

Chapter 4

Changes in Downtown Portland

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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Like the downtown of most American cities, the original factors which led to Portland's location have little to do with its current role but much to do with its current form. In the mid-19th century, a location at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers was believed to provide the best transshipment point for the entire Pacific Northwest, since it was the limit for ocean going vessels, and provided river access to Oregon and eastern Washington as well as the productive farmlands of the Willamette Valley. The specific location chosen for Portland was a natural wharf area on the west bank of the Willamette -- the only area along the river where firm ground came down to the water (Dotterrer, 1974).

As the 19th century advanced, this selected location lost its original purpose. The larger ocean-going vessels found it difficult to turn around in the narrow width of the Willamette at the downtown location, and major port activities migrated down river. At the same time, the introduction of railroads made inland waterways of less significance to commerce, while the much finer harbor of Puget Sound encouraged the transcontinental railroads to choose the Seattle area for their termini. As a result, Portland lost its role as the primary center of the Northwest. Nonetheless, the original location had developed into a downtown with suffi-

cient population and commercial connections to sustain itself and remained fixed in location (Figure 4.1).

The original Portland was laid out in a small scale grid (200 by 200 foot blocks with 60 and 80 foot streets) on a sloping plain which led from the river to the West Hills - a long, high ridge running roughly parallel to the river. As befits a river town the grid was oriented to the river rather than the compass. This grid of small blocks was broken about half of the way back from the river by a set of narrow (100 foot) blocks reserved as a linear park. This park formed the boundary between the riverward portion of town with its small lots (eight per block) and the hillside portion with large lots and in some cases larger blocks (Figure 4.1).

The early town concentrated along the river with combination wharf/warehouse/office buildings on the river and similar buildings in blocks behind. Beginning in 1872, this district was served by north-south horsecar routes. As the town expanded, the original angled grid was abandoned in favor of a grid aligned with the compass points. This created two disjunctions in the street system which became natural break points, demarcating the edge of the city's core (see Figures 1.2 and 4.1).

The extensions north and south were at least at the river front, into marshlands which, when filled, provided large flat land areas unbounded by the small scale street grid. At the

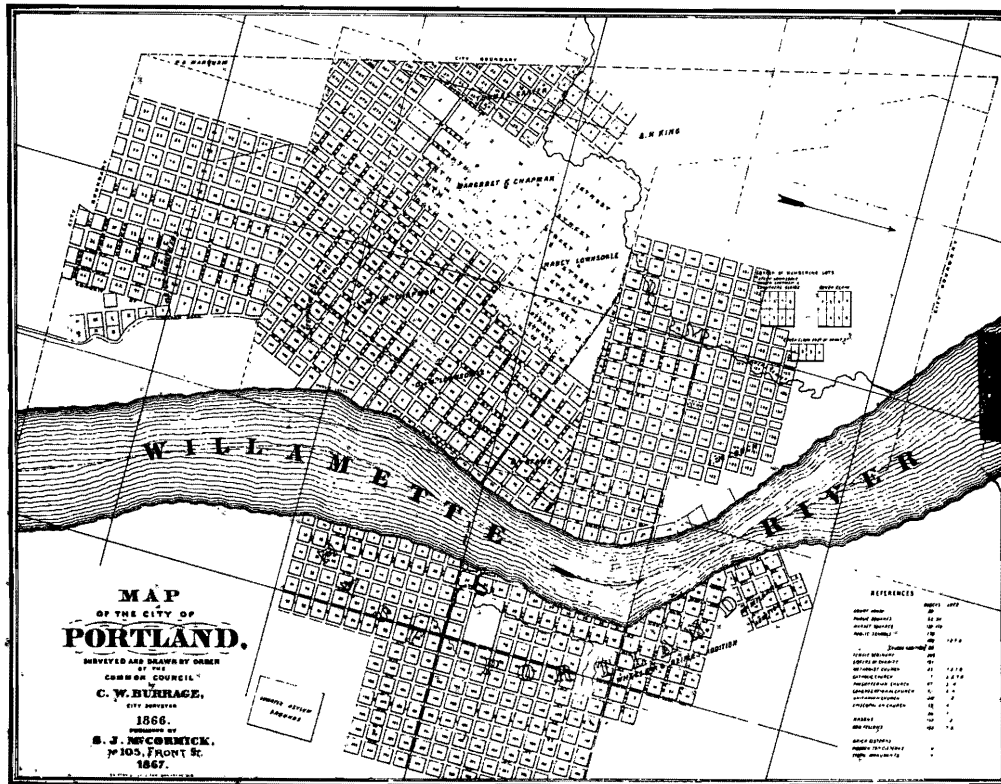


Figure 4.1: Map of Portland, Oregon in 1866 (north is to the right) showing the original street grid at right angles to the river. The later additions oriented to the compass points created "breaks" in the street pattern which for many years demarcated the limits of "downtown" Portland (Oregon Historical Society Negative #ORHI23568).

north end, the railroads erected a union station at a large yard. The waterfront lands to the south were used by lumber mills and other land-extensive industries requiring water transportation.

