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Creative Accounting

Are We a 21st Century Greenwich Village?

By Michael McGregor

Portland writer, Assistant Professor of English, PSU

To determine the current condition of Portland's creative community, you might do what I did on a brisk day in late October: hop one of those downtown streetcars that still look fresh from Christmas morning and ride it north along Tenth Avenue toward the Brewery Blocks. After all, Northwest Portland has always been a place for artists. And in the past decade or so, as galleries have filled the rehabbed buildings of the Pearl District, creative firms like Animation Dynamics, Plazm Media and advertising giant Wieden + Kennedy have also anchored there. The Brewery Blocks project alone, the first part of which won this year's Mayor's Award for Design Excellence, would make the district north of Burnside seem the place to go to see what creative Portland looks like.

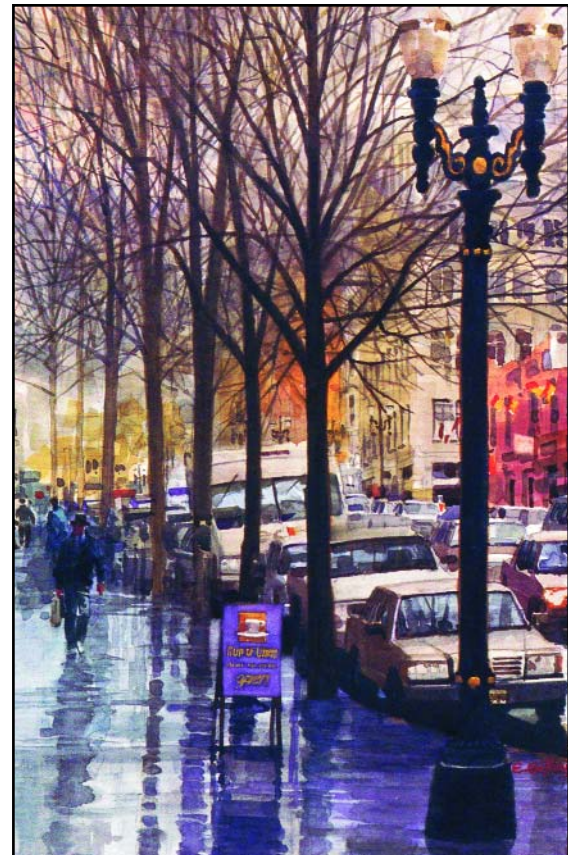
Even before the streetcar reached the stop at Powell's, where I could hear the saws and jackhammers transforming a neighborhood once haunted by the down and out, I felt imbued with possibility that day. Maybe it was just the sun, or the streetcar's shiny fixtures, or the faces of the young people heading for the shops on Northwest 23rd, but my mind kept drifting to other desirable cities – Prague and Amsterdam with their transportation systems, Paris with its elegant facades, and New York with its sense that everything is happening there. Are we heading that direction? I kept wondering. Is Portland poised to become what a poet friend in Illinois called it, the Greenwich Village of the 21st century?

The answer would seem to be “yes” if you believe the buzz that has made its way across the country in the past few years, attracting young members of what urban growth guru Richard Florida calls “the creative class” to town. Typical is an article in Cincinnati's *City Beat* last month entitled “Why We Left Cincinnati.” From interviews with six young architects who moved to Portland after graduating from the University of Cincinnati's prestigious architecture program, reporter John Fox concludes that Portland has everything young creative people are looking for. The attributes he cites are: a vital

urban core, a variety of housing options, Portland's urban growth boundary, acceptance of alternative lifestyles, a strong arts and music scene, availability of organic foods and local public markets, a strong mix of transportation options, concern for the environment, the proximity of nature, and an ongoing quest by city leaders for a better quality of life.

