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Sakura Square names development team to help reimagine downtown Denver block

Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, Nichols Partnership and Barry Hirschfeld Jr. among team chosen to guide redevelopment



RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post

Mary Wood reads a book in Sakura Square, September 08, 2016. Wood has lived in an apartment in Sakura Square for the past three years.

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Sakura Square has chosen a development team that includes the [Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect behind the Aspen Art Museum](#) to lead the [reimagining of its prime downtown block](#).

Denver-based Nichols Partnership and Barry Hirschfeld Jr., a Denver native and chief executive of Asia Investment Partners in Japan, beat out two other finalists to be named the project's preferred developer, officials announced Tuesday.

[Shigeru Ban](#), architect of the lattice-covered Aspen museum that opened in 2014, is another key member of the team and will have design oversight of the redevelopment master plan. His firm will work closely with Denver-based Anderson Mason Dale Architects and the project is anticipated to incorporate Japanese-influenced design concepts, Sakura Square LLC chief executive Gary Yamashita said.

“We are excited to enter into this next phase of the development process on this important city block with Nichols Partnership, Barry Hirschfeld Jr. and their team,” Yamashita said in a statement. “Together we look to establish a cultural gateway that preserves and celebrates the Japanese and Japanese-American experience.”

No other details or project renderings were released Tuesday. A request for qualifications issued in September, though, required that the Tri-State Denver Buddhist Temple stay on the block — although potentially in a new building — as well as new and returning Japanese cultural uses that could include restaurants, Japanese-influenced gardens, martial arts studios and a museum.

Other possible uses could include office, hotel, retail, residential and parking.

“We are very early in the process,” Yamashita said in an email Tuesday. “No buildings have yet been designed.”

Nichols Partnership’s resume includes [Turntable Studios, Denver’s first large-scale micro-apartment project](#), PearlWest, an office and retail development in downtown Boulder; and Clayton Lane, a 9.5-acre mixed-use district in Cherry Creek North. Hirschfeld, who has extensive experience doing business in Japan, will act as “an overall cultural ambassador for the project,” spearheading the connection between the U.S. and Japan, officials said.

“We believe that Sakura Square is a legacy project that will further solidify Denver as a world-class city,” Nichols Partnership president Randy Nichols said in a statement. “We are extremely honored to have been selected to lead the redevelopment and have assembled an incredible team to ensure that Sakura Square remains a cultural destination and economic engine for generations to come.”

The aging buildings of Sakura Square, bounded by Larimer, Lawrence, 19th and 20th streets, are all that’s left of a much larger [Japanese-American neighborhood that traces its roots back to about 1900](#).

Much of that neighborhood disappeared when the Denver Urban Renewal Authority demolished 30 blocks of downtown in 1969. The Buddhist temple, though, was offered the opportunity to buy the block at 19th Street for \$188,000 and named it Sakura Square, after the Japanese word for “cherry blossom.”

“We are honored to be part of the Sakura Square team,” Ban said in a statement. “All over the world we work to create great places to build communities and bring people together. We look forward to creating a new destination for the Japanese community, the sangha of the Temple, the people of Colorado and everyone beyond.”