The wooden buildings of the original waterfront were rapidly replaced with brick and cast iron buildings of two to four stories. As the city expanded these buildings were occupied almost exclu-

sively by wholesale and small manufacturing operations (see Figure 3.2). In the late 19th century, the retail trade and the major office activities moved westward into a district of white brick and glazed terra cotta buildings which became the 20th century "downtown." This district focused around the federal courthouse/post office and the Portland Hotel, both located at Sixth and Morrison.

The construction of railroad lines (1872-1884) encouraged growth outside the original boundaries. North toward the railroad station a typical "station district" of tourist hotels and railroad-oriented businesses developed. In Portland, as in other northwest cities, this was associated with a "skidroad" district of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels and other services for the single men who worked in the woods and on

farms. The area south of the original plat, by contrast, developed as a neighborhood of wooden buildings for those who worked in the waterfront industries. The area became the residential base of several immigrant groups -- especially Jewish and Italian communities (see Chapter 5).

Most of this growth in the 1870's and early 1880's continued the city's north-south linear orientation which was driven by the river and the West Hills. Beginning in 1887, however, the first bridge (Morrison) was constructed across the river to connect the core area with the east side, which had large, generally flat areas suitable for housing subdivisions (Table 3.1). Other bridges were constructed and served the electric trolley car lines, which extended eastward into the new east side residential areas where most of Portland's residents lived by World War I. Many of these trolley lines also extended westward through the downtown core, reaching into the more dense residential neighborhoods at the base of the West Hills. An east-west axis of development was established as the streetcar lines encouraged the spread of office/retail and other urban center uses westward toward the hills. At the same time, the old waterfront buildings with small floor areas, and on a river too narrow for the largest vessels, began to decline. As a result, the downtown core area reached a kind of stasis about World War I, when Portland's "pioneer period" of explosive growth came to an end (Dotterer, 1974).

At this time Portland leaders determined that Portland's status as a metropolis required a "City Beautiful" plan to guide future development. The "Bennett Plan" of 1912, prepared by a Chicago consultant, proposed

boulevards, civic centers, and new railroad station in the core area. The plan was adopted by the voters, but the World War intervened, delaying implementation. After the war, a reduced growth rate and the needs of the automobile meant that virtually nothing in the core plan was executed. Nevertheless, the plan did mark the first "public planning" effort for Portland, and it advanced the idea that downtown was a "public" place worthy of public expenditure for enrichment and embellishment (Dana, 1912).

The automobile was a major instrument of change after World War I. While the car increased the daily "reach" of downtown by reducing travel time, it required traffic control and parking. These requirements were, of course, no different than for other cities. But Portland's small block size and narrow streets made the adjustments very difficult (Figure 4.1). Parking on site was difficult even in new buildings, and much of the older housing adjacent to the core -- and the older cast iron buildings near the waterfront -- were demolished for surface parking lots. Because of the small blocks, an economical lot required most or all of a city block, resulting in large openings and an un-urban "gap-toothed" area except in the very center of the core area. Even in the very center, the Portland Hotel was replaced by a parking lot in the 1950's. Because of the narrow streets, Portland was forced early on toward a one-way grid system for traffic except in one or two cases where significant (and expensive) street widenings were undertaken. One of these, Burnside Street at the northern break in the grid, reinforced the already existing "edge."

In the thirties the wharfs were demolished and replaced by a seawall to

eliminate the flood hazards. In 1943, Robert Moses, the New York public works czar, was hired by Portland to plan projects to employ the returning military and shipyard workers once the war ended. He proposed a waterfront highway called Harbor Drive on the site of the old wharves, which was built immediately after the War. He also proposed street widenings and a loop expressway around the central part of the city to accommodate increased automobile traffic (Moses, 1943). These plans, greatly modified, were carried out by the state highway division in the 1950's and 1960's (see Figure 3.3).

EARLY PROGRAMS OF PLANNING AND PUBLIC CHANGE

A period of planning and development began in the late 1960's, with the greatest activity in the early 1970's, followed by an active period of physical change in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Given the political leadership to carry out many of the planned projects and a healthy economy, the core was radically transformed. The individual transformations were much like those of other U.S. cities -- urban renewal clearance of "slums," a vigorous period of office construction and a growing interest in, and rehabilitation of, historic buildings. Portland's overall transformation was different than in many other cities, however, because individual changes were harnessed in support of a larger, cohesive vision of the downtown. That vision builds upon trends established by the historic development and was aided by the relatively small area of the downtown -- limited by the river and the West Hills.

