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Urban Center Plaza

by Carl Abbott

Nobad Toulan's conception of the place that would house Portland State University's College of Urban and Public Affairs' new facility went far beyond a mere structure. A vital urban plaza that would act as a link to Portland's downtown, a transportation hub, and a gathering place for students and community members, was central to his vision. The Urban Center Plaza, over its 14-year history, has fulfilled that vision becoming an anchor of commercial, civic, and educational activity in the central city's south end. The following observations are excerpted from an article by urban historian, Carl Abbot, published in Landscape Architecture shortly after the plaza's completion in 2001. —The Editor

The Urban Center Plaza shares one of downtown Portland's 200-square-foot blocks with PSU's Urban Center building and attached Distance Education wing and extends across a vacated street right-of-way to the south. The plaza and building, which houses the university's College of Urban and Public Affairs are considered the standard-setting components of a University District plan to link the 20,000 [29,000 in fall 2012] student university to the thriving core of Portland. The plaza's designer, Doug Macy of Walker Macy, the Portland-based landscape architecture and urban design firm, lists its functions: a forecourt to the Urban Center, "an inviting front door" for Portland State, and a gateway for Portlanders entering their downtown from the south.

The plaza is ten blocks, and ten minutes, from Pioneer Courthouse Square at the heart of the city, and six blocks from the Performing Arts Center and the Portland Art Museum. It defines a downtown subdistrict and the southern end of downtown itself.

Adding the square footage and the plaza cost roughly \$5-million. The bulk of the

funds came from the Portland Development Commission, supplemented by a Federal Transportation Administration grant to TriMet, the regional transportation agency. TriMet managed the construction in coordination with bus facility improvements on Fifth and Sixth Avenues—Portland State is the single-most active destination in the TriMet system.

The touchstone for civic spaces in Portland is busy Pioneer Courthouse Square, created in the 1980s to replace a parking ramp in the heart of the shopping district. In many ways, the Urban Center Plaza is a reverse image of the square which Walker Macy helped to design. The square creates an urban amphitheater by cutting a circle into a concave set of stairs and steps. The Urban Center Plaza thrusts a circle of stairs and stadium steps into the heart of the space—in effect, turning Pioneer Square inside-out.

The fountains in the plaza key off of Portland's natural setting and act as signposts that help to call attention to the major pedestrian corridors. One ripples gently over low baffles like a Columbia river fish ladder. The others channel water into narrow streams that surge over escarpments like the waterfalls that plunge from the 2,000-foot bluffs of the Columbia Gorge in Portland's immediate environs.

The informality of the plaza with its many subareas and alternative use routes suggests that regular use will be constant but small scale — a spot for a quick slice of pizza, twenty minutes reading in the sun, five minutes of chatting on one of the fountains parapets. And that may be just what is needed for a campus in a bustling city. **M**



Pioneer Courthouse Square



Urban Center Plaza



Pioneer Courthouse Square

Portland Art Museum

Performing Arts Center

Oregon Historical Society

Urban Center Plaza



Urban Center Plaza



Urban Center Plaza