

SurveyLA

Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey

LOS ANGELES CITYWIDE HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

Context: COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT, 1850-1980

Theme: Wholesale Flower Markets, 1912-1962



(Los Angeles Public Library)

Prepared for:

City of Los Angeles
Department of City Planning
Office of Historic Resources



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PREFACE

This context is as a component of Los Angeles' citywide Historic Context Statement and provides guidance to field surveyors and historians in identifying and evaluating historic resources relating to the wholesale flower industry in Los Angeles. This is a separately published subtheme of the citywide Industrial Development context. Refer to www.HistoricPlacesLA.org for information on designated resources associated with this property type as well as those identified through SurveyLA and other surveys.

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INTRODUCTION

The wholesale flower industry is part of a larger process that includes breeding, cultivating, selling, and arranging cut flowers.¹ The wholesale cut flower industry of Los Angeles is concentrated across a few blocks in an area of Downtown Los Angeles dominated by wholesale operations for many of the city's manufacturing, agricultural, and food-related industries. The wholesale flower industry grew from a locally concentrated trade in the late 1890s to a wholesale operation that is now linked with a large, international network of growers, wholesalers, and retailers. This subtheme focuses on the wholesale flower industry and the property type, the wholesale warehouse, associated with this industry in Los Angeles.

A theme specifically for the wholesale flower industry and associated property types was not initially included in the Industrial Development Historic Context for SurveyLA. However, the city's early flower farms, the first stage of the wholesale flower industry, are addressed in the Agricultural Roots theme of the industrial context.² Early sales locations for cut flowers were nurseries and informal stands near the farms. Residential gardeners harvested blooms for sale to local florists, and the sourcing systems for florists' shops was not centralized.³ Wholesale cut flower markets began as informal meeting places where it was convenient for growers to bring their goods. The earliest wholesale operations for cut flowers emerged in the 1910s and used existing loft buildings or vacant lots. When the first purpose-built wholesale flower markets were constructed in the 1930s, the buildings were similar to other wholesale operations for perishable goods: typically, big, boxy warehouses with cold storage sections and loading docks for trucks.⁴ Another part of the flower trade are florists' shops, which are best classified as retail stores and are explored in the Commercial Development context.⁵

¹ Amy Stewart, *Flower Confidential* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2007), 6.

² No cut flower farms were identified in the SurveyLA field surveys. Several nurseries were identified in the field survey under the theme of Commercial Identity as longstanding local businesses. Nurseries are related to the flower industry, but not part of the same process of growing and selling cut flowers.

³ Peggi Ridgway and Jan Works, *Sending Flowers to America: Stories of the Los Angeles Flower Market and the people who built an American floral industry* (Los Angeles: American Florists' Exchange, Ltd., 2008), 11.

⁴ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 4.

⁵ Several florist retail shops were identified in the field survey as contributors to commercial historic districts..

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Despite the physical similarity of wholesale flower markets to other cold storage and wholesale perishable goods distribution buildings, the wholesale flower market property type in Los Angeles is distinguished from other wholesale operations by an association with the Japanese American community.⁶ Though Genovese Italian and Greek immigrants also played an important role in the wholesale flower industry in California, Japanese Americans dominated the industry over several generations.⁷ Early flower markets where growers gathered to sell goods were divided along ethnic lines, and the Japanese American community's market evolved into the city's leading wholesale cut flower operation. Eventually, different ethnic groups began to cooperate and consolidate under one roof, but this did not happen until the early 1960s, when the first American-born generation took charge from its parents.⁸

The wholesale flower industry is a significant representation of the history of Los Angeles, reflecting the city's ethnic and industrial heritage. Unfortunately, most remaining buildings associated with the history of the wholesale cut flower industry do not retain sufficient integrity to convey significance. Despite the lack of remaining historic resources to represent this theme, the history of the wholesale cut flower industry is explored further because it reflects the heritage and resilience of the Japanese American community as well as the growing internationalism of the Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century.

⁶ See also the Japanese Americans in Los Angeles historic context; other property types that reflect the significance of Japanese American in the history of Los Angeles are explored in this context.