In many ways, this framework has been built around transportation. In the 1960's, the city and state followed Moses' recommendation for an inner-

loop freeway, which was completed in 1973. This loop has confined the downtown core even more tightly than the original topographic setting (see Figure 3.1). On the west side, the freeway isolated several large "downtown" office, club, and apartment buildings outside the downtown core. The area isolated has seen almost no new construction since the freeway was built.

The decision to build the freeway loop also meant cutting through the old south Portland ethnic neighborhoods and dividing them from the downtown. Because of decaying physical conditions, Portland's new urban renewal agency declared this area "blighted" and designated it the South Auditorium Urban Renewal District. During the planning for this district and the freeway, there was considerable dispute as to whether the freeway should be located south or north of the new urban renewal district. Ultimately, the freeway was built to the south, uniting the district with the traditional downtown and masking the disjunction between the two street grids. The South Auditorium Urban Renewal District (begun in 1958) was a total clearance project which created an entirely new neighborhood of high rise housing and offices. The public improvements were extensive and of very high quality. The overall plan created super blocks by vacating streets but kept the scale of the existing 200 foot grid by placing pedestrian ways on the former street rights-of-way and in some cases even saving existing street trees. The landscape plan, by Lawrence Halprin and Associates, was lush and creative -- providing two waterfall parks with a green resting park in between (located along S. W. 2nd Avenue from Market to Hall). These public spaces were connected by the heavily treed pedestrian-

ways which also connected the area to the surrounding grid of streets.

As this first urban renewal district developed in the 1960's, a consensus seemed to develop rather quickly on both its good and bad points. First, total clearance was bad, since it removed the stability from the community and left no history. Second, planning by subdistricts or precincts was desirable, since identifiable areas of varying character were created. Third, high quality public improvements were essential to successful redevelopment -- and a good design was essential to achieving that quality. Finally, while buildings separated from the sidewalk by landscaping were attractive, this arrangement discouraged street life and was not generally appropriate for a "downtown." Similar lessons were learned in a second urban renewal district in the southwest corner of the downtown. This district created a precinct for a state war veteran's college which was rapidly growing into an urban "commuter" university (now Portland State University). To accommodate this growth, apartment buildings and a few large old houses were demolished. The loss of housing was immediately perceived as a loss to the idea of "downtown," so much so that demolition was halted and a number of the buildings were rehabilitated as student housing.

ESTABLISHING THE OVERALL PLAN FOR DOWNTOWN

Armed with these observations -- learned firsthand and reinforced by commentary from elsewhere -- Portland launched its "Downtown Plan" era in 1970. Once again, decisions about transportation were critical first steps.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Portland and the metropolitan area faced several critical choices. A group

of strong and creative political leaders established a consistent program which called for strengthening downtown, maintaining families in city neighborhoods and using transportation investments to meet these objectives. With the completion of the freeway loop and a number of radial freeways leading to that loop, the region was ready to add a second group of radial freeways. These were rejected because of the expected impacts on neighborhoods and air quality and the projected high cost. Instead, the funds originally earmarked for a freeway were "transferred" to a large number of transit and highway projects. The region chose to invest in a much increased transit service and to discourage auto commuters into the downtown area. The adoption of a "parking policy" which limited new parking space construction meant that from 1972 to 1982 daily traffic into the downtown remained relatively stable while employment increased by to 80,000. Increased travel to work caused by the growth in employment was handled primarily by the expanding transit system.

These transportation policy choices had three significant physical impacts on the downtown core. First, to accommodate increased bus volumes and provide an attractive environment for bus patrons as well as others, the Transit Mall was created (completed 1978). Two north-south streets through the heart of the office district were built with two exclusive bus lanes and a local access lane for automobiles (Figure 4.2). While the initial justification was clearly operational, widened brick sidewalks, trees, shelters and art work were included as essential. These decisions represented the continuing recognition that public works must be of high quality to attract private investment. Secondly, the completion of

