Portland, Oregon, today is often referred to as a reference case for urban success and sustainability. However, Portland was not always regarded in quite that way. As recently as the mid-1960s, the Willamette River flowing through Portland was regarded as an open sewer, and into the early 1970s, the City violated air quality standards most days of the year. It’s downtown was, like most across the nation, reeling from the onslaught of suburbanization as a growing web of interstate highways took people and activity out of central cities.

However, at about the same time, late 1960s through the 1970s, Portland made choices that were uncharacteristic for their time. In addition to early and significant commitments to environmental quality, SRO housing and services to the homeless, community policing, and an expanding parks and trails system, during this era Portland became known for:

- removal of a highway to convert a stretch of waterfront into a park;
- cancellation of decades-old freeway plans and the transfer of those federal funding commitments into new and now iconic transit investments;
- creation of a revolutionary downtown plan that rewrote the destiny of the Central City as a people place in a car era;
- formal recognition of neighborhood associations as part of the governance apparatus for the city;
- creation of a regional government, the only one of its kind in the US today, and its development of a regional urban growth boundary; and
- adoption of a comprehensive plan consistent with Oregon’s landmark statewide land use planning program, widely regarded as a model.

Today, Portland receives a continuous stream of visitors to see the results of this 50-year legacy of civic action and innovation. National and international delegations come to see the physical results of these initiatives written in the urban form of the City and its institutions.

However, the Knight Foundation, though interested in the nuts and bolts of urbanism and urban form, asked a different question: Why did Portland make different decisions than other cities, decisions that today have created a kind of urbanism not possible in many US cities?

To explore this question, we convened two panels to engage in conversation with Knight Vice President Carol Coletta about their engagement with the City, other citizens, and across sectors back in that time. Our invitation to them stated that:
“... our hope is that we can get beneath the things that can be seen to a better understanding of what it was that enabled, or assisted, or prodded "Portland" to make decisions that have set our city and region apart from other places in the US. Most important for this meeting is not what we did, but why this transformation of our place happened, and how it happened. The water? Food? Views? People? Bureaucracy? You tell us.”

The participants in each of the two panels are listed in Attachment 1. Without their generous participation, and willingness to engage in some back and forth about events of decades ago, this report and the videos would not exist. Participants were recruited from among those known for having made notable contributions to that early part of Portland’s modern history. Though this is largely a history of the last 45-50 years, a number of key participants were unavailable, deceased, or had moved away to other cities and regions.

Several key themes emerged from the conversations:

- **There was no grand plan, but there was a guiding vision** (See [http://vimeo.com/peteyboy/nograndplan](http://vimeo.com/peteyboy/nograndplan)).

  Initial discussions weren’t about what to build, or what not to build, but about what the city should be and what needed to happen to get it there. The conversations that kicked things off weren’t about solving the problems of “right now,” but about what the better city would look and feel like, and how it would work. There were, in fact, lots of plans, but individually they had little power.

  However, by creating them with reference to this larger discussion, and to a larger vision, small things got leveraged into larger things, and that helped to sustain action over the time that it actually takes to get things done. This wasn’t about making Portland a version of some sort of idealized urban success, or a compendium of someone else’s best practices, but was about making Portland the best Portland that Portland could be. The vision was comprehensive and expansive, about the whole place and the city writ large. Everything is related to everything.

  In addition, a good vision allows leaders to take unpopular actions. That is, people are unlikely to embrace meaningful change without first seeing whether it works. Leaders often have to take the risk of committing to changes before people can know whether the changes are likely to succeed. The vision is the baseline against which the reasons and intentions and commitments of leaders are measured, or at least it should be.

  The unifying notion here is that actions should be driven by ideas, not solutions. This is another way of saying that identifying overarching principles first enables solutions to emerge in a new and useful context, rather than to drive the process with interest-driven actions from the outset. For example, in Portland the 1972 Downtown Plan really mattered (see Attachment 6 and visit:
http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/ourregion/CentralCty/intro.html). However, it arose not as a way simply to physically remake downtown, but as part of a larger strategy to remake the city. The 1972 Downtown Plan was set within the context of efforts to save the whole city from the ravages of suburbanization. (See Attachment 2: Yaden’s 1972 article on changes in demographics, a highly influential piece early on.)

Just saving downtown was not enough, and just laying claim to a vision for downtown wasn’t either. By expanding the field of view to the city, advocates for change were able to redirect and reframe local politics towards new ends no longer defined and circumscribed by more geographically narrow downtown interests.

The larger vision for the city was later defined as the “Population Strategy,” the retention of middle class families with kids in the city through improvements in neighborhoods, parks, schools, and public safety. (The Population Strategy emerged as the alternative to the “Do Nothing Strategy,” predicated on the assumption that what was happening to the City was beyond the City’s ability to change, or the “Social Service Strategy,” focused entirely on the needs of the lowest income residents. The Do Nothing strategy was deemed unacceptable, and the Social Service strategy was seen as too narrowly focused. See Attachment 3: Weber’s 1977 Memo laying it out, and Attachment 4: a speech by Weber summing up what it meant.)

