Portland: Civic Culture and Civic Opportunity

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Citation Details
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By Carl Abbott

SEATTLE? SURE. But Indianapolis? Kansas City? Columbus? Portland on paper has an interesting set of peer cities. Take the nation’s second-level metropolitan areas with populations of one to three million. Pick a score of social and economic indicators, such as percentage foreign born, median educational attainment, and industrial distribution of workers. Then find the places whose socioeconomic profile resembles Portland.

Despite obvious differences in style and tone, Seattle is a close match. Less expected as statistical siblings are cities along the American main street — the old National Road, U.S. 40, and Interstate 70. Start on East Broad Street in Columbus, Ohio, and end on West Colfax Street in Denver. Along the way are Indianapolis and Kansas City. Another city with a Portland feel is Cincinnati, a conservative town of river, hills, and neighborhoods. The peripatetic Gen-X spokesman of Monk magazine recently described Portland as having “coastal intelligence matched with a Midwestern scale and pace.”

There is a certain middle-westernness to Portland in its moderate scale, slow tempo, informality, and self-satisfaction.

Such similarities are reminders of the power of history. Most of the early settlers of the Willamette Valley came from the Ohio and Missouri valleys, making Oregon a far finger of the Middle West. Despite the ethnicity of South Portland, most of the city’s immigrants came from the littoral of the North Sea rather than from southern or eastern Europe. The similarities are also reminders that Portland grew as a particular type of city, a regional metropolis in the typology of Otis Duncan. What makes Portland different from such places as Atlanta or Denver is not regional orientation in itself but the extraordinary characteristics of its particular hinterland and history. This is precisely the insight that journalist Ernie Pyle reported in 1936:
Portland's connections to its rivers remain central to its character after more than 150 years. This man is fishing in the Willamette River at downtown's Waterfront Park, with the Hawthorne Bridge in the background.

Everybody here is crazy about Portland. They rave about it. They don't talk Chamber of Commerce folders; they don't talk about their industries and their schools and their crops. They roar about what a wonderful place Portland is just to live in. People do live well here. This whole Northwest country is beautiful, and the climate is pleasant, and existence is gentle.

Portland is a place, they say, where money doesn't get you anywhere socially. I asked what does get you somewhere — what, in other words, was the standard for social admittance in Portland? They thought and they thought. They finally decided that the standard was merely an ability to contribute something — usually agreeableness and interest. . . .

It was settled by "down Easters" who came around the Horn. They made the money and became the backbone. They're still the backbone, and the pace-setters of Portland thought. But they have somehow mixed their New England soundness with a capacity for living the freer, milder Northwest way, and it makes a pretty high-class combination.
Like residents of Indianapolis or Denver or the fictional Zenith of George Babbitt, Portlanders are proud of themselves. They can be formidable boosters of their home community. Ask around town and you will learn that Portland is special for its climate ("mild," not rainy), its views of snow-capped Mount Hood, its small-town ambiance and "just folks" style, and its success at fending off many problems of urban congestion and sprawl. New Yorkers either love Portland because people can actually relax here or hate it because there's no edge to anything. In health-conscious Portland, novelist Blake Nelson's exiled poet chain-smokes to keep a connection to the raspy life of lower Manhattan. But standing at the foot of Multnomah Falls, about thirty miles west of Portland in the Columbia River Gorge, "Mark's cigarette is going out. It's too wet here." In this self-satisfied picture of achievement by avoidance and healthy living, Los Angeles has long been damned, Seattle has sold its soul. Only Portland still treads the strait way of good planning.

Portlanders are pleased provincials, and Portland's conceit is the satisfaction of self-sufficiency. New York, to personify a contrast, blithely dismisses American rivals, measures itself against Paris and Tokyo, and proclaims itself the champion of the world. Portland is satisfied with its place and pace — its position in both the economic and natural landscapes and the patterns of life that its landscapes support. It is a city, to quote a recent observer, whose tone is set by "people who fully occupy themselves locally." A fascinating example is the musical career of Marv and Rindy Ross, Oregon schoolteachers who formed a successful Portland bar and club band in the early 1980s. They scored a national recording contract as Quarterflash and an MTV hit in "Harden My Heart," with Rindy Ross playing saxophone and contributing spectacular vocals. Rather than trying to hang on in the fiercely competitive national music scene, however, they returned to regional roots, assembling local musicians into the Trail Band to perform Northwest music from the era of the Oregon Trail to the present. The Trail Band enlists first-line skills for a regional audience of community festivals and "cool little community theaters," to quote Marv Ross. As I was putting the final touches on this manuscript, I heard them at an upscale party marking 150 years of the Oregonian (another regionally entrenched institution). I challenge anyone to find a more rousing rendition of Woody Guthrie's "Roll On, Columbia."