⁷ Like Japanese immigrants, Greek immigrants gravitated to the flower industries in many cities where they settled in the early twentieth century. One group of Greek immigrants were the Rhodelisi, Jewish people from the island of Rhodes who came to Los Angeles in the 1920s. The length of association with this group was short in Los Angeles, lasting only one generation, and they do not appear to have established themselves as important figures in the city's wholesale flower industry.

⁸ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 72.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Los Angeles emerged as a center of agricultural and industrial production. The city was first linked with a transcontinental rail network in 1877 and ventilated and refrigerated boxcars were introduced by 1887.⁹ The first cash crop transported to eastern markets was wheat, but citrus dominated the market after transportation improvements for perishable goods. Between 1890 and 1938, the main cash crops were citrus, olives, and, in the later decades, flowers and bulbs.¹⁰ California's temperate climate allowed growers to meet a demand for food and flowers that were out-of-season in the eastern parts of the United States.¹¹

Japanese immigrants dominated the cultivation and sales of flowers, and many other aspects of agriculture in California, following the first waves of immigration from Japan after 1884.¹² There are two common explanations for the involvement of Japanese immigrants in the state's flower-related businesses. The first is that Japanese immigrants initially became involved in agriculture in California because many came from farming towns in Japan. The state's first flower farms were concentrated south of San Francisco in the 1880s. In San Francisco, flower growers were largely initiated into the business by fellow immigrants from the same hometowns or prefectures. This explanation also accounts for Genovese Italian immigrants. The Genovese and Japanese immigrants established flower farms in the same areas south of San Francisco. As Asian immigrants arrived in Southern California from Japan, China, and Korea, they also found niches growing cut flowers in Los Angeles and San Diego.¹³ Another explanation for the concentration of Japanese immigrants in the flower industry suggests that the Japanese immigrants who came to San Francisco in late 1800s tried to pursue traditionally urban professions such as engineering and teaching, but encountered discrimination and turned to agriculture.¹⁴ The dual influences of community among fellow immigrants and discrimination from other residents undoubtedly played a role in the decision of many Japanese immigrants to pursue agriculture in California.

In 1908, Los Angeles had 30 florists and 60 nurseries. Names of florists and nurseries listed in the city directory of 1905 reveal that the early flower industry in Los Angeles was not dominated by a single ethnic group. Two florists (~7%) and sixteen nurseries (~25%) were run by people with Japanese names.¹⁵ Unlike other cash crop industries in Los Angeles at the time, the floral trades did not have a listing for wholesale businesses. After the destructive San Francisco earthquake in 1908, many Japanese immigrants moved south and joined Los Angeles' flower industries. However, the Japanese Americans of

⁹ Ronald Tobey and Charles Wetherell, *The National Orange Company Packing House: an architectural and technological history, 1898–1940* (Riverside: University of California, Riverside), 43.

¹⁰ LSA and Chattel, Inc., *Industrial Development Historic Context* (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles Office of Historic Resources, 2011, rev. 2017).

¹¹ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 65.

¹² The Japanese government prohibited emigration of laborers from Japan until 1884 when the Japanese government and Hawaiian sugar plantations signed an agreement to allow labor immigration. From Hawaii, many Japanese continued on to the United States mainland. In the 1880 Census, 86 Japanese people resided in California. They were mostly students or immigrants who left Japan illegally. In the 1890 Census, 1,114 Japanese people lived in California.

Isami Arifuku Waugh, Alex Yamato, and Raymond Y. Okamura, *A History of Japanese Americans in California. Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California* (U.S. Department of the Interior National Parks Service, 17 Nov. 2004. Web. 16 Feb. 2017).

¹³ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 72.

¹⁴ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 72.

¹⁵ Los Angeles City Directory (1905), 1696 and 1780-1.

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San Francisco and Los Angeles' flower trades were competitive with each other throughout the twentieth century.



Murata showroom, 1919. Murata was one of the first Japanese-owned wholesale flower operations in Downtown Los Angeles. (*Florists' Review*, Volume 44, Issues 1132-1144)

Before the 1910s, most flower growers in Los Angeles who did not operate retail nurseries gathered in informal markets to sell flowers to the florist trade.¹⁶ Japanese immigrants had formed centers of flower cultivation in West and South Los Angeles and Long Beach. Japanese growers pioneered techniques like growing mums with multiple blooms on a stalk, creating desirable products for the market. The Japanese immigrants also established agricultural cooperatives modeled after traditional organizations in Japan. These growers gathered in informal markets closer to Downtown Los Angeles to sell their products.¹⁷ Unlike citrus, with a vast network of rail-adjacent packing houses connecting groves, flower farms and nurseries did not initially form collective packaging or sales operations to market and sell their products.