Bruce Adams lists similar attributes in his enthusiastic chapter on the Rose City in *Boundary Crossers: Case Studies of How Ten of America's Metropolitan Regions Work*. “Portland has a vision that goes beyond the traditional special-interest politics that dominates many cities,” he observes, “a vision that a region can preserve its environment and generate a vibrant, growing economy – that, in fact, the two are tied together.”

Elsewhere in the same piece, Adams writes, “Local business leaders know the environment is the key to Portland's quality of life, enabling them to attract the talented employees they need to compete in the global marketplace.” According to Florida, the largest percentage (over 30%) of the American workers Adams is referring to are members of the creative class, which he defines as people



Gene Gill, Portland artist, not only was educated in the region, but draws inspiration for his work from the rain and light of the metroscape. Courtesy of the artist and Gottlieb Gallery.



"Hot Wheels" by Portland artist, Gene Gill. Courtesy of the artist and Gottlieb Gallery.

"whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content."

In his own book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida ranks Portland only 16th among metropolitan areas with populations of one million or more in its desirability for the creative class, but he clearly thinks that Portland's star is rising. (Among the factors Florida considers are innovation and diversity, categories in which Portland scores significantly below hotter spots like San Francisco, Austin or Seattle. While Portland has a thriving gay and lesbian community, it has long been called the whitest city in America.)

Then there's *Money Magazine*, whose editors named Portland America's most livable city in 2000 and ranked it number two behind New York City in 2002. Certainly livability goes hand-in-hand with creativity, doesn't it?

So America has discovered Portland, and many national opinion leaders are listing it among the best places for young creative people to be. But the question remains: where do we really stand in terms of creativity? Are the factors listed above enough to make Portland a first-class creative community or are there other things (as Florida suggests) a creative city needs? Beyond the buzz, the hype, the building projects, is Portland the "creative mecca" some local leaders are fond of calling it? Or are we just patting ourselves on the back

without an accurate idea of who we are and what we have?

I carried these questions with me on the streetcar that day, hoping Stuart Horodner might have some answers. Horodner, 41, who once owned a gallery in Manhattan's SoHo district, was director and curator of the art gallery at Bucknell University before becoming Visual Arts Curator for the Portland Institute for Contemporary Arts (PICA), one of the city's most dynamic young arts organizations. PICA's founding director Kristy Edmunds hired him two years ago for his knowledge of the national and international arts scene as much as anything else. If anyone could put Portland's place in the greater creative community – at least the arts community – into perspective, it seemed he could.

I found Horodner on the second floor of the Wieden + Kennedy Building, home not only to the advertiser whose work for Nike, Coca-Cola and other international brands has brought attention to one significant part of Portland's creative community, but also to the latest Portland restaurant to be praised from coast to coast, Blue Hour. To reach him, I had to sidle past the busy desks of Literary Arts, Inc., the 16-year-old group responsible for both the Oregon Book Awards and the Portland Arts and Lectures series, one of the most successful literary series in the country. Judging by the

company they keep, it would seem Horodner and PICA have no choice but to maintain a national and international perspective.

"My role and PICA's role is to reflect a larger context," Horodner confirmed when we were seated in the PICA Resource Room, a revamped warehouse space now lined with books and videos by painters, photographers and performing artists whose work is cutting edge. "In the past, Portland has been a rather isolated place, but things are changing."

A trim man with close-cropped hair, Horodner compared Portland to a newborn baby. "I loved being in New York," he said, speaking enthusiastically from deep within a loud red chair. "I loved the sense I had of being surrounded by the best, a part of history. But here I have a chance to influence

those industries bring with them.

Playwright Joseph Fisher, 28, who moved to Portland in 1997 after graduating from Southern Methodist University's respected theater program, concurs. "Theater requires a metropolitan scene to thrive," he says. "The theater in Portland is getting better because more of a metropolitan atmosphere is springing up."

By "metropolitan" Fisher means a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan community, the kind of community he found in Dallas and sees reflected in the Pearl District's lofts and the new art galleries spreading through Alberta. He means more economic bustle, too. "The more citified things become, the more people need the arts," he says. "Cities divide people up and they need those community experiences."