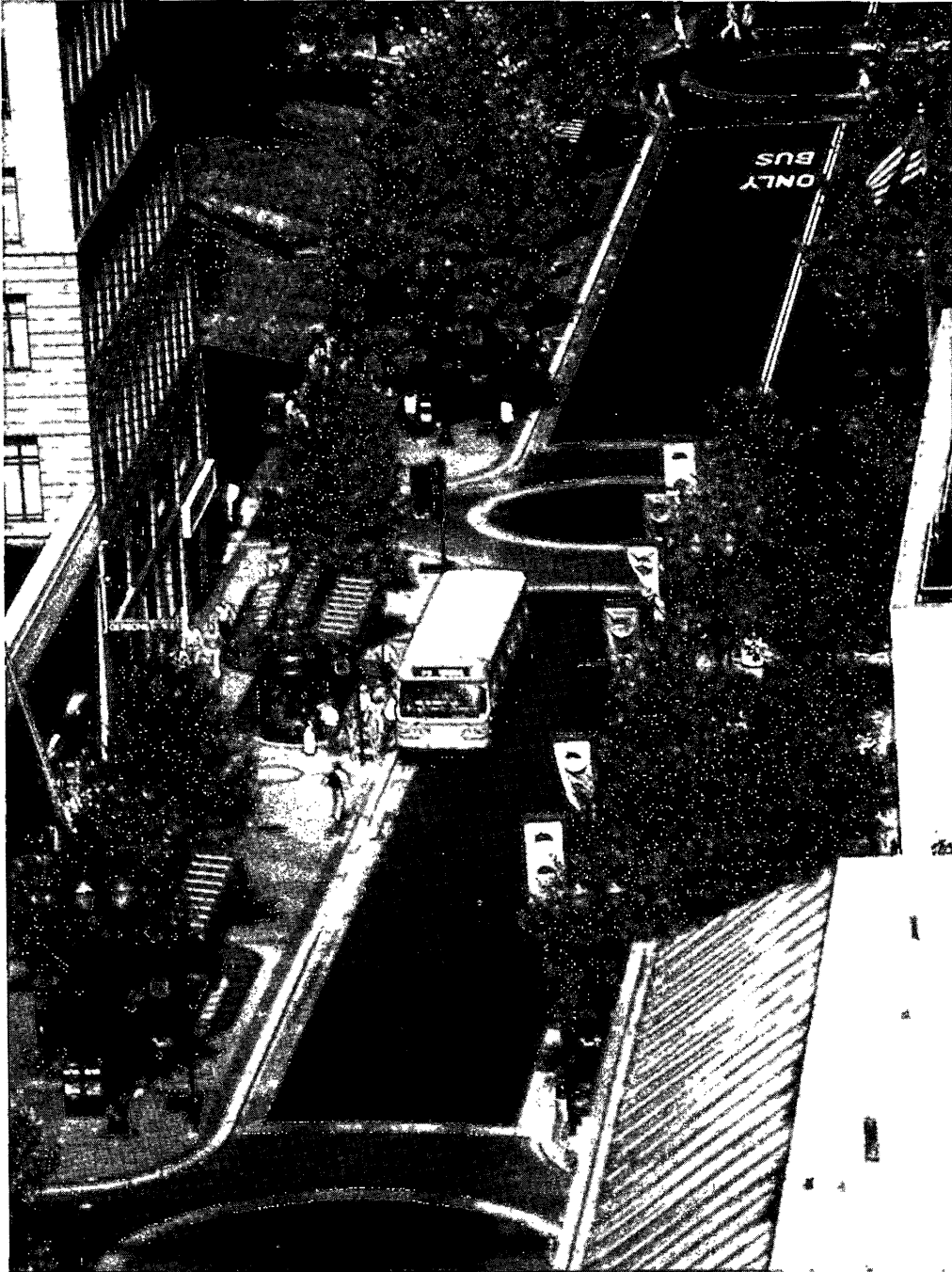


Figure 4.2: *Transit Mall, looking north on 5th Avenue. Completed in 1978, the Mall was the major transportation improvement of the Downtown Plan, which called for combining high levels of transit service and high density office buildings in a North-South spine through the downtown (Photo: John V. A. F. Neal).*

the freeway loop and the goal of maintaining current traffic levels meant that the Harbor Drive expressway, built just after world War II, could be removed and replaced by a waterfront park. Finally, the parking policy discouraged surface parking lots, and therefore helped to end the destruction of buildings and eliminated "the gap-toothed look."

The Downtown Plan (adopted 1972), which was prepared while these transportation proposals were under study, developed a coherent vision of the downtown core (Figure 4.3). In many ways, the Plan's intent was to resuscitate and advance the 1920's downtown; that is, to make it a place of many activities, active at most hours, and the center of its region. The Plan was based on recognizing and encouraging individual specialty subdistricts, each with a strong character although with indistinct boundaries. The Downtown Plan aimed to maintain the scale and feeling of the older downtown. It called for keeping the existing 200-foot blocks and streets which provide a high proportion of open space, light, and air. It also urged that new buildings be built out to the sidewalks, preferably with street-level retail, in order to reproduce a sense of "enclosure" and high levels of activity which make downtowns special. The primary subdistricts identified were a north-south spine of high density offices adjacent to the Transit Mall, and a retail district running east-west along

the former street car lines near the middle of the office spine. At the intersection of these two districts, the Downtown Plan proposed a public square, replacing the parking lot at S. W. 6th and Morrison which was on the site of the former Portland Hotel. Around these two primary districts, the Plan proposed districts of lower density buildings. These included two historic districts adjacent to the waterfront preserving the remaining cast iron buildings, an apartment housing district west of the Park Blocks, and a medium density office area between the old downtown and the first urban renewal district (Figure 4.3).

