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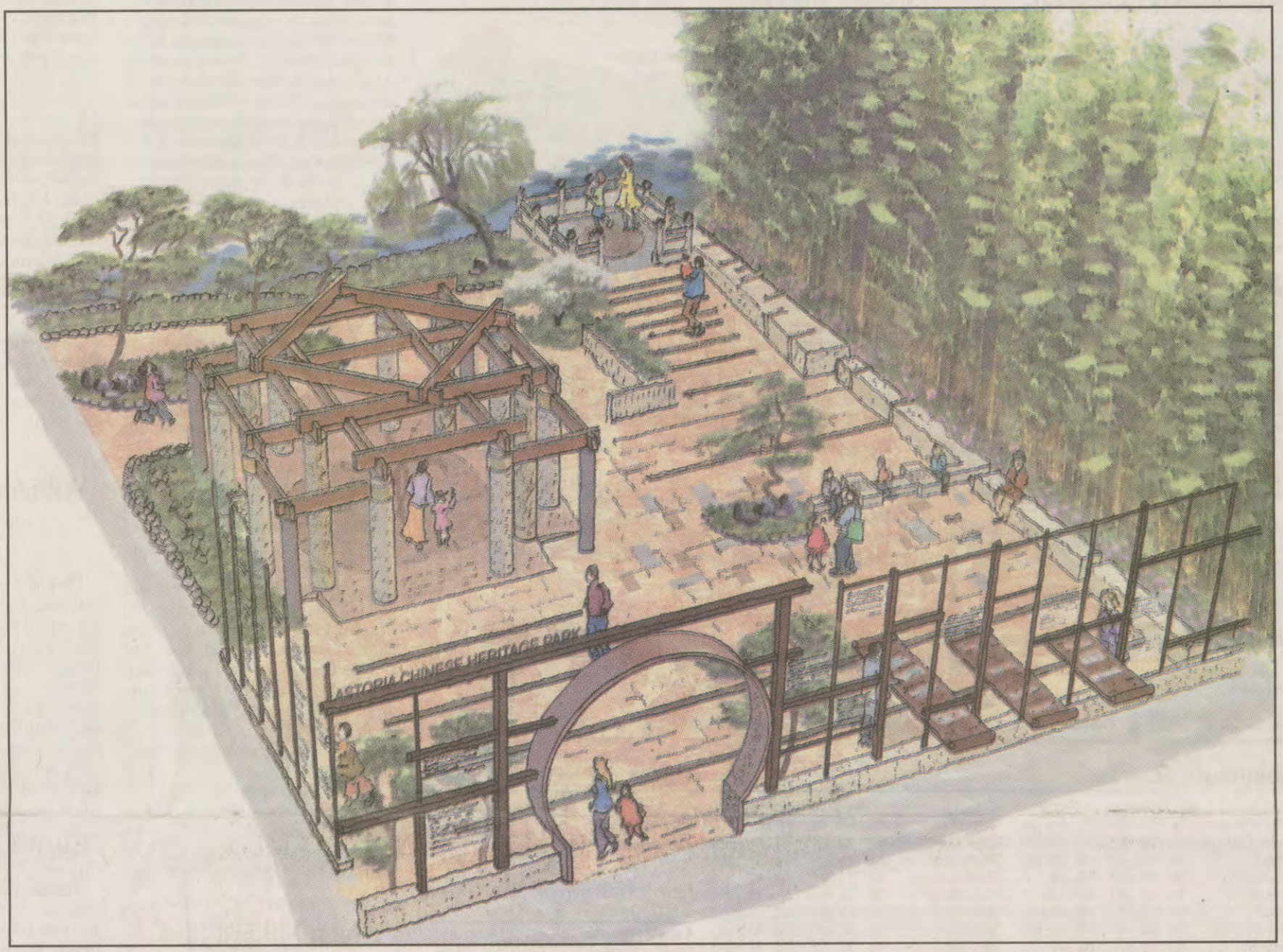
Astoria park to symbolize Chinese heritage, tradition



SUENN HO — MulvannyG2 Architecture

This conceptual drawing for the Astoria Chinese Heritage Park includes a moon gate, a heritage platform and other symbolic elements.

Chinese Park Committee presents city with a conceptual design for park

By SANDRA SWAIN
The Daily Astorian

On the waterfront at the edge of Astoria's former Chinatown, a tribute to Astoria's Chinese heritage is taking shape. A tiny park at Ninth and Astor streets will be transformed in a way that commemorates the culture and contributions of Chinese immigrants and celebrates their hard work, bravery and pioneering spirit.

Thanks to the year-long efforts of a Chinese Park Committee, and with help from city staff, a conceptual design has been developed by Suenn Ho, senior designer at MulvannyG2 Architecture in Portland. Last week, Ho presented the design to the Astoria City Council and it was warmly received.

"I had seen the drawings before the presentation, but when the professional talked about it, it really brought it to life," Mayor Willis Van Dusen said. "I really believe the community will get behind this park and will support it."

"It's exactly what I had envisioned it would be," said Duncan Law. A self-described elder statesman of Astoria's Chinese community, Law grew up here and worked in the canneries that lined the riverfront in his youth. He went on to become an Oregon State University professor and headed the OSU Seafood Lab here for decades. Astoria's Seafood Consumer Center is named after him.

Law said he was uneasy with the park's location at first, recalling that the area once was a "bawdy house district." But he said he put that concern aside and now considers it the ideal spot because it's at the midpoint of the Riverwalk, a place where people can rest, learn about history and be reminded of the role the Chinese played in this area.

