

# Old Town Portland



## Post-Pandemic Activation Plan





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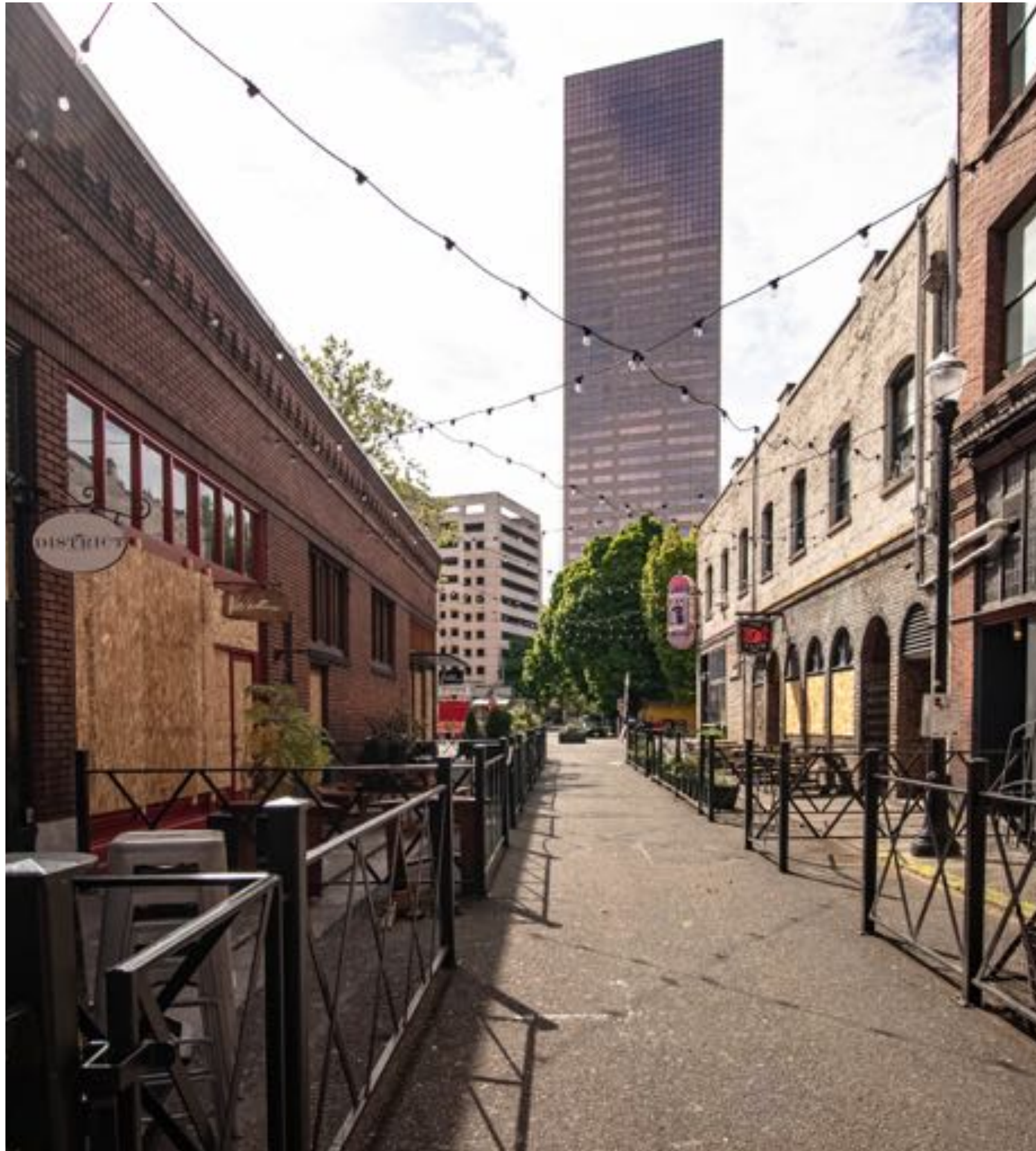
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## A Changed Landscape

Monday, March 23rd of 2020 marked the beginning of a new era with Oregon governor Kate Brown issuing a stay at home order in response to the growth and severity of COVID-19 cases in the State. On this date no one could have predicted the chain of events that would transpire throughout the following year. The length and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a tremendous upheaval to the social and economic fabric of Portland, leaving behind a dramatically altered landscape.

With the abrupt exodus of employees, tourists, and other patrons, Downtown Portland began a hollowing-out process that has led to an astonishing number of business closures and commercial vacancies. With a dense concentration of hospitality amenities and tourist attractions coupled with a small residential population, the Old Town neighborhood district has suffered tremendous pandemic-related losses that will lead to a difficult and complicated road to recovery.