- **Portland didn’t emerge because of a focus on creating stuff, but because of a focus on recreating and sustaining political culture** (See [http://vimeo.com/peteyboy/citizenparticipation](http://vimeo.com/peteyboy/citizenparticipation)). It’s all about engagement. Transit, neighborhood associations, and energy conservation didn’t change the City, people did. And they were the ones to embrace transit, neighborhood associations, and energy conservation as levers for making Portland a better place to be. Leaders mattered. But, leaders were needed who understood power, knew how to get things done, and knew the city intimately, not leaders who had the ideas or the BIG idea. Neil Goldschmidt, widely regarded as a key catalyst for innovative change, didn’t run on integrating land use and transportation planning. Instead, he ran on open government.

Perhaps as important, leaders need to model the tolerance of aberrant views. Some of those aberrant views may be brilliant, but if there is no environment of tolerance, the message is that nothing but the prevailing wisdom matters, which is death to reinvention. Leaders have to be tolerant, and capable of forgiveness. And again, leadership in Portland functioned most effectively in an environment of dynamic citizen participation. We can point to developments like the Rose Quarter arena district which, instead of coming through the “Portland Way,” came about through “brute force,” out of the mind of a single individual. And it’s a dead place.
The “Portland Way,” of interminable meetings and participation, based on the fundamental principle that everyone gets their say, was and is essential (see Attachment 5: Abbott’s article about jurisdictions “talking to each other). The challenge then and now is to get people out of their homes and into contact with each other. The fundamental goal, a part of the overarching vision, was and is that people don’t need to move to be able to live in a better neighborhood, that a better neighborhood can emerge from their work with their neighbors and the incorporation of that work by the City into its work.

No one, from any sector, wanted to see this place over-run. That made future growth and change an issue of common and shared concern that led different groups to tolerate different views emerging in the public process. What ultimately happened to those views, though, was the product of the policymaking process.

The commission form of government helped here, by giving citizens direct access to their elected officials around issues of great concern at the neighborhood level. However, the commission form alone is not the reason why Portland is Portland. What really mattered was an early understanding that the way Portland was governed was itself a major impediment to achieving the goal of a better Portland. Recreating a grassroots-infused political culture, served by a welcoming and transparent set of city processes, restructured and redirected civic culture in the city and was directly responsible for remaking Portland.

- To recap, it’s all about people, and about the scale of lives lived here. There was a real sense that people were taking care of the place and taking care of each other through the engagement that they had in redirecting the city away from a path that was not working. This is not a “Fortune 500” town, meaning that we are on our own to work things out. Back in the day, the utilities and banks were locally owned and locally directed. Today, those firms aren’t there for the city and its citizens in anything close to the same way...it’s about small business and engaging those that both choose to live here and whose success depends on the success of this place. People, by any measure.

- Back in the day, people read Jane Jacobs and decided to take over the city (See http://vimeo.com/peteyboy/makingchange). It was an open field then, and you could get together with like-minded people and just run, create things, make things happen. People had gone away from Portland, seen other places, and came back determined to both use the best of what they say and avoid the devastation seen in other US cities in that era. Portland seemed both ready for change and, most important, changeable. Government was the powerbroker back then, not so today. Today, what was once an open field feels more like a ladder, something you have to patiently climb. Politics today seems like a determination to get to neutral. Both of those developments make things more complicated and challenging.
The timing was wonderful. The environmental movement was just cranking up, and that spirit and those people were part of the mix. The critique of Jane Jacobs was in the wind, and resonated strongly with people here. There was a willingness to question, if not disregard, the old guard who had been running the city for so long, and were then running it into the ground. One old guy, Tom McCall, was instrumental in empowering the young guys, and in his own right became the mover of Oregon’s best known innovations in planning and policy. We had money to spend: CETA on young people, $600 million in highway funds on transportation projects to transform the region and change directions, and Federal transfers to (re)invest in the city. That combination of old guard and new actors, working with shared assumptions about participation and empowerment, willing to embrace a new vision and committed to change over the long haul, created the Portland we know today. Unquestionably, there was a lot of luck involved in that equation.
Attachment 1:

Knight Foundation Project Panels Agenda
Monday, September 15, 2014
Room 220 Urban Center Building, PSU, 506 SW Mill Street

8:30 Coffee and pastry
9 – 11 Panel 1:
- Rick Gustafson: First Metro Executive, currently with Shiels Obletz Johnson, Portland’s Premier project management firm, working on streetcar development in Portland and nationwide
- Jon Schleuning: with SRG architects, key staff person in Bureau of Planning back in the 70s
- Don Stastny: architect and urban designer, activist, lot of work in Portland and with the tribes
- Bud Clark: legendary Portland Mayor in early 1980s until 1990, former barkeep and neighborhood activist
- Rod O’Hiser: former chief urban designer for Portland, worked in planning from early 1970s through 1990s.

11 – 2 Break, debrief

1:30 Lemonade and cookies
2 – 4 Panel 2:
- Richard (Dick) Feeney: long-time governmental affairs guy for TriMet and transportation thought-leader, former PSU-based public policy researcher
- Bing Sheldon: founder of SERA Architects, Chair of Planning Commission, historic preservation innovator
- Lloyd Anderson: Former city commissioner and ED for Port of Portland, his election to council in 1960s marked seachange in Portland politics and direction
- Bill Scott: former Chief of Staff to legendary Portland Mayor Neil Goldschmidt, former ED for real estate development firm Pacificorp, founding member of education change organization Portland Leaders Roundtable and still engaged
- Mike Lindberg: key staff member of Portland Office of Planning and Development under Goldschmidt in 1970s and then member of city council for 17 years

4:00 Brief Debrief