**Outsiders might** freely dismiss Portlanders' self-satisfaction as the standard wares of hot-air merchants if their descriptions of the city were not echoed by many well-informed observers around the nation. Portland enjoys a strong reputation in the circles of urban planning and policy as a well-planned and livable metropolitan com-
munity. The city and region gained initial attention in the late 1970s and 1980s and have enjoyed a surge of positive commentary in the 1990s. Inspection junkets have become a steady contributor to the Portland tourist economy. Journalists try to discover "how Portland does it," to use the question posed by urban specialist Philip Langdon in 1992. One civic delegation after another makes the rounds in search of lessons for their own city.

Spanning city boundaries, the Portland area is a prime exhibit for innovative institutions for the management of metropolitan growth and services. In a burst of institutional creativity in the 1970s, the Oregon legislature crafted a statewide system for mandated land-use planning, and the voters of the three core metropolitan counties created an elected regional government, known as Metro. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently credited this region-wide cooperation for supporting a successful transition from traditional manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy.

It is instructive to look behind the quality-of-life ratings that earned Portland favorable attention in the 1970s. Journalist Arthur Louis named it the sixth best city in Harper's Magazine in 1975, and Ben-Chieh Liu put it first in a two-hundred-factor ranking for federal agencies. Although no one had yet used the term "social capital," that is what was being measured. Liu placed Portland first because of educational levels, library circulation, public parks, homeownership, voter turnout, newspaper readership, and similar factors. Portland dropped to the middle of the pack in the 1980s, especially in Places Rated Almanac and Money magazine, which emphasized the quantity of big city amenities and

Having chosen regional performances with the Trail Band over the pursuit of nation-wide fame with Quarterflash, Rindy Ross sings at the Washington County Fair in 1993.
Portland struggled with reclaiming the downtown waterfront through much of the twentieth century. Planning consultant Harland Bartholomew envisioned a sober and stately future in 1932.

economic variables during Oregon’s timber recession. One of Portland’s best placements in Money, in 1990, was only thirty-eighth, behind Tacoma and Richland, Washington. Residents of the Northwest know why these are puzzling results. Portland has continued to earn mixed reviews in the business press: good for entrepreneurship, less so for income. “The work ethic is excellent,” Fortune reported, “even though many workers need occasional sprees among the trees.” The city remained strong on specialized lists (Ms., 1984; Women’s Sports and Fitness, 1987; and Outside, 1992) that focused on physical environment and civic capacity.

Portland has rich social capital and nationally admired institutions for citizen involvement and civic action, because a set of challenges familiar to many U.S. cities has interacted with a distinctive political culture. Robert Kaplan writes that not only do Portland pedestrians wait for green lights but the city also “has the atmosphere of a Scandinavian country, where almost everyone shares a background and values, and trusts the centralizing and controlling force of local government to preserve these things.” The result — when it works — has been a rare conjunction of public and private interest. Portlanders inhabit their region very self-consciously and deliberately, even if they are not unanimous in the goals they seek.

Portland’s civic activism in the 1980s and 1990s can be compared to that of similar eras elsewhere. One well-known example is Birmingham, England, from the 1850s through the 1880s, when the business
The replacement of Harbor Drive by Tom McCall Waterfront Park was one of the first and most important changes to emerge from the citizen activism and planning ferment in Portland during the early 1970s.