Fisher, who is playwright-in-residence at Stark Raving Theatre and was recently selected by the Kennedy Center as America's most promising young playwright, chose to live in Portland in part because he'd heard the buzz. Eric Overmeyer, who teaches playwriting at Yale's renowned School of Drama, told him Portland was a wonderful city with an up-and-coming theater scene. He thinks Portland has a long way to go in terms of arts support, but he sees promise. And he finds the city's surroundings more conducive to creation than most other places.

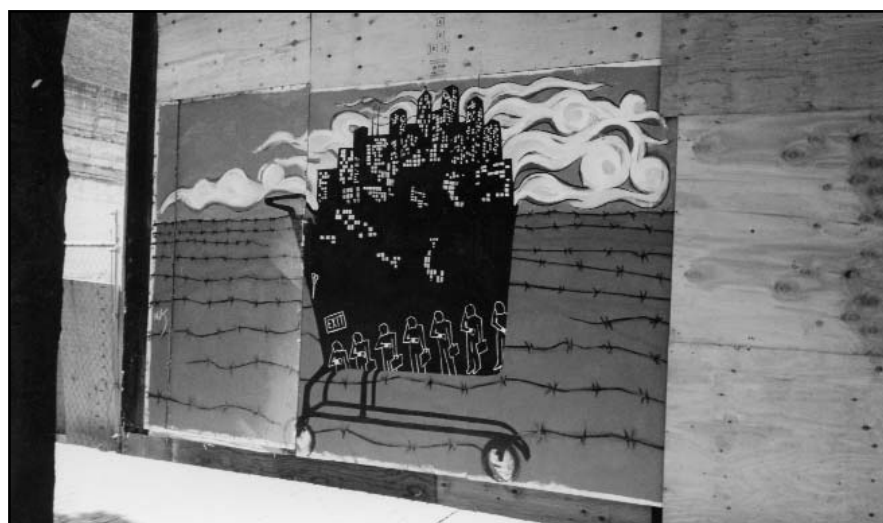
"Portland is definitely a spiritual community," he says. "People pay attention to the way things feel, the way they should be. They pay attention to the natural world, too. That's why there are a lot of creative people here. My thinking is, everywhere is inhospitable to theater so why not go where there

How do you balance all the beautiful aspects of . . . Portland with the need to be connected . . . elsewhere?

I have creative freedom, access to people, and a working environment I can't have there. That's why people from across the country and the world are moving here. The question I hear creative people asking, though, is 'How do you balance all the beautiful aspects of being in Portland with the need to be connected to things elsewhere?'"

Horodner's question may be the most important one for Portland's arts community to answer as it takes stock of where it is and looks ahead. It is related to the larger questions of economic and population growth. To sustain a vital arts community – one diverse and prosperous enough to attract international attention while both fostering and holding onto local talent – a city needs a large and active art-consuming public, one with the inclination and the money to support a variety of artists and arts organizations. According to Florida, the creative class is exactly that; hungry for the stimulation art provides, its workers help the arts to grow. Which means that Portland's future as an arts community is directly linked to its ability to draw creative industries and the younger, hipper workers

something still in its infancy. And here I have



Street art in Old Town. Photograph by Christine Davis

are trees? It's important to live in a place that makes you happy."

It seems that in the 1990s Portland's pleasing mix of trees and metropolitan atmosphere made many people happy, especially those working in creative fields. Over the course of the decade, Oregon added 242,000 jobs, most of them in the Portland area and many in the then-fast-growing high-tech sector, a key employer of Florida's creative class. According to a recent report by the Portland Development Commission and the Oregon Creative Services Alliance, in 1997 the Portland area alone had 26,731 workers in 10,059 businesses in the creative services industry, a rubric under which they group: independent artists, writers, and performers; motion picture and video production and post-production services; graphic designers; photographers; software publishers; customer computer programmers; and advertising and related businesses. Combined, these businesses took in over \$2.2 billion that year. Even if you factor in the recent economic downturn, it would seem that Portland has a solid foothold in the creative services sector. But in the current economic climate, things are seldom what they seem.