PUBLIC DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

In the late 1970's the region decided to construct a light rail transit (LRT) line from downtown to the eastern suburbs. The decision was at least partially based on the success of the Transit Mall and the associated bus service expansion, which saw ridership double in less than five years. In the downtown, the line followed the east-west axis of the retail core serving as the distribution shuttle which the Downtown Plan had called for. It also used First Avenue as did the first horse cars to connect the two historic districts. Within these districts the street rebuilding required for the LRT was expanded to create two small plazas which provide foci for each district. This line, which opened in September 1986 in a "free rides" weekend with over 200,000 riders and much entertainment, was built to the same high standards as the Mall. A shortage of government funds, threatened the level of quality but downtown property owners provided funds as a local match to provide the "amenities" which were locally recognized as essential to project success.

DOWNTOWN PLAN CONCEPT

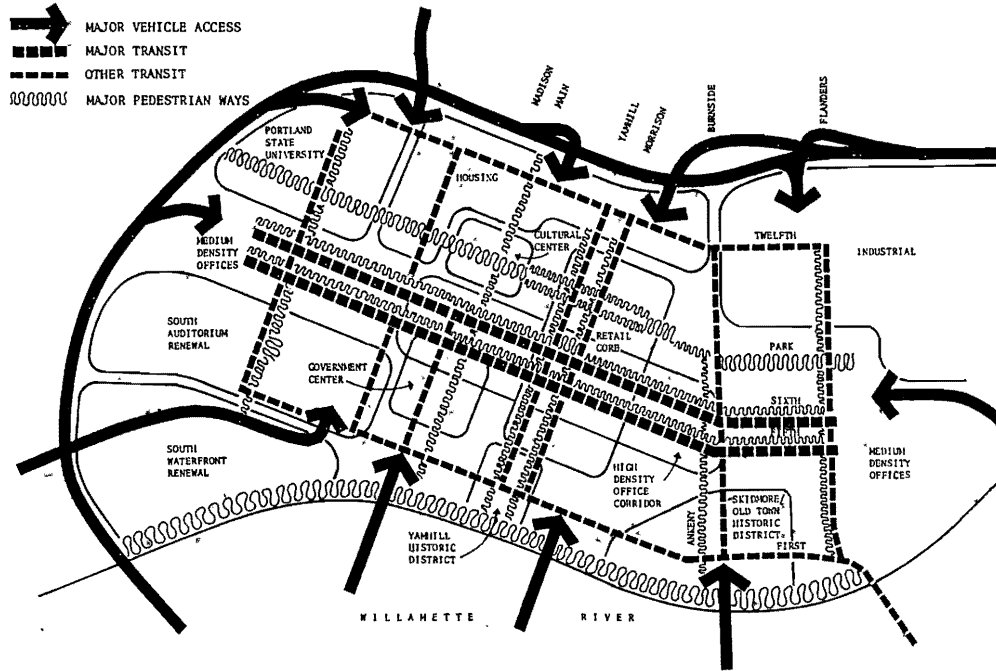


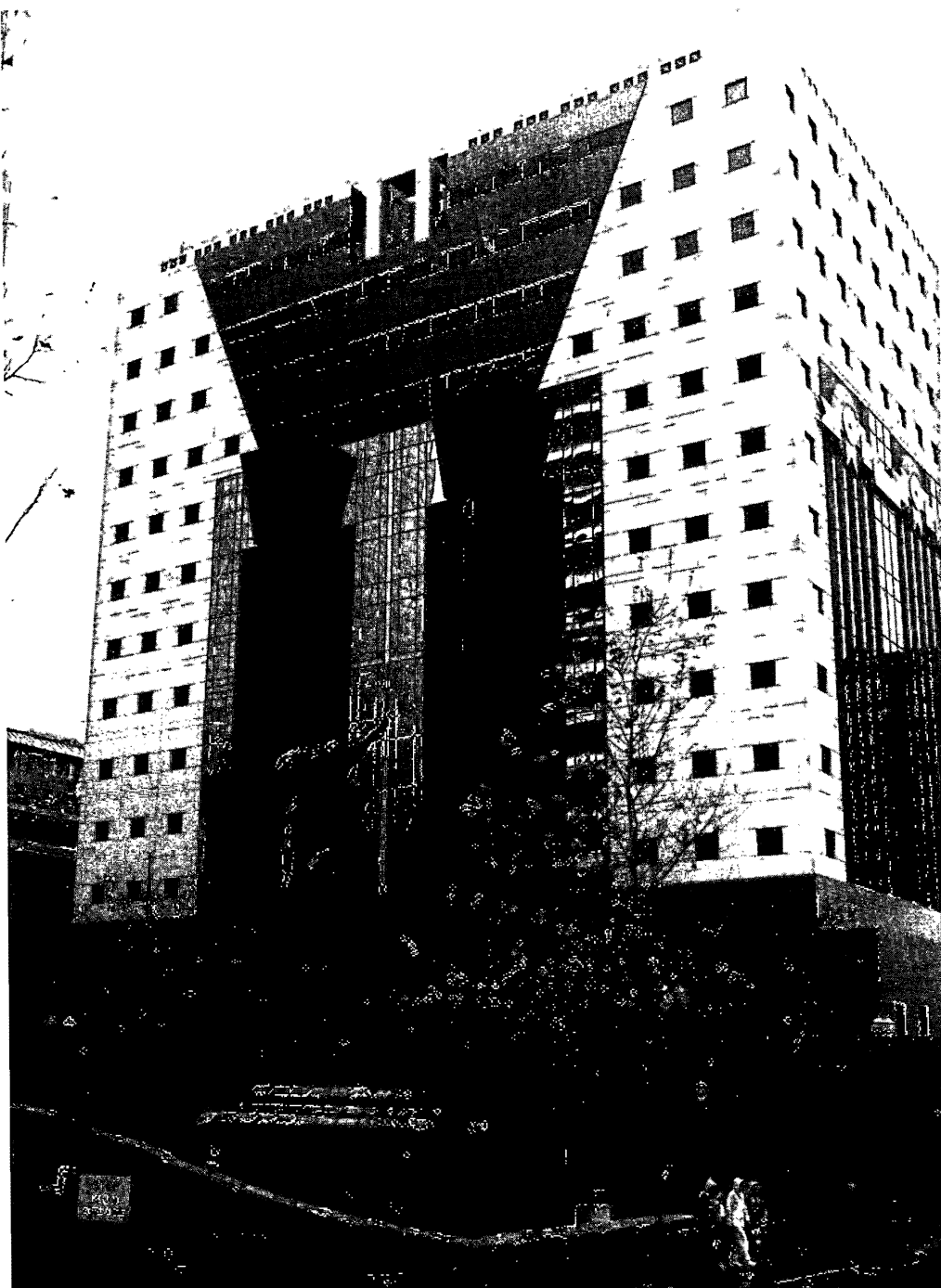
Figure 4.3: *Downtown. Plan conceptual diagram (north is to the right). This concept illustration, which shows the freeways and major auto entry points in heavy black lines, guided most of the downtown development over the last 15 years. Other features of the concept were the transit routes (dashed lines), pedestrian-ways (squiggles) and the sub-districts (outlined with thin lines).*

The continued striving for coordinated and high quality transportation public works also led to increasing quality for public and private developments and to a changed attitude toward the role of public buildings. A significant method used by the City to achieve both its design and development objectives was the public design competition. These competitions were used to construct public facilities like Pioneer Square, a city office building and the