The opportunity to design the park is special to Ho, who was born in Boston but grew up in Hong Kong and came to Oregon in 1992. "As part of the Chinese community, it's a really nice way of looking at the extended families here (in the United States). It's very inspiring," she said. "The older generation's values and aspirations are very precious. It's the job of younger generations to pass on their culture, to share the culture from the distant homeland," Ho said.



Duncan Law: prominent member of Chinese community

"Too many younger people only see fortune cookies. As the mother of two young daughters, I want them to appreciate that the older generation was there to pave the path."

Noting that "the Astoria experience was a very small sliver of the culture this group of immigrants brought to this very special city," in coming up with her conceptual design, Ho said she looked beyond the historic documents of the Chinese immigrants to where they came from.

Symbolic meaning

Her design concept features several main elements arranged within a nine-square grid that has a symbolic meaning in Chinese culture.:

• The Platform of Heritage, which "abstractly references the achievements of Chinese civilization," makes use of an existing concrete bunker and adds bronze inscriptions and images that "depict thousands of years of Chinese discovery and inventions." Surrounded by granite elements, the platform will invite visitors to look across the ocean toward the roots of Chinese culture.

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ASTOR STREET

SUENN HO — MulvannyG2 Architecture

Shown is a conceptual drawing of a plan diagram for the future Astoria Chinese Heritage Park.

Park: 'A real jewel of a park ... '

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• The Terraces recall a rock wall built by Chinese laborers along the waterfront on the east side of town for shoreline protection, remnants of which still exist.

• The Court will have plantings and paving tiles arranged to represent a sort of diagram of significant places in the former Chinatown. Some train rails will be inlaid in the paving tiles as a reminder that Chinese laborers helped build the railroad. A bamboo planter will serve as a bench and wall and will symbolize a timeline for significant historical events.

• The Pavilion of Transition "intended to be a majestic presence" will have columns and ornate benches, along with a "subtle depiction of life in the fish canneries." Its five-tier frame in the form of a lotus symbolizes purity through hardship.

• The Gate of Harmony will feature a Moon Gate entrance through framed images and stories of the Astoria community. It will be a place to celebrate the success and pride the Chinese community achieved through hard work.

• The Donor Screen will display the names of donors and supporters of the park as the project is underway.

• The Three Scrolls, "floating" slabs held up by frames and decorated by local children, will also celebrate the achievements of early Chinese immigrants and their descendants.

Local history on show

Kevin Beck, Astoria's parks and community services department director, said the design incorporates the history of the Chinese in Astoria through the years, compiled by members of the Chinese Park Committee.

"It starts in the early times, where there will be interpretation of when the Chinese first came to Astoria and the work they did and how they lived in this area. And then there will be a timeline that will bring it up to the current time, to the current Chinese people living in the community, how they're contributing, and how they've gone in for education and different professions. ... That's what really sets this park site off," Beck said.

The idea for a Chinese park was born out of dissatisfaction with the existing park, which had a hard-edged industrial look that was unpopular with the public and the Astoria City Council. Mayor Van Dusen appointed a Chinese Park Committee to come up with ideas.

At first, the group favored a formal garden with very traditional Chinese architecture, a kind of miniature version of Portland's Chinese Garden, according to Beck. But, he said, committee members soon realized that plan would be much too expensive. They decided to go back to the drawing board and hire a professional designer. The committee raised $7,800 and the city put in $3,000 to retain Mulvanny's Suenn Ho.

"Now they have a concept that we feel will really represent the community well, where it's a park site that's contemporary, somewhat modern, but still has some of the traditional roots of the Chinese heritage," Beck said.

The next question is how to pay for it. The expense will be mainly the responsibility of the Chinese Park Committee, but the city will also pitch in, Beck said, and will maintain the park after it's built.

There's no estimate on a price tag for the park. Ho said it revolves around "aspirations and strategy." It can be built in phases, starting with the ground, moving on to the bunker and the pavilion, and finishing with the moon gate because, "I always like to save the best for last," Ho said. Much depends on the materials used. Granite will play an important role, but she said its price varies widely, depending on color and surface. It can be used sparingly or as a highlight for special spots. Wood also varies in price. Ho said she can provide a list of materials to mix and match. "That's really the next layer of dialogue," Ho said, cautioning that "the last thing we want to do is compromise the experience of the park because of a low budget. It can be cost effective and be elegant with a smart budget," Ho said.

Funds sought

However, Dr. Duane Jue expects the park to "run into the hundreds of thousands." Jue, an Astoria dentist with 30 years of fundraising experience, said he's confident the committee can raise the money. He said a fund drive among the local Chinese community starts this week to raise about $20,000 in seed money. After that, the fundraising drive will be extended to the rest of the community, he said.

Another committee member, local pharmacist Felix Chow, said he wants to involve local people as much as possible and hopes local artists and craftsmen will help out. He said he doesn't know how long it will take to raise the funds, but expects grant money to play a role and "I hope the mayor will give us a big hand."

Currently, the city is hoping for a $75,000 grant that U.S. Rep. David Wu has been trying to secure. The allocation passed in the House, but was not approved by the Senate before Congress adjourned last week, according to Wu spokeswoman Jillian Schoene. "We'll have to work very, very hard to make sure the $75,000 doesn't disappear," she said. She said the grant's fate should be known next month.

Meanwhile, Beck said the city is working with the committee to develop a construction drawing for the park site based on Ho's conceptual drawing, and with emphasis on low maintenance materials that are vandal resistant and will weather well.

Paul Benoit, Astoria's city manager, said Ho came up with an interesting design for the small park site, which measures just 50 by 100 square feet. He said he's impressed by the way she incorporated historical and cultural references spanning thousands of years and linked them to the present time.

"It's a small site but an elegant design, and if we can do it as envisioned, and maintain the quality, we'll have a real jewel of a park on the waterfront," Benoit said.

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