

## First lady puts Thai Town on the map



Mei Melcon / Los Angeles Times

Pradap Kapaep, 57, of Los Angeles prays to a Thai spirit house at Thailand Plaza on Hollywood Boulevard in Thai Town. The Preserve America grant was awarded to support efforts to preserve the community's ethnic character. [More photos >>>](#)

**As a newly designated 'Preserve America' community, the neighborhood is eligible for up to \$250,000 in grants, which could bring alive visions to establish an identity.**

By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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On a recent afternoon, Los Angeles urban planners Chancee Martorell and Alex Holsheimer looked at a nondescript intersection and envisioned the makings of a signature plaza that would bring a physical focal point to the six-block area along Hollywood Boulevard known as Thai Town.



The parking lot at Hobart Boulevard, Holsheimer mused, could be transformed into a central plaza and green space featuring a tree linked to Buddhism, which infuses Thai culture: The sacred fig, also known as the Bodhi tree, is said to have shaded Buddha when he achieved enlightenment.

Across the street at the Thailand Plaza shopping center, where two spirit houses festooned with garlands add a splash of cultural color to the street, a historical display of Thai Town could be erected as the starting point for a neighborhood tour led by docents.

As the two planners with the Thai Community Development Center strolled down the street, their visions grew. Over here, maybe vacant storefronts could be turned into stalls for a Thai bazaar selling traditional foods and products to help nurture Thai-owned businesses. Over there, maybe traditional Thai-style benches could be added.

"One concern people in our community have is that our infrastructure is not as developed as it could be," said Martorell, the Thai center's executive director.

"What's lacking," added Holsheimer, a project assistant and UCLA urban planning graduate student, "is a central anchor in Thai Town."

There is no dearth of visions for Thai Town, Martorell said, only the lack of resources to bring them alive. But now that stands to change.

In a major boost for Thai Town, First Lady Laura Bush last month awarded the neighborhood federal recognition as a "Preserve America" community, signifying its value as a cultural and historic asset. The designation will make Thai Town eligible for up to \$250,000 in Preserve America grants, along with \$250,000 in other public and private matching funds.

"This national recognition says we are no longer an invisible community," Martorell said. "It says we have a presence in this country and are contributing to its cultural and social fabric."



Chinatown was also awarded Preserve America status last month. The two communities were part of a guided effort by the city of Los Angeles to win the federal designation for its five central Asian American enclaves -- Thai Town, Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Koreatown and Historic Filipinotown. Little Tokyo was the first to win recognition, in March; applications are pending for Koreatown and Historic Filipinotown.

"As the city moves into the 21st century as a global city, a Pacific Rim city, it's important to preserve and promote our historic ethnic cultures and economically revitalize our communities," said Sharon Lowe, a consultant to the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency who assisted in the application process.

The Preserve America program was established by the Bush administration in 2003 to support community efforts to preserve and promote cultural, historic and natural treasures; to use their assets for economic revitalization; and to share their stories through educational programs and tourism.

So far, the first lady has awarded the designation to about 500 communities nationwide, and last year the government gave out nearly \$5 million in federal grants for preservation activities. The funding must be used for research, marketing, training and education to promote heritage tourism, not for construction or repair projects.

This month, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly voted to authorize the program permanently.

To win the designation, applicants must submit an extensive application requiring, among other things, formal support from the mayor and evidence of cultural or historic preservation activities.

In Chinatown, about a dozen community organizations are collaborating on their Preserve America project, including the Chinese American Museum and the Chinatown Business Improvement District. Pauline Wong, the museum's executive director, said ideas for spending grant funds include developing materials for a walking tour that would link the old and new Chinatowns.



The old Chinatown, established in the 1880s, was centered around the area now occupied by Union Station; the only structure remaining from that history is the Garnier Building near Olvera Street. The 1890 brick structure served as the "unofficial town hall for Chinatown," Wong said, and now houses the museum.

When residents were evicted to make room for Union Station, they migrated to Chinatown's current location north of Cesar Chavez Avenue along Broadway and Hill Street and opened the neighborhood's Central Plaza in 1938. But Wong said that history is not widely known.

Today, Wong said, Chinatown is being transformed again as immigrants from Vietnam and Cambodia diversify the area and trendy art galleries replace old family-run restaurants and souvenir shops.

"There's a lot of new energy in Chinatown, but preserving the memories and buildings and history is important," Wong said.

If Chinatown is wrestling with how to preserve its 130-year-old identity, Thai Town is struggling with how to more strongly develop one, Martorell said.

Thai Town is only about 40 years old, having been developed primarily by Thais who began arriving in the United States in the 1960s to study but decided to stay and start businesses, she said.

In the 1980s, amid Asia's regional financial crises, a wave of less-educated, lower-skilled migrants came here to find work, Martorell said. But because so many intended to return to Thailand, they were slow to invest in property or build community institutions, she said.

As a result, Martorell said, most Thai Town property is not owned by Thais, an impediment in trying to create a more cohesive cultural enclave.

Thai Town, which runs along Hollywood Boulevard from Normandie to Western avenues, is home to about 46 Thai business, including silk shops, massage parlors, bookstores and restaurants.

About 10,000 Thais live in the neighborhood, Martorell said, representing about one-fifth of the Thai community in Southern California.

Despite the challenges, cultural tourism in the area has begun to pick up; the neighborhood's annual Thai New Year's festival in April drew 100,000 visitors, a tenfold increase in the five years since the tradition began, Martorell said.



The city's \$1.2-million "Streetscape" project along Hollywood Boulevard is expected to fund trees, paving, Thai Town street banners and other improvements.

LA Commons, a nonprofit organization that promotes neighborhoods through art, has started walking tours through the area.

And Martorell's organization is continuing to hunt for space to house a Thai bazaar and farmers market.

Now the Preserve America designation is sure to add even more momentum to the community's development efforts, Martorell said.

"The timing couldn't have been better," she said. "This neighborhood really needs a boost."

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