Performing Arts Center. They were also used by the urban renewal agency for three projects which mixed private office, retail and housing developments on land assembled by the agency. Except for Pioneer Square and the Performing Arts Center, which were traditional architectural competitions, these were design/build competitions.

The most famous, or infamous of the competitions, was for the Portland Building (the city's own office building). What started out as a relatively ordinary-sized and relatively low-priced project became high drama when the lowest

Figure 4.4: *Portland Building, 5th Avenue side, with Portlandia statue at the third floor level. The statue, like the building, was the result of a national design competition. It is paid for by a "one percent for art" fund and many generous donations (Photo: John V. A. F. Neal).*



cost project was also the most radical. The chosen design, by Michael Graves, was the subject of much questioning, as it was the first large "Post Modern" building to be approved for construction (Figure 4.4). The debate over radical styles and the resulting national architectural press attention helped to place Portland on the architectural map, and called attention to the other recent works and the overall plan which created the support for these developments. While it is unlikely that the Portland Building, as it is called, will ever be considered ordinary, it has seemed to slide into its environment with less disharmony than the initial debate suggested. More recently, the addition of the "Portlandia" statue in hammered copper has called attention once again to the building -- and renewed the stream of local and out-of-town tourists who come downtown to see what's new (Figure 4.4). In fact, Portlandia's trip up the river and onto her platform was cause for a parade of boats and crowds along the entire route.