# The Physical and Reputational Transformation of Downtown Portland

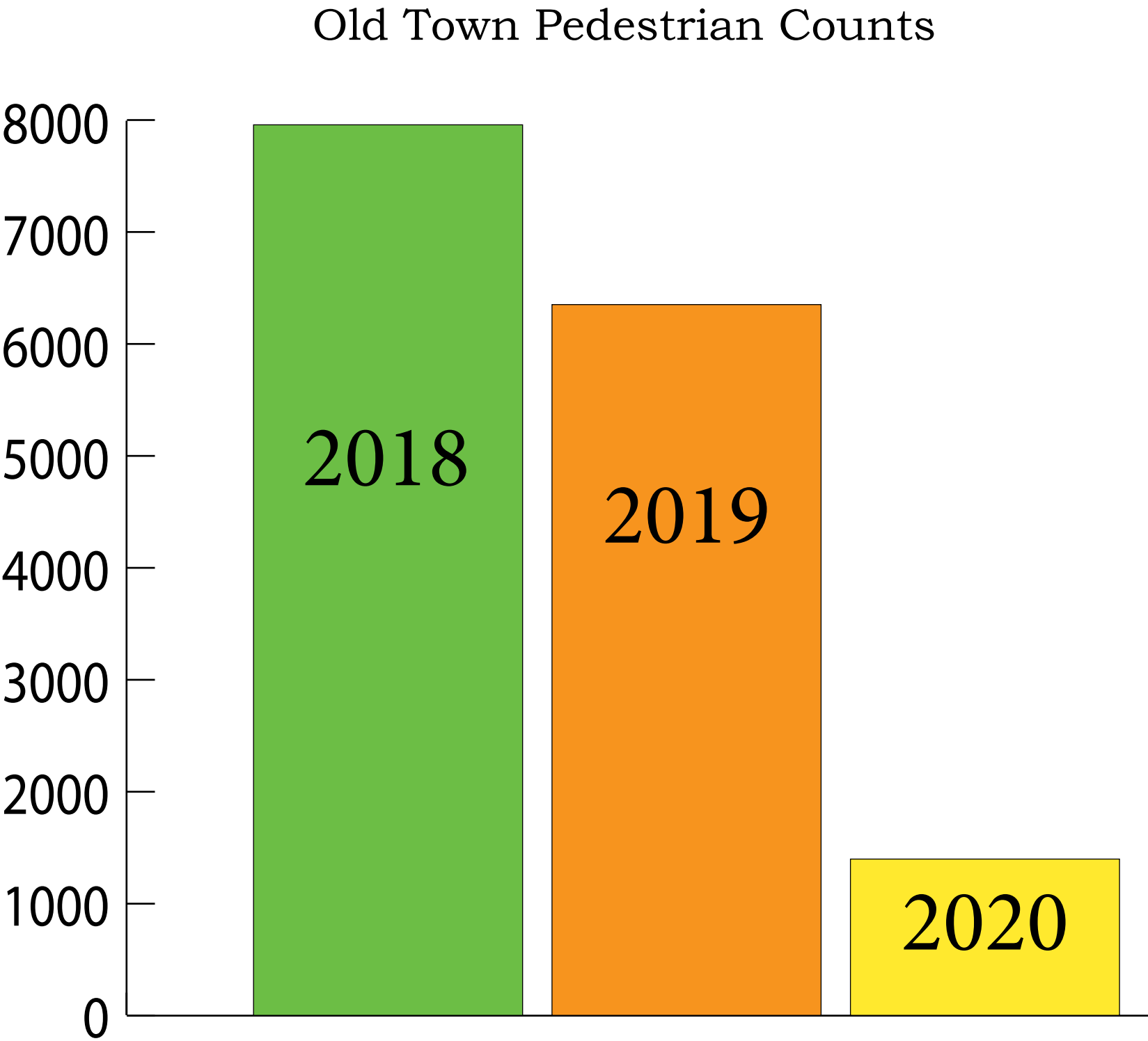


Immediately after the initial stay at home order was issued, the Downtown core took on a whole new form and appearance with once vibrant and busy streets becoming devoid of all activity. After 53 days of quarantine, Governor Brown lifted the initial stay at home order on May 15th, 2020 which many believed represented the light at the end of the tunnel. Ten days later Minneapolis resident George Floyd was killed while in police custody with a graphic and disturbing video of his death being widely distributed. Mounting anger over racial injustice and police brutality led to demonstrations in many cities with multiple peaceful protests taking place throughout Portland.



During the nighttime hours of May 29th, a riot erupted in Downtown Portland leading to a devastating level of property destruction and looting. Throughout the following weeks these behaviors would persist which lead to a large-scale boarding up of Downtown storefronts. In September of 2020 wildfire smoke engulfed Downtown Portland for close to two weeks, and in February of 2021 a historic snow event shut down normal activities once again. It is highly unlikely that Downtown Portland will ever see another year with so many continuous disruptions to community and economic vitality.

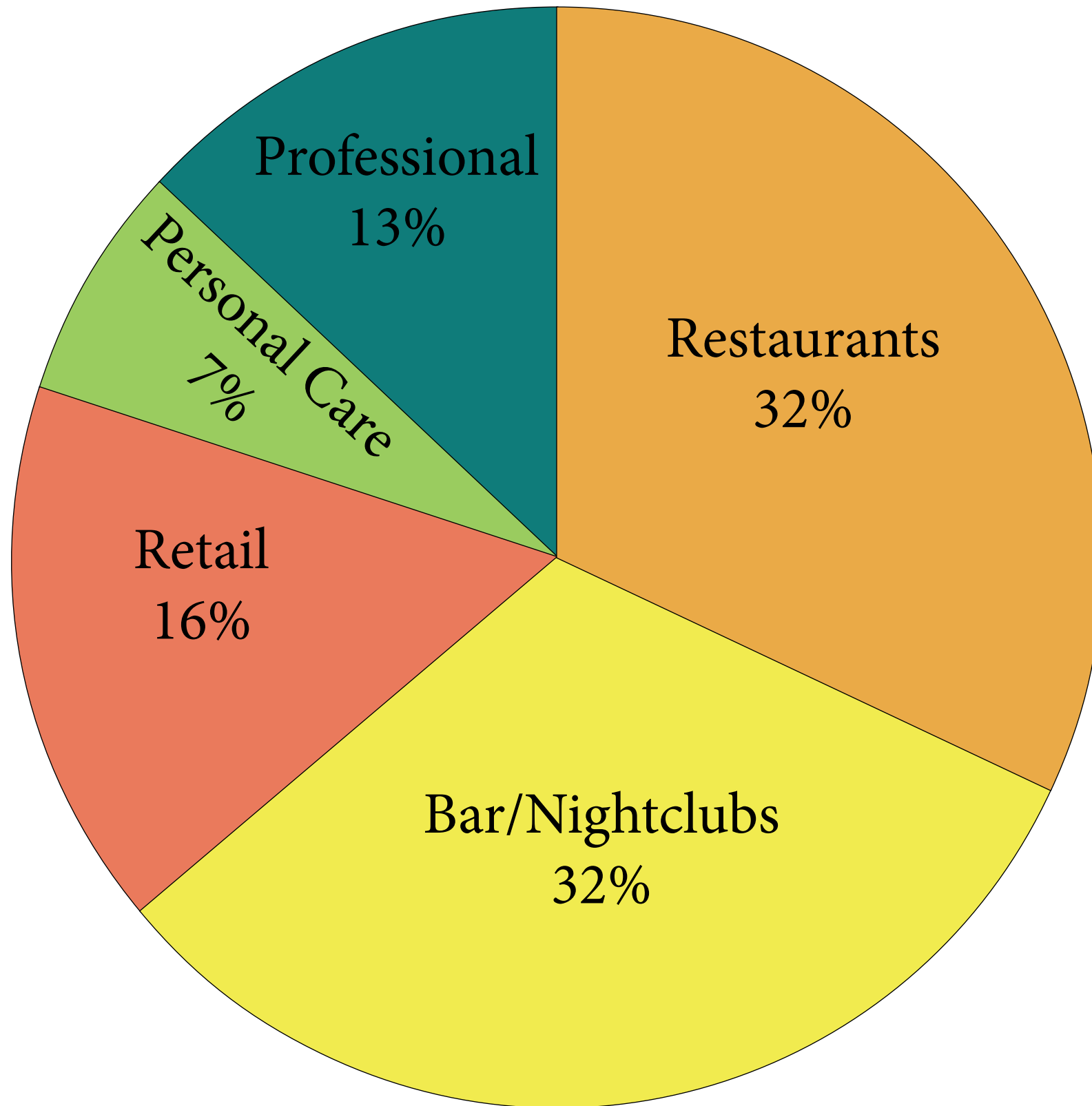
# Plummeting Pedestrian Foot Traffic in Old Town



Downtown Clean and Safe provides annual pedestrian counts at key intersections throughout Downtown Portland. Two intersections are counted each year in Old Town, NW 5th Avenue and Couch and NW 1st and Davis. Prior to the pandemic there were signs of a weakening economic landscape in Old Town with pedestrian foot traffic dropping 20% in 2019 along with high profile business departures which included Northwest Natural, Starbucks, and Compound Gallery. Pandemic restrictions, business closures, reductions in tourism, and negative safety perceptions caused pedestrian foot traffic in Old Town to drop 78% between 2019 and 2020 which had a devastating impact on business vitality and quality of life for Old Town residents.



# 2020 Old Town Business Closures



The pie chart to the left divides 32 Old Town business closures by industry sector. Old Town has a large concentration of bars and nightclubs which were disproportionately impacted during the earliest stages of the pandemic. Restaurants located in the Old Town district are heavily reliant on the daytime business community and tourism and both of these groups remained largely absent throughout the pandemic. Retailers in Old Town also appear to be heavily reliant on tourism but these businesses had more freedoms to operate during the pandemic which may have aided their survival. While some losses in professional services are accounted for this industry is less visible than ground floor retail and hospitality establishments, so the actual number of losses are likely to be much higher. Many private firms have expressed serious concerns over neighborhood conditions which may be an indicator of decreasing commercial office occupancy in Old Town.



# An Expanding Homeless Crisis in Old Town



Due to the cancellation of the annual point-in-time count, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Portland's homeless population are unknown from the macro perspective, but increases in neighborhood tent counts and consistent anecdotal reports indicate that the Old Town unsheltered population significantly increased throughout the course of the pandemic. The shuttering of food services in other neighborhoods prompted more unsheltered individuals to relocate to Old Town, and neighborhood stakeholders consistently reported that a "new group" had moved in which largely displaced the preexisting Old Town unsheltered population. With employees, tourists, and other visitors abandoning the neighborhood, struggling unsheltered community members were largely left alone in the streets which created a very difficult environment for our most vulnerable community members. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the rapid growth and vulnerability of the homeless population which calls for a heightened sense of urgency to find solutions to this expanding humanitarian crisis.



# Neighborhood SWOT Analysis

Complex conditions in Old Town make the neighborhood conducive to a traditional SWOT analysis. Old Town is a neighborhood that is consistently regarded as having “potential” and many different strategies and plans have been implemented, but challenges related to poverty, crime, and disinvestment have persistently stood in the way of measurable and consistent progress.

## Strengths

Proximity to the Downtown central business district

Irreplaceable historic architecture

A cultural history that is very unique to Portland

Abundance of transit amenities

Proximity to the Downtown waterfront

## Weaknesses

Ongoing concentration of illness and poverty

Negative perceptions and stigma resulting from crime, poorly treated behavioral health conditions, and associated issues

Ongoing difficulties with executing new development projects and filling commercial vacancies

## Opportunities

Large amounts of vacant commercial spaces provide robust opportunities for business incubation

Presence of several development ready parcels

An expanding bicycle infrastructure that connects to viable neighboring districts

\$57 million dollar Old Town action plan fund

## Threats

The “potential” of Old Town is contingent upon the vitality of greater Downtown Portland which is currently in question

Increased stigma and negative safety perceptions due to pandemic-related increases in crime and behavioral health issues

Poor track record in initiating change



# Design



# Activate

# Cultivate



# Promote



# District Recommendations

## Design

Design interesting new plaza spaces in the northern and southern sections of the neighborhood

Create new amenities to define and enhance the Entertainment District

Add artistically inspired crosswalk designs at key intersections

Add complimentary and distinct historic district signage

## Activate

Initiate and support recreational activities on the Waterfront

Organize and facilitate live musical performances

Support and evolve the Chinatown/Japantown District

Leverage the new and existing bicycle infrastructure to increase neighborhood foot traffic and patronage

