SHAPING THE CITY:  
PORTLAND, OREGON, 1841-2011

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From the moment future Portlanders began shaping their future city, they fully appreciated the place they had chosen: a place bounded by rivers, surrounded by green hills, lying between ocean and mountains, and made comfortably habitable by a temperate climate. With the self-confident assuredness of the transplanted New Englanders they were, the first generation of settlers claimed their new town was imbued with all of the moral, spiritual, and physical qualities needed to nurture industry, sensitivity, and refinement—values necessary for a “civilized” and productive community. Over the next 150 years, succeeding generations shaped Portland into a metropolis that honors both its natural environment and the traditions of good urban design.

Caution and conservatism, moderation and proportion have been legendary parts of the original Portland personality. The city is connected with nature. Yet, when it comes to the recent and democratic exercises in participatory planning, Portlanders cultivate an amity, patience, and venturesome aspect far beyond that of most American cities. In their historic conservatism and willingness to try new ways of building everything from neighborhoods to transit systems, Portlanders have been able to strike their own balance. That balance takes practice, perseverance, and community

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involvement. It’s that involvement, the engagement in the community, that distinguishes this city and its 150-year old shaping. The fountain in Portland’s old town gets to the heart of Portland’s real-estate ethic: “Good citizens are the riches of a city.”

We often think of planning as policy making process.

Someone comes up with an idea. Usually it’s an idea to aid commerce or further economic development.

Politicians and policy makers then design a concept, and the public provides input.

What is underappreciated are the citizens of the city: pioneers, donors, gadflies, and other activists.

Many times, city planning begins with an individual, seeking his own benefit, but producing something that benefits the city as a whole.

This is a picture was taken on Canyon Road, above the city, conceivably as town-builder Daniel Lownsdale might have seen it in the 1840s. We can imagine Lownsdale, or some other planning pioneer, developing his vision of what the future city should look like.

In the end, city planning is more of a dance. Geography lays out the dance floor, a patron sponsors the dance, and everyone at the dance is looking for partner in progress.

Here, the Florodora Girls pose at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, an event that shaped the next two decades of real estate growth in Portland. The world’s fair, indeed, set off a wild whirl of development and City Beautiful building
Portland’s early settlers had large land claims that extended, on the west, from the hills to the Willamette River. Within a few short years of claiming their land, these same individuals divided up and sold off their properties. Real estate development was a dominant activity from the city’s earliest days.
In this map, we see early Portland. To the left of the city are two roads crossing the Tualatin Mountains, now known as the West Hills. The hills are a spur of the Northern Oregon Coast Range and they separate the Tualatin Basin of Washington County from the Portland Basin of western Multnomah County and Clark County, Washington.

The Tualatin Basin grew the wheat that was the basis of Portland’s early economy, and economy that, even today, is still significantly dependent on wheat and other agricultural produce.
The map above is the plan Daniel Lownsdale and his fellow Portlanders laid out for Portland in the mid-1840s. Coming from Kentucky, Lownsdale purchased the land that would become downtown Portland on September 22, 1848. Lownsdale established the first tannery near the current location of PGE Park/Jeld-Wen Field just west of the downtown Portland. He resurveyed Portland, keeping the small blocks (200 feet per side, 64 feet streets), and adding the contiguous park blocks.

The 200 by 200-foot grid dictates that the streets and sidewalks today play a major role in the usability and accessibility of the city and its neighborhoods. Because of the need for access to all sides of each block, and the founders’ early desire to partition land in a way that maximized their value (the small blocks meant more-lucrative corner lots to sell), the standard 60-foot right of way was adopted, a modest measurement when compared to other cities.
Portland in 1852 was a rather muddy affair, with its two-story wooden structures. By the 1880s, however, Portland could boast over 100 cast iron-fronted buildings that gave the city a distinctive European—an Italianate, to be more precise—air.
Daniel Lownsdale’s donation of a strip of land, which became the South Park Blocks running right through the Portland State University campus, early on became an important factor in establishing the city’s downtown residential and cultural center. The photograph above shows the blocks in the early 1860s. The lithograph below depicts the blocks, soon after the elm trees were planted in the 1870s, at the corner of Park and Montgomery streets.
Soon after his arrival from Harvard in 1867, the Unitarian minister Thomas Lamb Eliot, became the conscience of the city, influencing Portland cultural and intellectual development long after his death in 1936. Eliot led in the creation of such major civic institutions as the public library, the school and parks systems, the Humane Society and the Boys and Girls Aid Society, the state’s penitentiaries, Reed College, and the Art Museum, among other agencies. As well, he mentored the young architect A. E. Doyle, who would go on to design many of Portland’s iconic buildings.
The architecture firm of William Widden and Ion Lewis were the city’s “go-to” architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The young man standing to the tight is A. E. Doyle during his apprenticeship with the firm.
In 1905, Portland was the host city of the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition, a world's fair. This event increased recognition of the city, which contributed to a doubling of the population of Portland, from 90,426 in 1900 to 207,214 in 1910.