After this foray into national limelight, leadership turned toward local designers for public projects. However, the local architectural scene was much enlivened by the national attention, and the results were hardly less bold although generally more inchoate. The design of Pioneer Square had to accommodate many ideas. An open square respectful of the neighboring diminutive "pioneer" federal courthouse, it also had to provide for large public gatherings, two LRT stops and retailing within a single 200 foot block. The Square does serve all these functions, and provides an identifiable "center of town."

The development competitions of the urban renewal agency have generated controversy, but they have also pro-

duced high quality public environments. These competitions were for the small area redevelopment projects which replaced the large clearance urban renewal activities. Combined with an extensive program of historic and housing rehabilitation loans, and smaller public improvements, they have demonstrated that an urban renewal agency can achieve high quality results for a total environment without engaging in total clearance projects. The agency's first competition was for a three block office/housing project in the area between the old waterfront downtown and the first urban renewal project. The KOIN Center Tower, the only part yet constructed, includes lower-level retail, multiplex cinema and TV studios with offices and housing above (Figure 4.5). The tower itself represents a return to earlier architectural forms -- its stepped back shape and blue metal sloping roof recall New York's Chrysler Building, albeit reduced in size and with less decoration. The largest design/development competition was for a downtown retail mall scheduled for construction in 1988. The primary public objective is to increase the total amount of retail downtown and to focus that retail on the upper end of the market. The Rouse Company, a developer of similar projects in other cities, was selected as the developer and retailers new to the Portland area have expressed an interest in being part of the project. Its central location near Pioneer Square and connecting the waterfront historic district with the retail core, make it a critical element in the Downtown Plan's overall retail strategy.

OFFICE DEVELOPMENT

The 1970's and early 1980's saw the construction of a number of office buildings. These included the First



Figure 4.5: *The new RiverPlace development extends Waterfront Park with a public marina and esplanade. Fronting the esplanade are shops, a small hotel, and apartments and condominiums. The skyline on right shows the peak-roofed KOIN tower and the Interstate Bank tower (Photo: John V. A. F. Neal).*

Interstate Tower, a tall bank tower which anchored the south end of the downtown office spine and served to connect that spine with the urban renewal area (Figure 4.5). It was also the first time a bank had moved out of the early 20th century "banking district" at the north end of downtown, and therefore contributed to the radical revision of "downtown" which the Downtown Plan projected. On the other hand, it was a large tower with an inhospitable plaza and no street-level activity, it conflicted with the on-street pedestrian emphasis of the Downtown Plan. Its striped black glass

and white marble tower also seemed to many to have little reference to the "human scale" which was such a by-word of the Plan. Other, smaller towers had some of the same characteristics, but their lesser size and more traditional locations caused less comment. These towers were followed by others which were progressively more in keeping with the Plan's objectives and also more adventuresome in overall architectural form. A shifting national architectural scene pushed architects toward adventuresome forms, but the Downtown Plan and a public design review process helped to harness this shift in support of an overall vision of the city.

The most notable of recent towers is the U.S. Bank Tower (1983) which anchors the north end of the office spine and dared to place first class office space on Burnside Street -- the traditional "skid road." The Bank, which had originally planned its tower in the early 1970's, maintained the basic flat-topped box of the International Style, skewed to reflect the conflicting angles

of the two grids at Burnside Street. Its skin, however, is an almost playful combination of polished pink granite and pink glass that vary in reflectiveness and light/dark values depending upon weather conditions and time of day.

Paralleling the new office towers, which changed the physical form of the downtown, was the rehabilitation of many older office buildings. These, mostly terra cotta and light-colored brick buildings, formed the traditional heart of downtown and were the model for the design regulations of the Downtown Plan. In the period 1970 to 1985, almost five million square feet or 70 percent of the older office space was rehabilitated. The buildings near the Transit Mall were mainly rehabilitated for offices while a number of buildings away from the Mall were converted to housing for the elderly. Probably the finest example of these rehab projects was the Kress building, changed from an all retail structure, to two levels of retail with offices above. The new storefronts are recreations of the 1920's -- and probably of a higher quality than those originally built for the building.

The other significant remodelling trend was in the historic waterfront areas, where the cast iron loft buildings were restored to offices above retail buildings (Figure 4.6). This, of course, is a national trend common to many other American cities. Perhaps the only significant difference was the renewal agency's use of a revolving loan fund to encourage the rehabilitation throughout each historic district and the provision of other benefits to encourage the building of "infill" buildings on former surface parking lots. This effect is particularly noticeable in the Yamhill Historic District which 10 years ago seemed to be a small group of buildings in a sea of parking. Extensive rehabilitation, sig-

nificant infill and a pedestrian plaza built as a light rail station, has transformed and focused the area (Figure 4.6).