## Cultivate

Employ the arts as a community development strategy

Evolve Old Town into Portland's primer fashion district

Strategically fill vacant commercial spaces

Support incubation activities through pop ups

Aggressively recruit complimentary dining establishments

## Promote

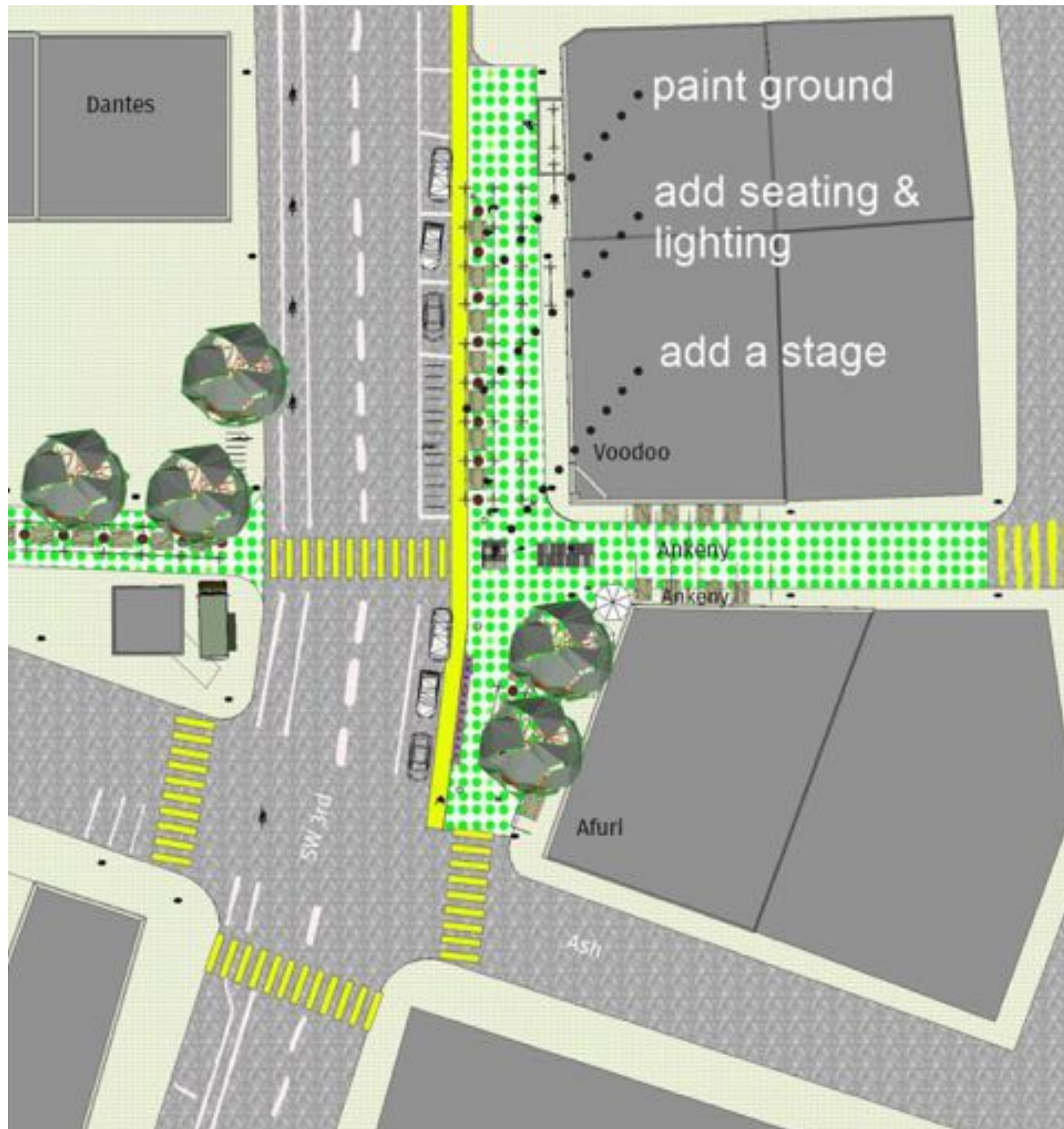
Organize and facilitate tours that promote the unique history and diversity of the neighborhood

Leverage the robust neighborhood transit infrastructure

Actively pursue and promote positive media coverage of the neighborhood



# Design Concept Section



Bold and diverse design elements are central to the form and identity of Old Town, which is evidenced by the neighborhood being home to the second largest collection of Cast Iron style buildings along with the presence of Chinese-influenced design elements. Old Town has several distinct plaza spaces which include the Japanese-American Historical Plaza, Ankeny Plaza, and the Festival Streets on Davis and Flanders.

The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the need for adaptable outdoor spaces, and with Old Town serving as a hub for entertainment and culture there are many opportunities to create and activate new plaza spaces throughout the neighborhood. With a record number of outdoor events taking place on the Davis Festival Street during 2020 there is reason to believe that a robust patron network exists for outdoor activities in Old Town. Developing additional outdoor plaza spaces can increase the amount of visible activity in the neighborhood and provide a remedy for the recent prolonged period of inactivity.





## 1. NW 3rd and Ankeny

Due to an unusual configuration the pedestrian area around NW 3rd and Ankeny could become a distinct and viable plaza space. With the presence of Voodoo Doughnuts, Ankeny Alley, and the Portland Saturday Market, this area is Old Town's most popular tourist destination. While this location has seen some upgrades in the form of a distinct pedestrian travel lane, planters, and alley lighting, the surface area remains rough, undefined, and devoid of public seating. Upgrades to the space could extend the periods of time that patrons spend in this area which could lead to measurable increases in density of activity.

The design concepts on the following pages seek to better define this space by adding an interesting color scheme to the ground, adding public seating, and providing definition to plaza boundaries.