Large-scale flower cultivation with significant acreage began in the 1910s and with it came more organized sales operations, transforming flowers into a cash crop.¹⁸ The cooperatives and informal markets were no longer sufficient to meet the increasing supply and nationwide demand for flowers grown in Los Angeles. Listings for wholesale flower operations separate from florists and nurseries began to appear in the city directories.¹⁹ One of the earliest vendors to describe itself as a wholesale operation was the Ocean Park Floral Company in the early 1900s. The company sold flowers grown in its flower fields close to the City of Santa Monica

¹⁶ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 72.

¹⁷ This history was largely excerpted from Naomi Hirahara, *A Scent of Flowers: The History of the Southern California Flower Market, 1912-2004* (Pasadena: Midori Books, 2004).

¹⁸ Peggi Ridgway and Jan Works, *Sending Flowers to America: Stories of the Los Angeles Flower Market and the people who built an American floral industry* (Los Angeles: American Florists' Exchange, Ltd., 2008), 11.

¹⁹ The first wholesalers listed were S. Murata & Co (751 Broadway) and Anton Kravchyk (2413 2nd Avenue). *Los Angeles City Directory*, 1914.

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from an office at 214 Mercantile Place (demolished) in Downtown Los Angeles.²⁰ More wholesale operations, with vendors providing shipping services and sales spaces that connected growers, buyers, and florists' shops, emerged in the 1910s. The vendors were not yet concentrated in a single district or block. Los Angeles' flowers became cash crops on a national scale after shipping and wholesale merchants appeared in the 1910s. The industry began to organize and consolidate into wholesale markets with spaces for multiple vendors concentrated in a district in Downtown Los Angeles.

Fifty-four Japanese Issei (immigrant) flower growers started what became the Southern California Flower Market in 1912 as a trade organization for Japanese cut flower growers and sellers in the greater Los Angeles area.²¹ The first Southern California Flower Market, a gathering of vendors, opened in 1914 and operated from a building with other wholesale merchants at 421 Wall Street (extant).²² The Southern California Flower Market had several locations in the 1910s and 1920s, but primarily stayed within a few blocks along Wall Street from its inception until the 2000s. In 1914, the group of vendors officially incorporated the Southern California Flower Market as both a cooperative professional organization and a place to sell flowers. The organization had a Japanese-only membership policy until 1915; however, the Japanese-only practice continued informally until 1963. Japanese men also formed the Southern California Floral Industry Association in the 1910s to recruit growers from around Southern California, especially Long Beach, to sell through the Southern California Flower Market. Seeing the potential of nationwide markets for Southern California's flowers, these organizations experimented with new ways to sell their products. They attempted to open a shipping division (1914 and 1916) and opened a sales office in Chicago (1916). Though they were unsuccessful in establishing a nationwide market for cut flowers at this time, the industry grew in Southern California.

Concurrent with the creation of the Southern California Flower Market, a professional group of European American growers and wholesalers from Germany, Italy, Holland, and Greece, later known as the American Florists' Exchange, established the wholesale Los Angeles Flower Market. The European American Los Angeles Flower Market was located at various buildings along South Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles. While these groups would always be linked together "...the two markets in Los Angeles would remain close in proximity yet distinct to insiders, illuminating a complex relationship related to Los Angeles race relations..."²³ Japanese Issei growers greatly outnumbered the European immigrant growers and drew more buyers to their market. The Europeans' American Florists' Exchange's Los Angeles Flower Market would open earlier in the morning to compete. In San Francisco, Chinese and Japanese growers cooperated with each other and with the Italians because the Italians faced less discrimination and controlled the city's major bank, providing access to capital.²⁴ In contrast, the ethnic division between wholesale markets remained strong in Los Angeles.

Hostility towards the success of the Japanese immigrant community in the agricultural industry in California led to the passage of two Alien Land Laws in 1913 and 1920. The first tried to discourage immigration of farmers, but the existing support network of Issei farming and market cooperatives encouraged new immigrants to pursue agriculture and agriculture-related industries rather than other

²⁰ The company was known for its signature Vawter Carnations, named for its president EJ Vawter. Mercantile Place was a shopping street later demolished for the Spring Arcade Building.

²¹ The Issei established three types of organizations in the communities they settled: churches, political/social organizations called by various names, and Japanese language schools. The social organizations were sometimes united by trade.

²² The building was erected in 1913, replacing an older rooming house. Other tenants included tobacco wholesalers and printers, neckwear manufacturers, and hat manufacturers.

²³ Hirahara, *A Scent of Flowers*, 57.

²⁴ Stewart, *Flower Confidential*.

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professions during this time. The second law in 1920 tried to prohibit Issei from leasing land for agricultural uses. Issei growers responded by purchasing and leasing land under the names of their American-born children. They also focused more on the cut flower industry, growing annuals, instead of perennials for nurseries. Perennials were more lucrative, but were a risky investment when Issei could not own or lease land for a long period. This led to an even greater percentage of Japanese people in the cut flower industry compared to other areas of agriculture. The wholesale market also helped the Issei navigate the law. Though its membership was entirely Issei, as an incorporated company the Southern California Flower Market could lease land. In 1928, the Flower Market formed Golden Sky Investment Corporation, a group with entirely Nisei (American-born) directors who acquired land on behalf of the Southern California Flower Market.

The 1920s were a period of expansion for the flower industry and Southern California agriculture. Controlled water sources from the Los Angeles-Owens River Aqueduct generated an agricultural boom in the 1920s and 1930s. By 1922, Los Angeles County led all other U.S. counties in the value of its agricultural products, with citrus, olives, and flowers being the most important cash crops for export.²⁵ Large-scale flower cultivation, with significant acreage and associated packing buildings and wholesale markets, began in the 1920s. In 1922, the Southern California Flower Market moved to 753-755 Wall Street (current location, building demolished). The Europeans American's Los Angeles Flower Market relocated as well, across the street to 754 Wall Street. Smaller wholesale flower stores also opened on Wall Street in the 1920s, further establishing a distinct Flower District along Wall Street between 7th and 8th streets. Most of the buildings used by the wholesale flower industry were previously constructed single story warehouses, garages, or retail shops. The district had numerous surface parking lots.

Though agriculture continued to prosper, the Great Depression, New Deal reforms, and National Recovery Administration introduced changes to the cut flower industry in Los Angeles, particularly in attempts to control the competition between the markets. The National Recovery Administration mandated that the two large flower markets in Los Angeles work together to self-regulate their industry. Though they maintained separate markets, the European and Japanese organizations created the Southern California Floral Association in 1933. The National Recovery Administration also required the two organizations to agree on minimum wages, hours, and price fixing. Language was a huge barrier to the discussions between the markets. Though Nisei (the first generation born in America) were entering the industry by the late 1920s, the Southern California Flower Market and its leaders conducted their business in Japanese through the 1940s. Though many members were foreign born, the American Florists' Exchange conducted its business in English. Nevertheless, the two operations negotiated a cooperative arrangement.

At the onset of World War II, all Japanese Americans in Los Angeles were deported to internment camps and forced to leave their businesses. The 755 Wall Street property was leased by other flower vendors during the war. After the war, the Southern California Flower Market operated from the San Pedro Firm Building at 150 N. San Pedro Street and a parking lot on Wall Street before returning to their prewar building in September 1946. Many original Japanese flower wholesalers and growers were never able to regain their prewar prominence, having lost their property and customers. Newcomers of varying ethnic backgrounds began to replace them.

²⁵ George Clements, "LA County leads in farm products," *Southern California Business*, September 1922, 41; LSA and Chattel, Inc. *Industrial Development Context*.

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Other changes in the postwar era affected local growers, the supplier side of the wholesale markets. After the war, California's remaining flower cultivation was still dominated by Japanese Americans, who produced 65 percent of the flowers grown in California through the 1970s. However, competition with foreign growers in combination with the housing boom signaled the end of large-scale cultivation in Los Angeles and, over the course the postwar era, California.²⁶ Wholesale flower sales in Los Angeles' Flower District (Wall Street between 7th and 8th Street) continued to flourish despite the changes in supply sources.

Though the growth of flowers in the city of Los Angeles was reduced, its wholesale industry was expanding. The wholesale flower industry changed drastically in the 1950s and 1960s with changes in shipping methods, soil technology, and marketing strategies. To fill empty cargo bays returning to the East Coast, airlines offered low airfreight rates to West Coast wholesale flower dealers, opening the national market beyond the rail lines that dictated previous trade patterns.²⁷ Soil and pesticide technology improved, creating less risk and enabling growers to cultivate a greater variety of flowers.²⁸ National marketing groups gained popularity in the postwar era, underwriting advertising campaigns and cultivating buyers.²⁹ To meet these changes, the Southern California Flower Market restructured, becoming a for-profit company instead of a cooperative, and established new marketing arms. The company focused on land acquisitions, buying property in the Flower District along Maple Avenue, the east side of the same block as their market on Wall Street. Competition between San Francisco and Los Angeles was still strong. Los Angeles maintained its two wholesale markets, though the traditionally Japanese-dominated market of Southern California Flower Growers Inc., was significantly larger. Smaller buildings on the east side of Wall Street and north of 8th Street were incorporated into the Flower District outside of the existing wholesale markets. In 1956, San Francisco merged its three markets. Though each retained its identity, collectively they were known as the "San Francisco Flower Terminal."³⁰ Wholesale flower vendors in Los Angeles began plans for their own expansion. The Southern California Flower Growers Inc.'s opened a new building, the Los Angeles Wholesale Flower Terminal, in 1963. The new building on the block bounded by Maple Avenue and Wall Street was one of the largest wholesale flower facilities in the world.

By this time, the ethnic division between the European and Japanese markets had begun to break down. In the early 1950s, bowling leagues and other social interactions in the Flower District had chipped away at the ethnic exclusiveness of the markets. Language barriers between the markets broke down as more American-born, second generation wholesalers took over the businesses. Though all the officers of the Flower Growers Inc. organization were Nisei at the time of construction, when the new building opened, the market accepted "outsiders," including northern California growers and European American tenants and shareholders. George W. Berlin, Inc. relocated from American Florists' Exchange building across the street to the new Flower Terminal. The George W. Berlin, Inc. became the first non-Japanese shareholder of the Southern California Flower Exchange and company president Elmer Fisher later became the first non-Japanese director of the Flower Growers Inc. The Los Angeles Flower Market on the east side of Wall Street continued operations with a small building. The Flower District expanded as retail and industrial buildings on the east side of Wall Street were rented by flower vendors.

²⁶ LSA and Chattel, Inc., *Industrial Development Context*.

²⁷ Gary Kawaguchi, *Living with Flowers: History of the California Flower Market* (San Francisco: California Flower Market, Inc., 1993), 72.

²⁸ Kawaguchi, 72.

²⁹ Kawaguchi, 73.

³⁰ Kawaguchi, 70.

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Imported flowers, market changes, and increasing sprawl were threatening the wholesale flower industry by the 1970s. The first big box craft stores selling silk flowers, Christmas decorations, and plants opened in the mid-1970s. This business had been a major source of revenue for retail florists and many closed, leading to a loss of buyers for wholesalers, even though most specialized in fresh flowers.³¹ In the late 1970s, cut flower production in Colombia exploded, leading to the eventual decline of flowers grown in the United States. In the early 1900s most flowers sold in United States were grown in United States. By the 2000s, three-fourths were imported.³² Consumer buying habits also changed. Supermarkets began selling flowers, purchasing the surplus products from Colombia. Supermarket sales of cut flowers expanded rapidly in the 1970s. Supermarket chains consolidated in the late 1990s and early 2000s and generally did not purchase their supplies of flowers through local wholesalers, further affecting the industry.³³

By the mid-1970s, most of the buildings in the Flower District, including the Flower Terminal building from 1963 appeared outdated. The United States Department of Agriculture also believed the building and entire Flower District were outdated and recommended relocating the markets away from Downtown's rising real estate costs. The Flower Market Advisory Committee, comprising members of both wholesale flower markets in the Flower District disagreed with the recommendation and decided to remain Downtown. The City of Los Angeles provided a \$3 million incentive for the markets to stay in Los Angeles. One condition was that Flower Growers, Inc. become a nonprofit. A substantial addition to the Flower Terminal building was completed in 1981. In the mid-1980s, members of the American Florists' Exchange rehabilitated and expanded buildings at 756 and 728-738 Wall Street and constructed a new building at 778 Wall Street. The wholesale flower industry continued to diversify throughout the 1980s as Latino sellers entered the market.

³¹ WFFSA, "Pivotal Moments in The History of WF&FSA" *Wholesale Florists Florist Supplier Association* (WFFSA, 2017. Web. 16 Feb. 2017) <<http://www.wffsa.org/aws/WFFSA/pt/sp/about>>.

³² Stewart, *Flower Confidential*, 6.

³³ WFFA.

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ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

Summary Statement of Significance:

Wholesale flower market-related resources are significant in the areas of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce, Social History, and/or Ethnic Heritage. The earliest wholesale operations for cut flowers emerged in the 1910s and used existing industrial loft buildings. When the first purpose-built wholesale flower markets were constructed in the 1930s, the buildings were similar to other wholesale operations for perishable goods: typically, big, boxy warehouses with cold storage sections and loading docks for trucks. While the buildings were not distinguished architecturally, they play a significant role in the city's industrial history and the Japanese American community's contributions to the city's growth and development. Few intact resources remain.

Period of Significance:

1912-1962

Period of Significance

Justification:

The period of significance corresponds to the period of growth for the wholesale cut flower industry, the establishment of the Flower District, as well as the time when the industry was segregated along racial lines. After the Los Angeles Wholesale Flower Terminal building opened in 1962, the dominant Japanese American wholesale cut flower organization was no longer closed to non-Japanese vendors. Changes to the wholesale flower industry in the 1960s and 1970s and government incentives to sustain the flower district resulted in widespread redevelopment of existing wholesale flower industry buildings or demolition of buildings constructed before the 1970s.

Geographic Location:

The best (and possibly only) known, extant resources are located on the east side of Downtown.

Area(s) of Significance:

Agriculture; Industry; Commerce; Social History; Ethnic Heritage

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Criteria: NR: A CR: 1 Local: 1

Associated Property Types: Industrial — Warehouse
Industrial — District
Commercial — Retail Building

Property Type Description: Associated property types in Los Angeles are typically, big, boxy warehouses with cold storage sections and loading docks for trucks. Interior arrangement of spaces includes open space for stalls and/or permanent shop space typically facing interior “lanes” or courtyards

Property Type Significance: Properties significant under this theme played an important role in the industrial and commercial development of the Japanese American community in Los Angeles.

Eligibility Standards:

- Played an important role in the local, regional, or national agricultural economy, either as a growers’ market or a broker/distributor’s market
- Is associated with a wholesale cut flower business that made an important contribution to the growth and development of Los Angeles
- Is the founding or the long-term location of a wholesale cut flower market
- Was constructed for a flower broker or wholesaler

Character Defining/Associative Features:

- Retains most of the essential character defining features from the period of significance
- Boxy warehouse form and massing
- Two-story brick, poured concrete, or steel framed building
- First-story warehouse/storage space, characterized by open bays
- Dedicated space for vendors, including open space for stalls and/or permanent shop space typically facing interior “lanes” or courtyards
- Accommodations for loading dock(s), automobile access, and parking on one of more sides
- Proximity to other wholesale markets, cold storage warehouses, and rail spurs
- Contributes to the commercial, social, ethnic, and cultural history of Los Angeles
- May have particular significance for its association with a neighborhood or community in Los Angeles
- May be associated with businesses/corporations that have gained national importance
- May feature corporate designs, logos, and signs
- May have served as a prototype for other buildings and locations
- In most cases, the business is still in operation

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- May also be significant for associations(s) with commercial merchants, builders, and leaders

Integrity Considerations:

- Should retain integrity of Location, Design, Setting, Materials, Feeling, and Association
- Property setting includes other wholesale markets (within a block)

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