As a result of the construction, remodelling and conversions of office buildings up to 1985, the downtown core contained 12 million square feet of office space, up from seven million square feet in 1970. At the same time, however, the downtown area has gone from 84 percent of the region's total office space in 1970 to 56 percent in 1985. These trends and percentages are not radically different than for other metropolitan areas, although perhaps the suburbanization of office space has been slower in Portland than in most other western cities.

RETAILING

Retail activity in the Downtown has changed substantially in the recent past. In the old retail core, the department stores engaged in an intensive period of remodelling during the 1970's (with one new store construction). Government action was also used to encourage retailing. To replace parking lost due to on-street parking removals, the city constructed two parking garages at the east and west edges of the retail district. Since they are intended to support retail activity, short-term parking is favored, and both have shops on the ground floor so that shoppers can stroll along continuous retail streets. More recently, the downturn in the Oregon economy and the increasing pressure of discount retail operations on the traditional department stores has resulted in two department store closures. In comparison with suburban shopping centers, the downtown has become more focused on the "upper end" retail market. The middle income market has generally disappeared as the downtown



Figure 4.6: *New Market Theatre Building with MAX light rail train on S. W. 1st Avenue in the Skidmore-Old Town Historic District. The New Market Theatre (high white facade) was originally built as a produce market with a grand theater on the second floor. For much of the 20th century a parking garage, it was recently restored as a shopping arcade with offices on the upper floors (Photo: John V. A. F. Neal).*

is unable to provide the sites desired by discount retailing operations. At the same time, "boutiques" or small retail shops have grown in number. The Galleria, a remodelled former department store (1975-76) was the first of these, responding to changing shopping habits. The recent development of "festival market places" in the two historic districts (Yamhill Marketplace, New Market Theatre, etc.) is designed to serve an

almost recreational role -- and offer the same types of merchandise one finds in resort towns. Retailing success depends almost as much upon creating a special environment as it does on the merchandise offered. The historic districts, with their restored buildings, markets for hand-made products and access to the river and Waterfront Park, provide this special environment.

HOUSING

Housing in the downtown area has been the subject of substantial change, much of it publicly inspired if not financed. The number of units has not changed dramatically, dropping from 11,000 in 1970 to about 10,100 in 1983, but the character of the housing has changed. The City has encouraged housing at all income levels, with subsidies focused toward serving special housing markets. The elderly housing market has been served by the con-

struction of new apartment buildings as well as by the remodelling of older apartments, hotels, and office buildings to meet the special needs of the elderly. The public has also subsidized housing rehabilitation for those low income individuals needing the special services of single-room occupancy (SRO's) and/or skid road housing. Most of the housing for this group is located in or adjacent to Skidmore historic district, which has significant retailing. Public conflict has erupted over maintaining housing and social services in this area because of the "problem populations" which use them. Actually, the number of low-income housing units has declined substantially even with the subsidy programs.

New housing for middle- and upper-income residents has been the most successful to date. Initial efforts focused toward the construction of new housing on waterfront land abandoned by industrial activities at both the north and south ends of downtown. While this housing is relatively expensive, given the size of the units it does provide sufficient amenities, e.g., river views and easy access to downtown jobs and downtown attractions needed to attract the target markets. The urban renewal agency is currently subsidizing the construction of middle-income infill housing along the Park Blocks. With the opening of this housing the total number of units in the downtown area will return to 1970 levels.

Many of the recent buildings and happenings discussed above reinforce downtown's role as an entertainment place. This is not only in the old sense of Broadway's "Great White Way" -- but also as a change of environment -- a "getaway" just like a ski weekend or trip to the coast. The parks, waterfront, buildings and sculptures provide an environment not found elsewhere in

the metropolitan area. The use of the light rail transit seems to support this conclusion, since weekend ridership is nearly as high as that of workdays. The Performing Arts Center (scheduled for completion in the fall of 1987) and the plans for a Convention Center and a relocated Oregon Museum of Science and Industry on the east side of the river across from downtown, will increase this entertainment or special purpose role for downtown. This "special activities" role, then, complements the downtown's more traditional role as a job center and in some ways augments its traditional roles as a center of retailing and higher density housing. Perhaps the most significant feature which the downtown has for fully exploiting this new entertainment role is the Willamette River. Planning and development activities over the last 15 years have lead the city back toward the river, but many additional opportunities are available. The river provided the original economic purpose for Portland's location. It is somehow appropriate that the city should again draw renewed purpose from the river.

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