## Plaza Concept for NW 3rd and Ankeny Alley Looking South





## Plaza Concept for NW 3rd and Ankeny Alley Looking North







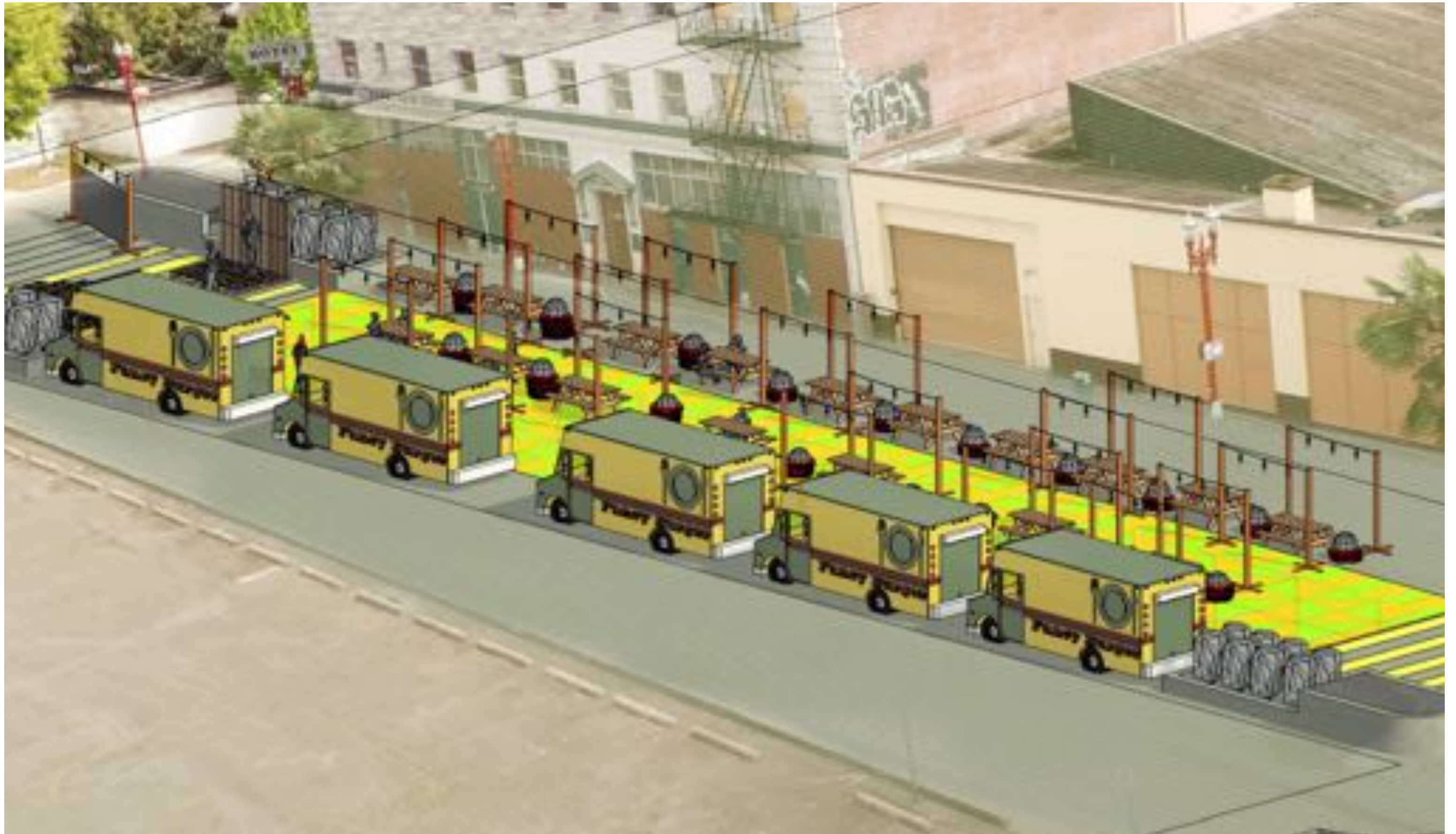
## 2. The Flanders Festival Street

There are two parallel “Festival Streets” located in Old Town, one on Davis and another on Flanders between NW 3rd and NW 4th Avenues. The Festival Streets were constructed in 2008 with the intention of generating visible activity in the neighborhood, but with no formal management entity being created or designated these streets remained largely inactive for over a decade. With PBOT offering free street closure permitting and barricades to promote more outdoor activities in response to COVID-19, a series of street fairs were launched on the Davis Festival Street by Produce Portland and the Old Town Community Association. These events grew exponentially throughout the summer of 2020 and these activities displayed the untapped potential of the Old Town Festival Streets.

Due to the absence of adjacent customer-serving businesses the Flanders Festival Street has remained inactive. The presence of the Lan Su Chinese Garden to the east and the Japanese American Museum of Oregon to the west provide opportunities for the street to be activated. The design renderings on the following pages propose a food cart pod that could be assembled during peak visiting times of the neighboring museum and garden.



## Plaza Concept for the Flanders Festival Street - Ariel View





# Plaza Concept for the Flanders Festival Street Looking West

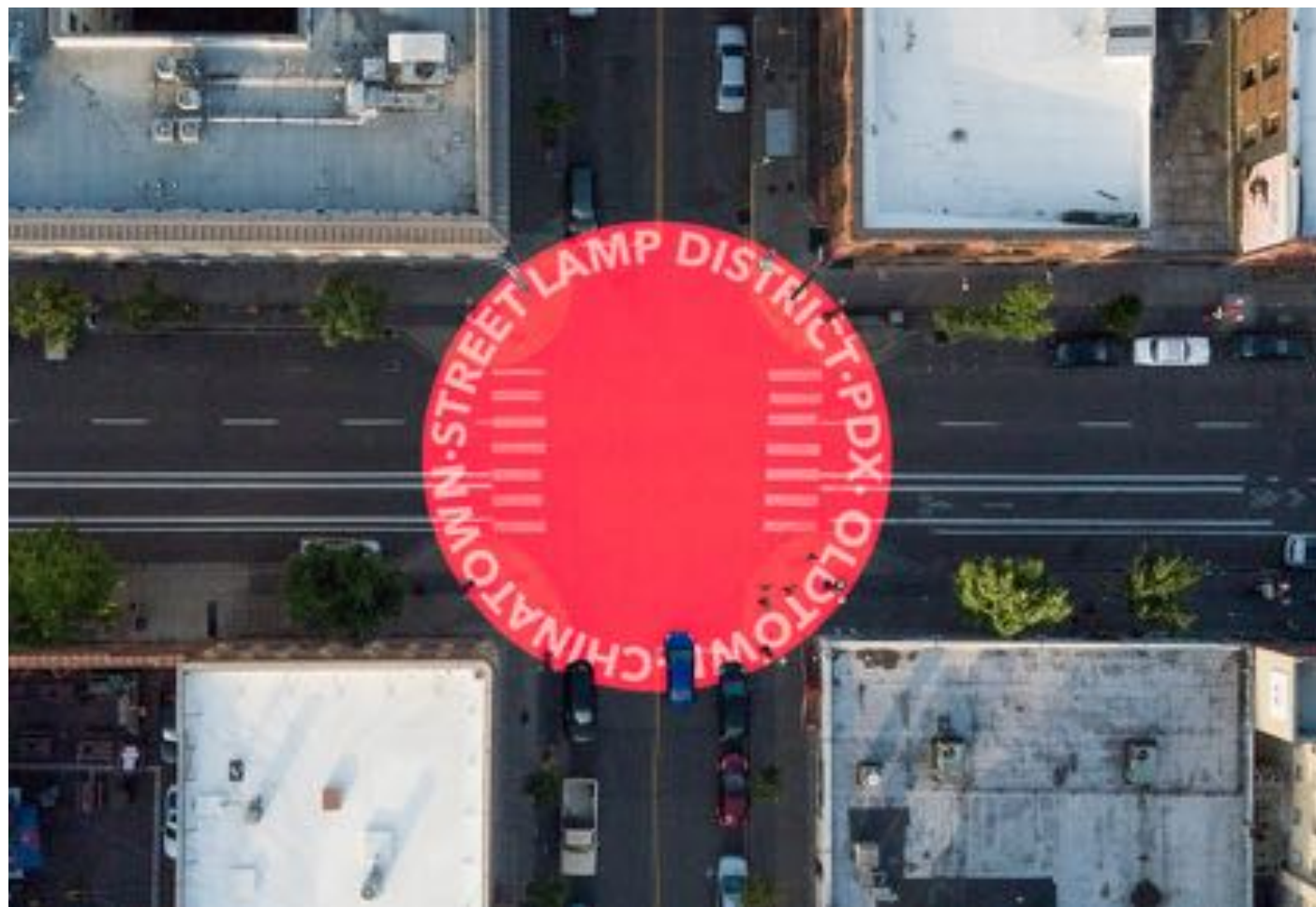




## Plaza Concept for the Flanders Festival Street Looking West







### 3. Upgrading the Entertainment District

Old Town was home to a formerly-thriving nighttime Entertainment District at NW 3rd and Couch which was an important component in filling commercial spaces and keeping the neighborhood active at night. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on entertainment businesses, which has led to an alarming increase in nighttime business closures in and around the Entertainment District. Design upgrades were proposed for the District prior to the pandemic, and due to the proliferation of nightclub vacancies and a pressing need to reactivate the neighborhood these formerly proposed design upgrades are strongly recommended for near-term implementation.

