

CLASSICAL *Chinese* GARDEN

CLASSICAL *Chinese* GARDEN AT A GLANCE

PROJECT TYPE:

Public Attraction

LOCATION:

*Block between NW 2nd and 3rd
Avenues
Everett and Flanders Streets*

DEVELOPER:

City of Portland

DESIGN TEAM:

*Robertson, Merryman, Barnes
Architects. Inc. Architecture,
Suzhou Garden Design Institute of China,
Architecture*

GENERAL CONTRACTOR:

Schommer & Sons

MANAGEMENT:

Classical Chinese Garden Society

PORTLAND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
1900 SW FOURTH AVENUE, SUITE 7000
PORTLAND, OREGON 97201-5304

TEL: 503.823.3200

FAX: 503.823.3368

WWW.PORTLANDDEV.ORG

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strengthen the neighborhood. The nearby MAX light-rail line provides easy access east to the Convention Center and Rose Garden Arena and south to uptown shopping and hotels. Projected to draw more than 100,000 tourists its first year, the garden actually drew more than 170,000 visitors its first nine months.

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION

Based on the Suzhou-style urban gardens that date back to the 13th century, Portland's Classical Chinese Garden is one of the largest gardens of this type built outside China. The garden design is a collaborative effort between the Suzhou Garden Design Institute of China and Portland-based Robertson, Merryman, Barnes Architects. The Institute designed the overall garden and built structures. The buildings were constructed in Suzhou, then disassembled and boxed and shipped to Portland where a crew of 60 Chinese artisans assembled the structures over a nine-month period. The American design team designed the infrastructure, foundations and utility systems.

The Portland garden is not a copy of any one Chinese garden, but draws on elements of many. It includes a central lake and zigzag bridge, a fountain, rockeries, waterfalls, a tea-house and ten other buildings and pavilions; all of which are linked by a network of fully-accessible walking paths. The open-air pavilions are intended to function as vantage points or resting places within the garden, rather than separate structures.

Emphasizing the belief that people should live in harmony with nature, Chinese urban gardens typically feature pavilion and open-style buildings. The largest structure in Portland's garden,

BACKGROUND

The idea for a Portland Classical Chinese Garden grew out of the sister-city relationship between Portland and Suzhou, China. Discussed for more than a dozen years, the project gained momentum in the early 1990's with the support of Portland's Mayor Katz and local business/civic leader Bill Naito. The garden concept became a reality when Northwest Natural Gas offered the city, under a 99-year lease, a downtown block they owned. The cleared site had been used as a parking lot for several years.

The 40,000-square-foot garden occupies the block in Old Town on the edge of the Chinatown historic district and is within the city's Downtown Waterfront Urban Renewal District. The area is rich with Chinese history, shops and restaurants. The garden bolsters the comprehensive program of public investments that have been made in the area to

the two-story tower building or teahouse at the northernmost end, contains a lift for the handicapped.

City design guidelines – such as a requirement that buildings on designated pedestrian streets feature windows or decorative elements on the ground-floor level to avoid large expanses of blank walls – also affected the garden’s design. Suzhou’s gardens grew out of the rise of a merchant class, which moved from countryside to the city and wanted to bring rural elements with them. The gardens are walled in and private, and originally were created for the enjoyment of the owners. Therefore the exterior garden walls are unembellished. However, to comply with the city’s design requirement, the architects added decorative windows on the wall exterior, along with small landscaped areas outside of the walls.

For the most part, there are few departures from the traditional walled-garden design. PDC project manager, Bruce Allen, said, “our first priority was to adhere to the authentic classical design that had endured for more than five centuries. We successfully appealed a number of code requirements, finding different, more creative, ways to address safety issues and absolutely minimized the compromises we made.”

Although the most stringent level of authenticity to the Suzhou’s style was followed for the architectural elements the plant material for the garden came from Oregon. Federal regulations prohibit importing full-grown plants. Although cuttings can be imported, they would have taken too long to grow to meet the garden’s construction schedule.

Long-term maintenance considerations shaped the decision to substitute certain modern materials in place of the traditional ones used in China. Undertaking extensive research on other Chinese gardens built in North America enlightened Portland designers about potential technical difficulties that could arise from using traditional materials and construction techniques. For example, the authentic roof system in the main building in the Chinese garden in Vancouver, British Columbia was failing and would cost about \$1 million to repair. To avoid this problem, materials less prone to leakage, like concrete, were used in the Portland garden’s roof system. The designers also created redundant roof systems in which the roof tiles, particularly along the ridges, were used

decoratively and were supported by an additional structural system.

This departure from the ancient construction method highlights an important cultural difference between the sister cities. In China, which is a labor-intensive culture and where labor is far less expensive than in the U.S., authenticity in classical garden design takes higher priority than long-term maintenance concerns.

Another important cultural difference between the two countries that surfaced during the process of planning the Portland garden was the different attitude regarding lawyers. When the Chinese team visited Portland in 1996 to forge an agreement for the garden project, they wanted no attorneys at the table. In China, attorneys are involved mainly in confrontational situations and are not called on to help craft business agreements.

MANAGEMENT

When construction was completed in the fall of 2000, the City’s Bureau of General Services turned over management and operation responsibilities to the non-profit Portland Classical Chinese Garden, Inc. created for this purpose.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

- Strong personal relationships, especially between the political leaders and mayors of the sister cities, expedited the agreements and kept the project on track.
- “Although the first priority was to adhere to the authentic classical design that had endured for more than five centuries,” said PDC project manager, Bruce Allen, “some compromises were necessary to meet code requirements and to comply with access requirements of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.” Similarly, long-term maintenance concerns drove the decision to use modern building materials and systems, in some specific instances, in place of traditional ones.
- In a project that involves collaboration between individuals that speak different languages, it’s essential to allocate additional time to the project schedule so that documents can be translated and interpreters can provide translation at meetings.
- Comprehensive research is also critical. The Suzhou Garden Design Institute had designed another similar classical Chinese garden in

Vancouver, BC, but the agreement between the two cities prohibited the release of any construction documents. Therefore, it was critical for Portland designers and planners to develop a solid knowledge base before starting the project. They researched other classical Chinese gardens built in the U.S. They also visited the Vancouver garden, as well as gardens in Suzhou, to actually see the construction and meet in person with the Suzhou design team to identify potential design and construction issues.

FINANCING SOURCES

- Largest contribution from funds raised by private, non-profit Classical Chinese Garden Trust
- PDC Tax Increment Financing
- Northwest Natural Gas donation of land under a long-term lease
- Total Project Cost \$12 million

SCHEDULE

Planning started:	early 1990’s
Design review:	January 1999
Construction started:	June 1999
Construction completed:	September 2000