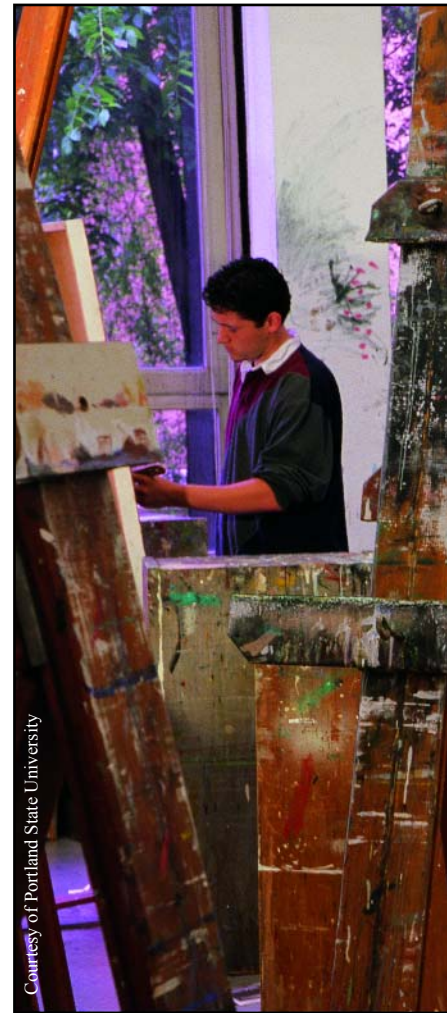
To get a better picture of the creative services sector, I walked straight east from PICA's building through the Pearl to meet with Jeanette Pilak in the newly refurbished Kalberer Building (now called the Creative Services Center) on Fifth Avenue. About the time Horodner began with PICA, Pilak became Executive Director of the Oregon Creative Services Alliance (OCSA), a non-profit organization set up to serve the common needs of trade and business associations in the creative services industry. OCSA, whose stated purpose is "to build Portland's and Oregon's image as a nationally recognized creative hub," grew out of a report published in June of 1999 that showed, in part, that young people in the 20- to 34-year-old range were moving to Portland in greater numbers, many to work in creative services companies. At that time, these companies were growing at twice the rate of the regional economy in general and paying wages two-thirds higher than the regional average (\$50,200 vs. \$31,430).

The report, *Designing Portland's Future: The Role of the Creative Services Industries*, is an impressive document that catalogues Portland's growth as a creative community throughout the 1990s and maps out strategies for everything from marketing Portland's creative services nationally and building arts awareness in area schools to developing resource networks, pursuing funding sources, and upgrading infrastructure in Portland's central core

where 54% of Oregon's creative services firms are located. It was meant to be both a celebration of the city's increasing national and international exposure and a blueprint for making Portland a recognized 21st century creative leader. Unfortunately, not long after its release, the economic situation changed both nationally and locally. National companies that had established satellite offices in the Portland area pulled out, many local startup high-tech firms (especially those based on the Internet) went belly up, and businesses that had enthusiastically embraced cooperative ventures, giving money to support the new initiatives the 1999 report called for, retrenched, re-focusing their energies toward holding on to what they had.

"Two years ago people believed in a collaborative and open environment," Pilak told me. "Now everyone is looking no more than 30 days out. Trade associations have fewer members, fewer corporate sponsors and less participation. People are making creative alliances only when they need them to survive."

In many ways the Creative Services Center building itself reflects the state of the creative service industry in Portland. In a cooperative venture with the building's private ownership, the Portland Development Commission spent \$12 million renovating it to serve as a creative services hub. Last September, OCSA moved in, as did several professional support groups in creative services industries. The plan was to lease most of the building's nearly 70,000 square feet on seven floors to creative companies, offering them state-of-the-art conference facilities, up-to-date telecommunications connections, and proximity to OCSA's services. But last fall's terrorist attacks and the corresponding economic downturn made tenants impossible to find.