The design concepts on the following page propose painting the intersection of NW 3rd and Couch along with constructing a permanent barricade system. These additions would benefit the district by defining it as a distinct place, providing a 24/7 advertisement for weekend activities, promoting activities within the central intersection, and reducing the labor and storage needs involved with managing movable barricades.

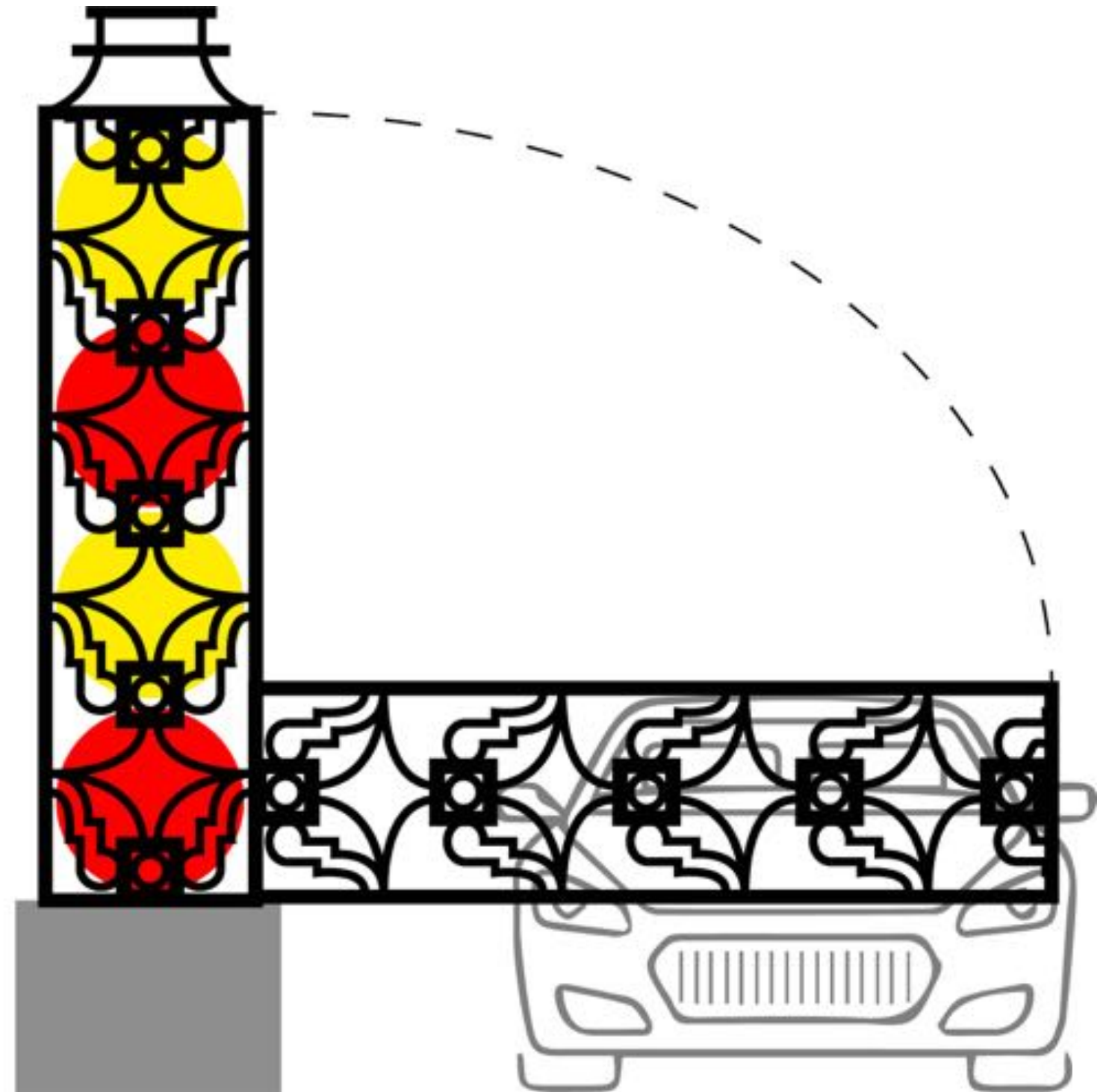


# Entertainment District Design Concepts

## 3rd and Couch Intersection Design



## Permanent Barricade System







## 4. Creative Crosswalk Design

Old Town has a walkable neighborhood infrastructure which can be leveraged in many different ways. Due to the presence of unique architectural design schemes in different parts of the neighborhood, there are opportunities to enhance and augment these preexisting design aesthetics even further. The absence of ground-level greenery and the challenges involved with greening the neighborhood call for additional strategies to add color and softness to the ground. Colorful and creative crosswalk designs are recommended as a way to break the monotony of the overly-concrete neighborhood surfaces and to enhance preexisting design elements.

On the following page the crosswalk on 4th and Couch receives a design intervention that corresponds with the Chinatown Gate. There are many sections of the neighborhood where a complimentary crosswalk design such as this could be added at a relatively low cost.



## Creative Crosswalk Design at NW 4th and Couch







## 5. District Signage

Signage is a key element in defining unique districts that have important architectural and cultural significance. District signage should be present at all boundaries and it should be designed in a way that encompass the unique aesthetic of the neighborhood. Prominent signage is a common feature in historic districts throughout the United States and these markers serve as reminders that historic neighborhood districts are distinct and special places.

While Old Town possess a few distinct signage elements which include the Chinatown Gate, mass produced wayfinding signs, and the standard green road sign pictured on the left, the neighborhood lacks the type of signage that is commonly found in other prominent historic districts. The following pages display signage concepts that are stylistically consistent with the proposed locations and are more in line with comparable historic districts. Due to the very diverse architectural and cultural history of the neighborhood different colors and styles are recommended with consistent fonts.



