The Landscape: New Columbia

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One of Terry McClain's most cherished memories about Columbia Villa is of the days that his grandson spent playing in the plum tree that grew next to their old house. "Darren loved that plum tree," he recounts. "All the kids did—because they'd get up there in the summertime and pick the fruit."

In 2001, as part of a massive redevelopment effort, the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) decided to raze all the homes at Columbia Villa and build a new community—New Columbia—in its place.

For several years, the McClain family relocated to a nearby temporary residence, but they'd visit the old neighborhood to keep tabs on the construction crews transforming the once-familiar surroundings. On one visit, McClain saw that a fence had been set up around the old tree, meaning the Housing Authority had decided to keep it. "I thought, I can't wait to tell Darren that his plum tree's still there," says McClain.

Today, the McClain family is back in their old neighborhood. And though almost everything has changed—homes, apartments, parks, and the street network are all new—using the plum tree as a guide, the family can still pick out the spot where their old house once stood.

The McClain plum is just one of many impressive old trees that suggest that this is a neighborhood with a long and varied history. In fact, almost half of the trees that grew in Columbia Villa remain in New Columbia. Without the presence of towering pines and stout, earth-bound oaks, the rows of freshly painted houses lining brand-new streets might give a visitor the impression that this was just another bulldoze-and-build greenfield development.

But New Columbia is anything but that. While many Portland neighborhoods have had their ups and downs, buffeted by economic and cultural tides, few have undergone changes as radical and wholesale as this area in North Portland. In the more than 60 years since it was first developed, the community has gone from flagship model for World War II workers housing, to notoriously troubled public housing project, to its present incarnation: an ambitious, relatively dense, mixed-income, mixed-use neighborhood that will include a new school, library, and "main street."

It all started in 1942, when the just-established Housing Authority of Portland embarked on its first project, Columbia Villa. The Villa was intended to house the families of blue-collar shipbuilders who had arrived to work at the Kaiser Shipyards to the north. For years, working families stayed, and except for its sprawling suburban-style layout, the neighborhood was little different from those nearby.

But by the late 1980s, things had changed dramatically and for the worse at Columbia Villa. The first drive-by shooting rocked the neighborhood in 1988, which soon became associated with gang violence and drug deals in the minds of Portlanders. Determined not to allow the situation to continue, the Housing Authority stepped in quickly and decisively with tough community policing measures and more responsive social services. But despite the well-received turnaround, Columbia Villa's reputation for trouble stuck.

Like the public at large, those who moved to the Villa in the '90s expected the worst. Terry McClain was one. "When we were getting ready to move here, we were very reluctant," he says. "We had heard about all the bad things that had happened back in the '80s. But contrary to ongoing perceptions, what they found instead was a welcoming, friendly, and spacious community where most residents enjoyed living. For many residents, the privacy and plentiful, suburban-style open spaces of Columbia Villa were vasts improvement over their former residences.

Columbia Villa had turned a corner. But meanwhile, its physical infrastructure, which was never intended to be permanent, was fast deteriorating and getting more and more expensive to maintain. So in 2001, the Housing Authority announced its intention to apply for a federal HOPE VI grant, combine those funds with local dollars, and then build an entirely new community on the site of Columbia Villa. The HOPE VI program was created to rehabilitate aging and run-down public housing projects across the country, and in its initial phases was directed towards...
infamously bad low-income high rise projects like Chicago’s Cabrini Green.

After receiving $35 million from HOPE VI, and assembling the rest of the $153 million project funds locally, the next four years was a flurry of activity for residents, the Housing Authority, and the agency’s building partners. Today, approximately a quarter of the final units are built and occupied. The rest are fast progressing though various stages of completion—from foundation excavation to roofing. And New Columbia is coming into shape very much as it was envisioned by the urban designers and community residents who began meeting for design charrettes in 2001. It is certainly not your grandfather’s public housing.

Where Columbia Villa had 462 units of mostly one and two story duplexes, New Columbia will contain 850 residential units in a wide variety of price ranges and styles. In fact, approximately 200 market-rate single-family homes will be interspersed with the affordable housing on site. Among the affordable housing options are single-family homes (subsidized at a variety of different levels), townhomes, apartments, and senior apartments. The mixture of market-rate and affordable housing is intended avoid “ghetto-ization”—the forced concentration of poor residents into a confined and separate community.

Anchoring New Columbia are McCoy Park and the N. Trenton Street “main street.” McCoy Park is already finished. Its open field, winding paths, community garden, climbing wall, and playground would be a source of pride for any neighborhood. Trenton Street is taking shape—and if all goes as planned it will be a true main street for both New Columbia and adjacent neighborhoods. Framed by several three-story buildings, the street’s physical proportions and concentration of activity are patterned after a traditional American town center. Critical uses that will occupy ground floor space on Trenton include a Portland Community College “Lifelong Learning Center,” Boys and Girls Club, Multnomah County Library, neighborhood-sized grocery store, and a new Portland public elementary school. In short, a great place for a new generation to put down new roots.