Artists in training at Portland State University

Portland State University had plans to move its multimedia lab and a production studio to the building but state-wide budget cuts in higher education forced it to back out, leaving Livengood/Nowack, an advertising firm slated to move in next February, as the only prospective major tenant.



Portland State University's art department.

Despite the weariness in her eyes and voice from having to focus on retaining creative services firms rather than recruiting new ones, Pilak speaks with guarded optimism about the industry's future. She knows that Portland's economic foothold in the national and international arena is weak, but with 15 years' experience in the management of non-profit arts organizations, she is adept at finding silver linings.

"Portland is a tertiary market," she says. "We will never be Manhattan or Hollywood. And it's clear that without Nike"—Portland's only Fortune 500 company—"and Nike design, you wouldn't have a dozen or so other companies that are here. We know that creative services grow out of spin-offs and convergences. But there are several sectors the Northwest is known nationally and internationally as doing well in already, and we have our own Portlandesque approach to them."

In addition to Nike and fellow footwear leader Adidas, Pilak points to outerwear creators Columbia Sportswear and Jantzen Swimwear, craft beverage producers like Tazo Tea and Portland's many micro-brewers, and specialty product manufacturers like Leatherman tools. To this list she adds a number of high-tech firms still thriving on the national and world stage, among them Animation Dynamics, which has done animation and logo design for Visa; DownStream Digital, one of the top digital media and post-production facilities on the West Coast; and Plazm Media, a design

and information business whose Plazm Magazine is known internationally as a place to view emerging forms of artistic and cultural expression.

Most important for Portland's future as a creative services center, Pilak says, is the area's power to retain young people looking for more than just good jobs. "Five to one of those who moved here when things were good are staying," she says. Among the reasons she cites are: access to outdoor activities, the ability to live alternative lifestyles, progressive thinking in the local community, the easiness of doing entrepreneurial work in Portland, and the city's public transportation system. "I've had many people tell me they came here just because they could give up their cars."

Portland is still drawing new creative people, too, Pilak notes, and they are finding jobs if they have the right training and experience, something she and others say is often lacking in the local worker pool. Just the day before we talked, she was able to find positions for two twenty-somethings from Cleveland with national experience in animation and e-learning. They came to Portland because they'd heard it was a great place to be. "Who the hell wants to be from Cleveland?" asks Pilak. "People like to say that they're from Portland. It may be just perception, but perception can become reality."

If Portland is to become a solid creative community rather than the recent faddish place to be, it must build on that perception before it disappears. Above all, that means investing in the city's infrastructure despite the current economic conditions as Neil Goldschmidt and others did a quarter century ago. In interview after interview with people in the arts and creative services, I heard the same refrain: Portland needs better arts facilities, better arts education, and stronger arts support from both public and private institutions.

"There's a quality of life here I think is exceptional," says Oregon Symphony President Tony Woodcock, who came to Portland in 1998 from England, "but public support for the arts is minimal to say the least. If the arts are to grow and develop along with the community, support has to grow and develop, too. They say that in the next 10 years the Portland area will gain another half a million people. We must see arts support as an investment."

Woodcock is careful to point out that audience support for the arts is strong already, with one million people attending performances by the four largest performing arts organizations — the Oregon Symphony, Portland Opera, Oregon Ballet Theatre, and Portland Center Stage — each year. He calls the level of arts activity in Portland in general "some-

thing any European city would be proud of" and says that simply having a designated Cultural District in downtown "says a great deal about how a community wants to see itself." But the city's arts venues are overused, he says, referring to a recent study by the Minneapolis-based Keeywadin Group that found Portland in dire need of new facilities. The authors of the study, who looked at population growth, arts events attendance, tourism and facilities in other cities, were, in music critic David Stabler's words, "bullish about Portland's prospects" but felt that Portland's major halls were overbooked. They recommended that Portland spend \$200 million in the next 10 years for two new theaters and renovations of existing structures.