## District Signage Concept at NW 6th and Irving





## District Signage Concept at Naito and Couch





# Activation Concept Section



There is a long history of assembling strategies and recommendations to activate Old Town so this exercise is nothing new, however, the prolonged period of neighborhood inactivity brought about by the pandemic elevates the need and importance for robust activation strategies. Historically, Old Town has been heavily reliant on tourism to activate the neighborhood and it is currently unclear as to what the future levels of tourist activity in Portland will be. Due to the ramifications of prolonged neighborhood inactivity it is imperative that renewed activation strategies be implemented in Old Town. The following pages list four activation strategies that are recommended for immediate implementation.





## 1. Opportunities on the Waterfront

One of the key assets of the Old Town neighborhood is its adjacency to the Wilmette River. With the abundance of cherry blossom trees, open fields, bicycle and pedestrian paths, and views of the iconic Steel Bridge, this area provides a wide array of enviable amenities. This space is defined by the presence of the Japanese American Historical Plaza which was designed by the award-winning landscape architect Robert Murase. This waterfront section is truly a special place that deserves to be activated to the highest degree possible.

Pandemic conditions have placed a greater emphasis on outdoor activities and throughout the past year there has been a notable increase in patronage along the river. A preference for engaging in outdoor activities is anticipated to continue beyond the pandemic which provides new opportunities for attracting patrons to the Old Town waterfront. The waterfront walkway and the open spaces near Naito create abundant opportunities for organized outdoor recreation that can activate the area and bring new patrons to Old Town.





## 2. Live Outdoor Musical Performances

After a prolonged absence of live musical events the pent-up demand for live music to return has become palpable. It may be in the best interests of Old Town to capitalize on this by organizing and promoting free outdoor live musical performances inside of the District. There are multiple viable locations to accommodate outdoor musical performances which include the Festival Streets, Ankeny Plaza, and the Entertainment District street closure area.

Previous studies on the Entertainment District and the Old Town retail core have identified live music as a strategy that can liven these areas and increase neighborhood patronage. Live music was a primary component in the growth and success of 6th Street Entertainment District in Austin, Texas and the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, California. The pandemic proved that live music is something that can be easily taken for granted when it is present but it is very much missed when it is taken away, and this dynamic speaks to the potential that live musical performances could have for reactivating the District.





### 3. Evolve the Chinatown/Japantown District

Old Town is a neighborhood full of distinct sub-districts and perhaps none are as easily recognizable as the Portland New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District. With the presence of the Chinatown Gate, multiple museums, Chinese-influenced architectural designs, and complimentary restaurants all of the necessary ingredients are present for a robust urban cultural district. Highlighted in gold on the map to the left, the Chinatown/Japantown District sits directly in the middle of the neighborhood which creates an opportunity for this sub-district to be an important catalyst for activating the neighborhood as a whole.

While the Chinatown/Japantown district possesses a very unique history and architectural form, ongoing issues related to vacancy and disinvestment have hindered the preservation and advancement of this important space. Recommendations made by the neighborhood Arts, History, and Culture Committee include engaging neighborhood university students in cultural activities, making historical sidewalk plaques more visible, facilitating cultural district tours, increasing meaningful support provided to Chinese restaurants, and increasing the quantity and presence of culturally-specific art.





## 4. Leverage the Existing Bicycle Infrastructure

With the recent installation of the Flanders Greenway along with existing bike lanes on 2nd, 3rd, Naito, and Broadway, Old Town may have more bike lanes per square mile than any other neighborhood in Portland. The Flanders Greenway is the first east-west bike lane running through the neighborhood which connects Old Town to The Pearl and Alphabet Districts. With these neighboring districts having a substantial residential population, the Flanders Greenway has long been seen as an opportunity to bring additional foot traffic and disposable income to the neighborhood.

If existing bike lanes running through Old Town were to be enhanced by substantial greenery, wayfinding signage, secure bike racks, and other amenities, Old Town could benefit from more cyclists riding through and parking their bikes to patron the neighborhood. The aforementioned proposal to convert the Flanders Festival street into a food-centric plaza space could also leverage this bike path for additional patronage. With outdoor recreation gaining popularity during the pandemic a ripe opportunity exists to leverage existing cycling infrastructure for community and economic development purposes.



# Cultivation Section



While design and activation provide the necessary ingredients to build a strong and healthy community, the process of cultivation allows for a molding of these ingredients into an optimal form. Much work has already been done to cultivate community in Old Town but with new opportunities emerging though increases in commercial vacancy and pandemic-influenced lifestyle changes there is room to evolve and grow, and the neighborhood would be well served by cultivating the components that are necessary to achieve a strong, healthy, diverse, and complete community.

Stakeholders in Old Town have been very active in attracting and promoting complimentary components to the neighborhood, and this sections seeks to document and encourage the continuation of neighborhood cultivation work that is ongoing.





## 1. Support the Further Cultivation of the Artistic Community in Old Town

Much progress has been made in expanding the artistic community in Old Town through the completion of over 40 window-board murals and the repurposing of a vacant unit on NW 4th Avenue into a rotating gallery space. The combination of grand historic architecture, a rich cultural history, and a centralized location has made Old Town key node for artists and creatives of all types. The presence of the Everett Station Lofts artist community, multiple museums, and the proximity of the Pacific Northwest College of Art create a solid foundation to grow a diverse and robust arts community in Old Town.

Initiatives that can further cultivate the artistic community in Old Town include launching a First Thursday event series, pursuing opportunities for additional mural installations, and pursuing additional pop up locations for temporary art gallery exhibits.







## 2. Evolve Old Town into Portland's Premier Fashion District

Over the past several years, creatively-driven clothing design has become a larger part of the identity of Old Town. The cutting-edge clothing designers who frequent Old Town are “cut from the same cloth” as the other artist communities who are bonded to the District. The presence of unique apparel retailers and proximity to Downtown are key factors in this relationship, and Old Town has increasingly become a popular destination for fashion photoshoots and other apparel-related activities.

While clothing retailers are consistently referenced as a strength of the District the actual density of retail establishments is quite low. Assembling a critical mass of apparel retailers would help solidify Old Town as a legitimate retail district and the best fit would be retailers selling creatively-driven clothing designs. Additional cultivation activities include attracting material suppliers, hosting fashion shows, and creating a low-cost studio space for product photoshoots.