Landscape architect John Charles Olmsted, nephew and stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted, was hired to develop a plan for the grounds. His plan took advantage of the scenic views available from the site, including Mount St. Helens and the river. Numerous other local architects, including Ion Lewis of the firm Whidden & Lewis, were commissioned to design the fair's buildings; the majority of the buildings were in the style of the Spanish Renaissance, and decorated with architectural flourishes such as domes, cupolas, arched doorways and red-colored roofs. The buildings, not intended to be permanent, were largely constructed of plaster over wooden frames, which resulted in rather low construction costs.

The major exception to the use of low cost construction techniques was the Forestry Building, a log cabin designed by A. E. Doyle which was said to be the world's largest log cabin.
In addition to his work on the fairgrounds for the Lewis and Clark Exposition, Olmsted created a park plan for Portland. He began by analyzing Portland's terrain, park inventory, real-estate prospects for future parkland, and park personnel. On tours of the city, he took copious notes of all he saw on five-inch index cards and snapped hundreds of photographs of the Portland landscape. He then spent his evenings at the Portland Hotel writing up his notes in longhand, which were then typed by hotel stenographers. Strategic, visionary planning was at the heart of the Olmsted Report of 1903. Olmsted wanted Portlanders to look far into the future—50 years or more—especially when it came to purchasing land while it was still within reach of the city's means. Typical of Olmsted plans, it was comprehensive, including advice on land acquisition, the qualities of good parks and park systems, parkways and boulevards, park governance, and administration.
The years following the Exposition were boom ones for Portland realtors and bankers. W. M. Killingsworth went so far as to imagine Portland becoming the “New York of the Pacific.” Following the lead of City Beautiful advocates and architects, Portlanders erected several terra cotta buildings that grace the downtown. Chicago planner Edward Bennett was brought to town to give the city a grand plan that would have had Portland built like Paris. While Portlanders were entranced by the vision, the price brought them back to reality, and Bennett’s plan was never realized.
As with other cities, Portland’s heady days of the 1920s came to a grinding halt with the onset of the Depression. Little was built, though the city lost many of its great cast iron buildings to the wrecking ball and the advent of parking lots.
During the years of World War II, Portland saw its population explode by one third as workers flocked to the shipyards to build the liberty ships that fed the allies. In 1943, the city council, acting upon orders from the federal government to make post-war plans, brought New York planning czar Robert Moses to draw up plans for Portland. He advised the city to rid itself of its old streetcar system and make room for cars and freeways. He also advised the city to acquire the land that would soon become Forest Park.

The fate of many a Portland streetcar, furnished with beautiful wood and leather seats.
Following the nationwide fashion of urban renewal, Portland created the Portland Development Commission in 1958 and launched its first urban-renewal district south of the civic auditorium. The wooden homes of the historic Jewish and Italian neighborhoods of South Portland were taken down and new buildings designed by Chicago architects Skidmore Owings & Merrill were put up.
An extension of the freeway ring around the city planned by Robert Moses included what was to be the Mt. Hood Freeway, carrying traffic from the eastside downtown east toward Gresham. The freeway would have destroyed several neighborhoods between the river and the eastern portion of Multnomah county. It was stopped by a combination of citizen resistance and empowered politicians.
From its founding and its evolution into the commercial center of Oregon, through creation of the Downtown Plan of 1972, to the Central City Plan of the 1980s and ongoing neighborhood plans—planning has always originated with citizens. And while there never was a Grand Plan, there always was a “noble diagram.” That diagram included the tight 200 by 200-foot blocks, the traditions of City Beautiful, and design guidelines that reinforce incremental development in which each building is considered as development occurs. The guidelines describe how a building or structure should fit within its context, what will add to the life and vitality of the street, and how it will relate to the public realm.

Above we see the evolution of two important downtown parks. At the top left is the old Harbor Drive on the west bank of the Willamette and, on the right, is Waterfront Park, which opened at the same location in 1979. Below shows the evolution of the landmark Portland Hotel to the two-story Meier & Frank parking lot to Pioneer Courthouse Square, today Portland’s “living room.”
The street network and the public open spaces now combine to create a downtown that is 60 percent public realm (the space between buildings) and it is the importance of the public realm that determines the character of the city. (Image courtesy of Walker Macy Architects)

Shaping the city as Portlanders know it has come not through planning alone, but through applying the tools that citizens, politicians, and city planners—together—have created to design and build Portland. Portlanders care about the natural environment in their state and their city—but they also care deeply about the built environment. And they view the city as a lasting legacy they will pass on to future generations.