Program.



# APPENDIX. PRELIMINARY DESIGN ALTERNATIVES

**WELCOME TO NIHONMACHI ALLEY**

NIHONMACHI ALLEY is a narrow, historic street in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, California. It is a vibrant neighborhood with a rich cultural heritage, home to many traditional Japanese businesses and restaurants. The alley is a unique blend of old and new, offering a glimpse into the past while embracing modern amenities.

**KOKUSAI THEATER**  
国際劇場

**MANEKI RESTAURANT**  
まねき

**SAGAMI CONFECTIONERY**  
さがみ

**UNANIMA SUSHI**  
うなひま

**YUBI**  
ゆび

**YUBI**  
ゆび



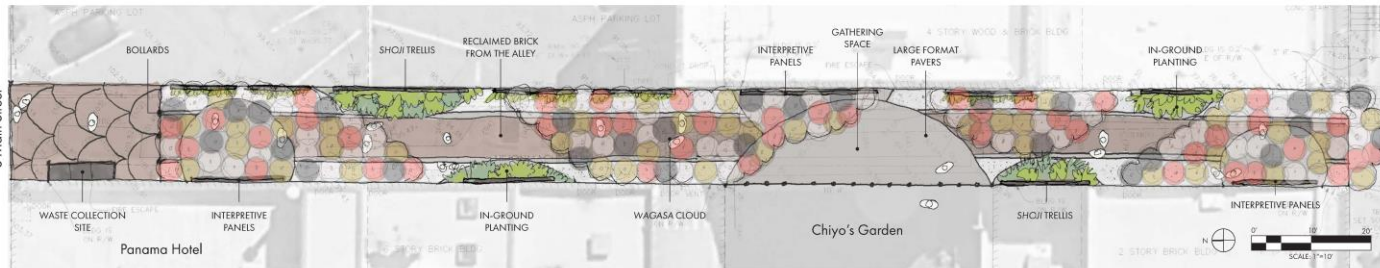
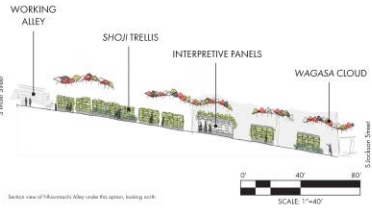


# WAGASA CLOUDS

This option draws on Japanese craft and architectural traditions to create an inviting, human-scaled, and place-based neighborhood connection. Overhead, clouds of suspended wagasa (Japanese paper umbrellas, here rendered in a more durable material) suggest a succession of colorful rooms through which visitors move. At night, the installation becomes a playful and engaging source of light.

Along the alley's edges, scaffolds inspired by *shoji* (walls, doors, and room dividers in traditional Japanese architecture) act as planted trellises or as mounts for interpretive panels telling the stories of Nihonmachi (Japantown). The circular forms of the wagasa overhead are mirrored below in the alley's pavement pattern, marking out spaces to gather together and defining the shapes of intermittent in-ground planting areas.

The majority of alley is closed to vehicles, while the west end of the alley where it meets S Main Street is retained as a vehicle-accessible "working alley" to facilitate waste collection.



# DAISUGI GARDEN

Inspired by the sustainable Japanese forestry technique of *daisugi*, this option speaks to the enduring strength of Japanese-Americans' roots in the Seattle area, creating a ground-and-sky garden within Nihonmachi Alley. Toward the lower end of the alley, a *daisugi* forest arbor hosts a floating garden above alley visitors' heads.

On the ground plane, pocket gardens are imagined as lush yet maintainable landscapes. Under the arbors, pockets of bamboo define and soften the edges, while in the upper reaches of the alley, broad cherry trees create a continuous canopy.

These planting areas define a meandering pathway that helps reduce the grade of the alley by making the distance travelled just a bit longer to navigate. This will help ease the topography for all who travel up the steep slopes. Bands of pavement, recalling the raking of traditional stone gardens, help define this elegant meander.

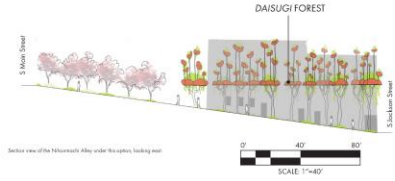
With the alley effectively closed to trucks, waste collection moves out of the alley completely to the frontages along businesses, similar to what currently occurs in other areas of the city. The frequency of trash pickup, however, remains the same.



Looking up from Jackson, the Daisugi arbors reach to overhead while still offering clear sightlines up and down the alley.



*Daisugi* (also called *topiary*) is a sustainable Japanese forestry technique that originated in forms around the 16th century. Daisugi trees make use of naturally growing tree multiple horizontal growths up to the base of the tree, allowing the upper vertical branches to be put to use, while the rest each remains undisturbed.



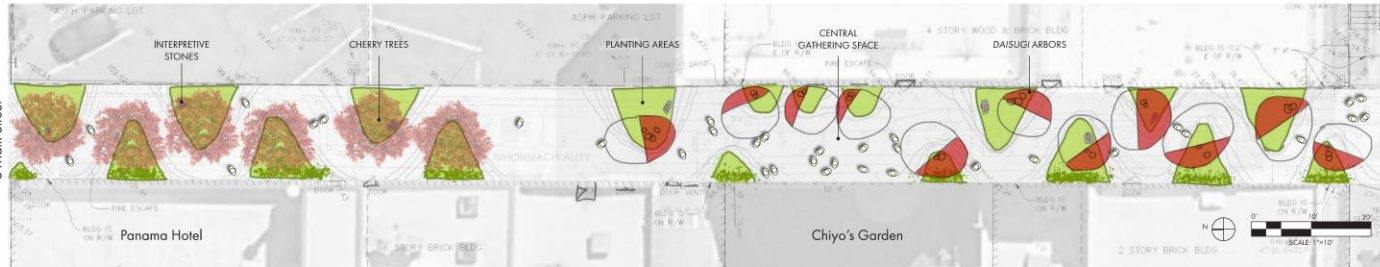
Section view of the Nihonmachi Alley under the canopy, looking east.



Vegetables, like watercress, drip down from the design arbors to create a trout and salmon pond.

While in the planting areas, stone microforms can help fill the design voids to create a trout and salmon pond.

Bands of pavement, inspired by traditional Zen gardens, define the curves of the planting areas.





# GATEWAYS TO THE PAST

Inspired by the gateways both of the CID and gateways' echoes with the spiritual animism of Shinto, this option proposes to create a series of gateways that connect through the CID as part of a cultural progression through the neighborhood.

The wood gateways are crafted from two species: Western red cedar, representing North America and paying homage to Native American stewards of this land, and Japanese yellow cedar, in a callback to Japan. Where vertical posts turns to horizontal beams, these wood species are joined through complex, hand crafted joinery.

Between the gateways, interpretive vitrines tell the stories of Japantown through text, objects, lighting and sound. Where vitrines are infeasible, vines grow up over the alley, slowly creating a continuous corridor of greenery.

In this option, the "Clean Alleys" program continues as it operates today, with the alley serving as the location for waste pickup.