### 3. Leverage Commercial Vacancies to Attract Resilient Entrepreneurs

While commercial vacancies have been one of the most significant barriers to progress in Old Town, this dynamic does provide an opportunity to create and mold to a degree that would not be possible if these spaces were currently occupied. Readily available and potentially lower-cost space provides an opportunity to attract creative entrepreneurs who are at a germinal stage of development and would be a complimentary fit with the other creative and artistic enterprises within the neighborhood.

Efforts are underway to provide lower cost commercial space to emerging entrepreneurs and the observed enthusiasm and optimism within this group provides a much needed remedy for all of the challenges that Old Town has faced over the past year. A great need has developed to find creative solutions to make commercial leases more economically feasible to increase density of activity in the neighborhood. Encouraging Prosper Portland to master-lease buildings and consolidating like-minded creatives into single units are cultivation activities that are ongoing.





## 4. Foster Small Business Incubation with Market and Pop Up Opportunities

Much of the potential to evolve Old Town into a premier fashion districts comes from the connections that young apparel designers have to the neighborhood. A strong network has been developed by engaging young entrepreneurs in low-barrier outdoor markets which allow them to sell products and gain valuable customer feedback from market patrons. Market participants who have large product inventories have been invited to do pop up shops in the OTCA gallery space, and by providing a brick-and-mortar retail experience these young entrepreneurs are brought closer to obtaining a retail unit of their own. Markets and pop ups represent the bottom steps on a ladder that can help young entrepreneurs gain the confidence and experience to consider leasing a commercial unit of thier own.

Further incubation activities can include expanding and diversifying the locations and products offered at outdoor markets and identifying additional vacant retail spaces to expand the amount of retail pop up events taking place in the neighborhood.





## 5. Aggressively Recruit New Dining Establishments to the District

Previous studies performed by the Old Town Community Association and Eco Northwest have identified a lack of dining options as one of the most pressing issues in regards to neighborhood vitality. Limited neighborhood dining options were frequently referenced as a weakness prior to the pandemic, and the amount of restaurant closures over the past year have compromised the dining landscape in Old Town even further. The number of neighborhood dining establishments would have to double to provide the amount of dining options seen in other viable Downtown districts.

Significantly increasing the number of dining establishments in Old Town may require the most time and effort out of all the cultivation strategies that are proposed in this document. Achieving the desired level of growth will most likely require substantial incentives along with intensive recruitment work by neighborhood stakeholders and public agencies.



# District Promotion Section



Old Town has long been regarded as a neighborhood full of “hidden gems”, and while there are some distinct advantages to maintaining this type of brand the current challenges call for increasing awareness to all there is to see and do in the neighborhood. Distinct amenities and offerings in Old Town include the Lan Su Chinese Garden, multiple cultural museums, beautiful rooftop spaces, unique retailers, and a rich cultural and architectural history. No need to keep all of this a secret!

While the Old Town neighborhood possesses many notable assets, the neighborhood has experienced high levels of crime and vacancy which has the effect of generating negative press coverage and stigma. News stories regarding crime and homelessness in Old Town increased substantially throughout the pandemic which appear to have fed into negative perceptions of the neighborhood. After a very difficult year there is much work to be done in changing perceptions and increasing awareness of all the uniqueness and beauty that is contained within Old Town.





# 1. Organize Historic District Tours

Well run historic district tours can be a way to introduce people to the hidden details and nuances of the neighborhood, and this activity could be a viable revenue generator for the Community Association if they choose to pursue this venture. Organized tours are common in other comparable districts and many believe that historic district tours are critically important in supporting and promoting preservation efforts. Old Town community members and stakeholders have consistently voiced dissatisfaction regarding neighborhood tours that have been facilitated by existing groups which has led to pessimistic views about any potential benefits coming out of this activity. This dissatisfaction creates an opportunity to provide an alternative that is more in line with the type of tour that community members want to see.

With Old Town being adjacent to the Downtown core a viable market exists for district tours when levels of tourism to Portland are high. With negative stigma and perceptions by some that the neighborhood is unsafe, offering formal guided tours may be a way to bring people into the neighborhood who may not feel comfortable or motivated to explore the District on their own.







## 2. Promote the Array of Transit Options

Old Town is the only neighborhood outside of the Central Business District where all five Max light rail lines can be accessed. When you add up the existing bicycle infrastructure, the Portland Union Amtrak Station, and the Portland Downtown Heliport, Old Town has more alternative transportation options than any other neighborhood in Portland. Old Town is ripe for transit oriented developments of all types along with attracting residents and businesses who wish to live a car-free lifestyle.

While the neighborhood is quite rich in transit resources it does not appear that Old Town has a reputation for having bountiful transit options. In business owner survey that was conducted in January of 2019, zero business owners cited proximity to transit as a reason for locating their businesses in Old Town. Through this survey and other discussions it appears that even Old Town community members and stakeholders are unaware of the density and richness of neighborhood transit options. Promoting transit resources inside and outside of the neighborhood may help to change perceptions regarding the advantages of living and working in Old Town.





### 3. Pursue Positive Media Coverage

Throughout 2020 an unprecedented number of negative news stories were generated regarding devolving conditions in Downtown Portland. Old Town also received an unprecedented amount of negative news coverage regarding dramatic increases in sidewalk camping and violent incidents. The path to reputational recovery involves overcoming stigmas from negative news coverage for both Downtown Portland and the Old Town neighborhood.

While it is true that circumstances over the past year have led to many challenges in the neighborhood, the negative news coverage doesn't tell the full story. Throughout 2020 there were many events, initiatives, and activities in the neighborhood that reflect positively on the existing community. Seeking more balanced news coverage by promoting positive activities is a way Old Town stakeholders can help to paint a more complete picture as to what is happening inside of Old Town.



# Conclusion



After a year like no other, much hard work needs to be done to regain lost ground and place Old Town on a trajectory that will fulfill the neighborhood's potential in becoming an active, viable, and prosperous community. The design, activation, cultivation, and promotional recommendations contained in this report are able to be implemented in-concert which can create a positive synergy that would be far greater than the sum of its parts. These are all strategies that can be implemented and championed by the Old Town Community Association Board of Directors and the Community Development Director. While past planning documents have provided recommendations for other governmental agencies, the events and outcomes over the past year have indicated that the fate of Old Town lies in the hands of the current neighborhood stakeholders, and the future is very much dependent on what this group will be able to collectively accomplish.



# Acknowledgments



This plan was written and assembled by **Daniel Klinkert, MUP LCSW** with design rendering assistance provided by:

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All Photographs by Daniel Klinkert