

Far East Building
347 East First Street, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA



An Official Project of Save America's Treasures

Historic Significance

The Far East Building is located in the heart of Little Tokyo, the historic, cultural, and symbolic center of southern California's Japanese American community. Located in the Little Tokyo National Landmark Historic District, this three-story 1896 building is eclectic, with Beaux Arts and Moderne style elements. Its façade is characterized by massive arched windows and a vertical "Chop Suey" sign in neon. The building housed a hotel and storefront, but was particularly well-known for its Far East Café, a restaurant specializing in Chinese American food. Four members of the Jung family opened the restaurant in 1935, introducing Cantonese specialties such as chop suey and chow mein to a diverse clientele. The restaurant's location drew Japanese immigrants and EuroAmericans, attracting local politicians from the civic center area, sports figures including Michael Garret, gangsters including Mickey Cohen, and even Hollywood stars like Anna May Wong, who attended the Far East's grand opening. The Far East was known for its varied menu, reasonable prices, friendly family service, and characteristic décor, including booths with curtains.

Located next door to the Nishi Hongwanji Temple, the oldest Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo and now part of the Japanese American National Museum, the Far East Café became the premier secular gathering place

of the Little Tokyo community. Over the years, weddings and funerals at the Temple, as well as other important gatherings and celebrations, were followed by banquets at the Far East. It also played host to countless events for those in and around Los Angeles City Hall and it has been featured in Hollywood movies, including *Chinatown*, *Dragon* and *Farewell My Lovely*.

For 60 years, the Far East Building remained an enduring symbol of friendship and cross-influence between Chinese and Japanese immigrants. During the upheavals of World War II when 6,000 of Little Tokyo's Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes and businesses behind to enter detention centers, the Café remained open because of its Chinese ownership. Following the war, as Japanese Americans returned to Los Angeles to resume their lives, many found themselves without money, homes, or jobs; the Chinese American owners of the Far East Café welcomed back old friends and customers, providing meals and housing on credit for those unable to pay.

A Unique Restoration Story

In 1994, the Northridge earthquake severely damaged the building and forced its closure and the structure sat vacant for nearly a decade, exposed to pests and the elements. Fortunately, in 2001 the Mar family donated the building to the [Little Tokyo Service Center Community Development Corporation \(LTSC\)](#). LTSC began restoration of the building in 2002 and oversaw the building's careful rehabilitation, ultimately assembling nearly \$4 million in financing. The project restored the Far East Cafe, created a community computer center in the first-floor retail space, and reconfigured 24 single-room occupancy units into 16 units of affordable housing. In 2006 the restaurant reopened as the [Chop Suey Café and Lounge](#). The result is a building whose many layers of history shine through, a vivid reminder of the community's past that continues to meet its evolving needs.

Saving the Far East Building

In 2002, the Far East Building was selected as one of 24 sites to appear in the inaugural year of "Restore America: A Salute to Preservation," a partnership between House and Garden TV and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The building was featured in HGTV's popular weekly series, *Restore America*, and the [Save America's Treasures](#) program at the National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded the Far East Building \$75,000. In 2002, LTSC also received \$200,000 as part of the J. Paul Getty Trust's *Preserve L.A.* initiative and a \$2,500 grant from the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors.