

This article originally appeared in:

Places

A Forum of Environmental Design

Published by: Design History Foundation; Pratt Institute, School of Architecture

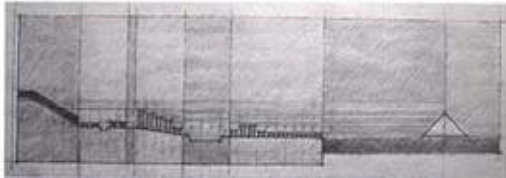
University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design

Spring 1999 Volume 12 Number 3

Pages 34-37

Reading Portland: The City as a Verb

By John Echlin



Towns and regions crystallize around the experience of making and inhabiting. Perhaps it is experience - verbs and not nouns, activities and not names – that is, or should be, the force that shapes residential living. – Keller Easterling

To me, Portland is the perfect counterpart to the Italian “city as laboratory.” It possesses a coherent urban structure in dialog with its natural setting, and its politics and traditions have encouraged an active public involvement in shaping itself. In a personal reading of Portland I will try to distinguish a few key qualities and experiences that make this city unique.

The natural setting. Portland faces east, toward the rising sun over the Cascade Mountains, unlike other West Coast cities, which face west, toward the Pacific Ocean, the setting sun and promises of riches beyond. There is a spiritual link with Mt.

Hood, the volcanic pyramid to the east, which the original pioneers recognized as the gateway to their promised land.

Portlanders rise early and work late, being more like their industrious Eastern ancestors than their laid-back West Coast neighbors. The Willamette River, Portland’s original economic reason for being, both divides the city and joins it as a major public open space. The former waterfront commerce along the river has been replaced in recent years with public parks and housing that aspire to equally dense activity.

The urban growth boundary. Like Italian cities (such as Pistoia, which was captured in the 1400s by the Florentines, who proceeded to build a wall around the city to contain the inhabitants) Portland has set an artificial man-made limit to its outward growth. In the 1970s, Oregonians created a law requiring all cities to draw a line around their perimeter in order to separate and protect farmland. The effect on Portland has been to concentrate development energy within the urban core, where infill, reuse and redevelopment are vital means of transformation.

The Portland block. Compared to other American cities, Portland’s block structure inverts all the rules. It is deceptively simple, with 200-foot by 200-foot (one acre) blocks separated by forth- to sixty-foot-wide streets. The effects are complex. These compact urban



building blocks yield a larger proportion of public space (streets) to private space (buildings), as well as a higher surface to volume ratio than the typical American gridiron. As a result, like in Medieval cities, there are more edges and surfaces to inhabit, an emphasis on corner and intersections, and a downtown that though dense is surprisingly light and airy. All of this contributes to Portland's well-known pedestrian-scale experience.

Portland buildings. Buildings built in Portland before World War II took full advantage of the city's natural setting, its climate and the constraints of the urban block. Buildings were generally simple, box-like forms with large window openings, permeable ground-floor shops activating the sidewalks and prominent cornices framing the public space of the street.

Terra cotta became a favorite building material, providing bright highlights and a shimmering quality to downtown spaces, especially during Portland's dark and rainy winter. A successful Modern reading of this tradition is the Commonwealth Building (Pietro Belluschi, 1947), which has as much to do with reinterpreting Portland as it does with the international and technological aspirations of the time.

Misreading. Misreading can provide important lessons in reading. The Portland Building (Michael Graves, 1980) is primarily an architectural manifesto, fitting neither place nor purpose. To outsiders, its impact on architectural debate at the time was tremendous. Portlanders, however, have had to learn to live with it. As Randy Gragg, design critic for *The Oregonian*, put it, "It may be a monstrosity, but it's our monstrosity." This points out the virtue of a strong, dynamic urban structure: A bad building does not destroy a city.

Public involvement. In terms of shaping and reinventing the city, Portland's greatest successes are its neighborhoods and open spaces. The Pearl District, for example, a formerly exclusive warehouse and industrial area on the north side of downtown, has been transformed through liberalizing the zoning code and allowing residential and commercial uses to co-exist alongside industry. Historic tax credits have allowed many buildings to be converted to new uses. Combined with infill projects and rooftop additions, the Pearl neighborhood is full of surprises and accidents that create a vibrant experience that would have been impossible had it been torn down and built anew.

Pioneer Square. Pioneer Square is the public heart of downtown, equal in spirit and life to any piazza in Italy, yet it is a fairly recent creation. In testimony to the rapid evolution of American cities, it is already the fourth use on the same block in the last one hundred years. The site was originally occupied by a residence, then by the city's grandest hotel and center of social life, then by a parking lot. A scheme to build a parking garage on the site in the early 1990s precipitated a huge public outcry. In a rare case of overcoming urban amnesia and returning the site to its role as a public place, the idea for Pioneer Square was born.

This one-acre outdoor living room acknowledges the frame and scale of buildings surrounding it by creating a large but subtle gesture: an amphitheater open in the middle, allowing pedestrian circulation to cross through diagonally and activate the space even when there are no structured uses. Smaller-scale devices and collaborations with artists – structures, columns, canopies, walls and sculptures – occupy the edges and allow a variety of spaces for the imagination to engage in. It is so successful that at virtually any time of day or evening, during any season or change of weather, there is some activity to see, hear or join in on and feel a part of the city.



Tom McCall Waterfront Park. An equally interesting but even more remarkable feat of reuse and reinterpretation of public space is the city's waterfront park. An expressway, built in the 1940s to carry traffic around downtown, had obliterated the original 1800s commercial waterfront district. Like Pioneer Square, the land dedicated to automobiles by the previous generation has been returned to public use.

What is remarkable here is not so much the physical transformation of the space, but the memory of the waterfront and the power of the vision to imagine the river as a great public space. It is ironic to experience the park today, remembering the dense commercial harbor it once was, reflecting on how that history was lost to bulldozers and progress, and realizing that it could not have been a generous, inviting, green open space had it never been a freeway. What will it be like in another hundred years? Such is the tremendous transformational power of American places, which emphasize actions and not things.

Lovejoy Park competition. Designing provides an opportunity to learn something about places and is inherently a more active form of reading. In this case our office had the opportunity to participate in a recent housing competition adjacent to Lovejoy Park, a notable open space with a fountain designed by Lawrence Halprin in the 1960s.

Our entry offers not only an interpretation of this site but also a reading of Portland as a whole. Two L-shaped wings dimensioned to the size of Portland's block pattern interlock on the site and enclose two internalized, semi-private courtyards. The sloping roofs reflect the distant profile of the Cascade mountains and suggest the idea of a house. At Lovejoy Plaza, the taller wing projects forward, entering into dialog with the open space and activating its eastern edge.

Our reading attempts to interpret the forces that shape this particular place, making the building spaces both inseparable from and activator of this part of the city. It is architecture that informs rather than creates forms, that offers distinct choices and spaces to imagine. Or, as Walt Whitman wrote:

all architecture is what you do with it when you look upon it, (did you think it was in the white or gray stone or the lines of the arches and cornices?)

Notes

1. Keller Easterling, *American Town Plans, A comparative Timeline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 12.
2. Address to the City Club, Portland (16 June 1997).
3. Walt Whitman, "A Song for America," from *Leaves of Grass* (London: Everyman Press, 1996), 37.

Project Credits

Lovejoy park Development Competition

Developer-sponsor: Phoenix Properties

Design Team: Kent Davis, John Echlin, John Eidman, Patricia Gardner, Garry Papers, Eric Philps, Alan Slusarenko

Date: June, 1998