"If we're to keep pace with where the arts are going and where the community wants to go," Woodcock says, "we need to expand capacity."

Poor facilities are only one result of Portland's – and Oregon's – underfunding of the arts. (Though the Portland metropolitan area's arts funding quadrupled in the 1990s, Oregon ranked only 46th in state funding in 2000, one place

Inadequate support for education is hampering Portland's efforts to attract high tech creative firms . . .

better than in 1999.) Another is a lack of adequate arts education in the schools. A 1999 City Club of Portland report on a year-long lecture series called "The Arts and Their Public Value" cited the arts' role in preparing children to become creative, aware citizens and providing a positive outlet for young people's feelings as recurring themes. That same year, the creative services report I mentioned earlier, *Designing Portland's Future*, emphasized the need for arts education in the schools to both train the creative workforce necessary to expand the creative services sector and to enhance the arts offerings so attractive to Richard Florida's creative class. Inadequate support for education in general is hampering Portland's efforts to attract businesses of all kind, especially high-tech creative firms, which rely heavily on educated workers. Earlier this year, the Oregon Business Council gave the state's colleges and universities a grade of C- in overall quality and an F in affordability. Its grade for high schools overall was "D."

Still, there is good news. Earlier this year, despite a \$1 billion state budget gap, Oregon legislators approved establishment of the Oregon Cultural Trust, whose stated goal is the raising of \$128 million over 10 years for cultural activities. For Portland's largest arts organizations, donations have gone up. And more arts activities are available to Portlanders than ever. In 2000, nonprofit arts orga-

nizations in the greater Portland area offered 18,074 cultural events, drawing an estimated four million people and generating \$52 million in revenue. According to a 2001 report called *The Economic Impact of Oregon's Nonprofit Arts Sector*, in 2000 the total economic impact of the arts on Portland's economy was an astounding \$211 million.

The heady growth that marked the 1990s in both creative services and the arts has slowed, but people throughout Portland's creative community point out that Portland is a different city now. Success has raised expectations and left behind enough fertile ground for young people to feel that they can develop meaningful careers right here. A stalled economy hasn't meant the end of plans. People are regrouping, reassessing, and reorienting themselves. OCSA's Pilak, for example, is focusing more on individuals than groups, predicting that the future growth in creative services will take place within existing organizations as hospitals, government agencies and businesses of all types develop their own creative entities. PICA's Hordoner is busily preparing for a 10-day international festival of arts his organization will sponsor next September. And author Larry Colton has plans to bring in writers from around the country next October for a celebration of Portland's growth as a literary arts community.

"Portland is a different place for writers, especially young writers, than it was 10-15 years ago," Colton says. "More people are involved and now that writers such as Katherine Dunn, Ursula Le Guin, Craig Lesley and Chuck Palahniuk have done well, there's a sense of hope that didn't exist then. We no longer have the feeling that we're living here in Stuckville and no one will discover us."

Portlanders are justifiably proud that their city has remained a beautiful and relatively inexpensive place for young creative people to live while developing more of the cosmopolitan atmosphere and international awareness that both attract and foster creative businesses and arts activity. But at the end of that October day, as I waited for the streetcar south, I gazed up at the wooded hills beyond downtown and wondered what the future cost of all our current possibilities will be. Across the street from me, the sun still shone on saws and jackhammers at work, yet from the river came an icy wind, reminding me of how it blows in off the Hudson in the winter. I remembered how it rushes down the canyons of Manhattan, driving people into buildings that house more international headquarters and art venues perhaps than anywhere on earth. As it moves, the wind there picks up speed, sweeping everything along. There is little natural in its path to stop it. In places, not a single tree. ■