leadership espoused a "civic gospel." The civic culture there drew on the social values of nonconformist religion to shape city government as an effective servant of all the people. An American journalist in 1890 rated Birmingham the best-governed city in the world. An example in the United States is Chicago's "civic moment," which helped shape the city from the 1890s to the 1920s, when business interest and "public"
interest converged around the physical redesign of the metropolis. Much of the private sector was self-consciously “public” in rhetoric and often in reality. Middle-class women as well as men shared a vision of a reformed city that was implicitly assimilationist. The well-oiled economic machinery of the metropolis would have a place for everyone, and improved housing and public services would help integrate newcomers into the social fabric (although the vision foundered on the rocks of labor-management conflict and black immigration).9 Portland’s civic action might also be compared to the locally activated reinvention of cities such as Glasgow or Barcelona in the late twentieth century.10

The “civic moment” is fragile. The community consensus in Portland is continually under challenge — not from machine politics, as in Boston or Chicago, but from the values of privatism. In the face of neo-conservative national discourse that devalues the public realm, Portlanders must constantly tend and maintain their forums and institutions for civic discourse and community action. This challenge extends both to formal civic institutions and to the informal public places that nurture social capital. Moderate size has allowed Portland room for experiment, but success has meant growth and the need to acculturate newcomers into the “Portland way.” I have described this Portland style in terms of civic culture. For people who enjoy French theorists, it is similar to the concept that Pierre Bourdieu dresses up in Latin as habitus — shared predispositions and common ideas about how the world does and should work that arise out of the experience of living in particular places.11

Oregon is also a place where strong individualism tempers and challenges strong communities. In many ways it has been a classically “liberal” society in which few social institutions have intervened between citizens and self-interest. Oregon has low church membership and attendance, tied with Alaska for second-to-last place in this category behind unsanctified Nevada. Low church association and “pioneer” individualism mean low contributions to charity, with Oregon showing up two-thirds of the way down a state-by-state “generosity index,” which is based on the ratio of itemized deductions to adjusted gross income on federal tax returns.12 Ethic groups in Portland have limited political salience or cultural power (in contrast to Boston Irish, Detroit Poles, or Chicago African Americans). Labor unions have been weak, especially as the twentieth century wore along. The mediating role that these traditional institutions play in eastern cities has to be filled in Portland by consciously created civic groups, including neighborhood associations, “friends of” groups, the City Club, and the Association for Portland Progress. Environmental organizations such as
This aerial view of downtown Portland on August 30, 1974, shows the Harbor Drive expressway running along the west bank of the Willamette River before it was torn up to create Waterfront Park. The resulting swathe of green space reconnected the downtown area with the river, but industrial areas and freeways still consume the east bank.

the Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society are especially strong in Portland. Balancing historically low levels of charitable giving, Oregon has more nonprofit organizations with federal 501(c)(3) tax status per capita than most other states.

Portland, in other words, is an “intentional metropolitan community,” a term that is meant to imply both vision and fragility. Intentional communities range from co-housing projects to communes, from secular utopian settlements to separatist religious enclaves. They are motivated by a dream of doing things better and quickly collapse when visions diverge. Functioning on a much larger scale than Brook Farm or New Harmony, Portland’s vision is less comprehensive, but it is still ethically based.

Portland’s newspapers and its community leaders carefully monitor their progress toward civic goals. I have mentioned the City Club, with its regular research reports on issues of governance, growth, and community values. The club’s attempt to define a “Vision for Portland’s
Mt. Hood looms over a foggy Portland in 1970, creating a counterpoint to the First Interstate Bank building (now the Wells Fargo Bank building) under construction. A rare combination of urban amenities and natural beauty in large part defines the city’s character.

"Future" in 1980 influenced thinking during the next decade. The Columbia-Willamette Futures Forum and the Civic Index project in the 1980s examined patterns of leadership, community participation, and other aspects of civic capacity. Portland Future Focus followed by defining an agenda of action issues for the 1990s. The Central City Summit in 1998–1999 placed environment and education at the top of the civic to-do list.

One problem that faces “intentional” Portland, as it does many other cities, is the replacement of local business leadership by outside ownership. Outside takeover of Evans Products in the early 1980s removed a progressive civic voice from the city. Georgia Pacific transferred its corporate headquarters to Atlanta to be closer to southern pine forests. In the second half of the 1990s, San Francisco and Minneapolis banking conglomerates absorbed Portland’s two biggest banks, which had their roots in the pioneer generation. One electric utility has been taken over by Texans and resold to Nevadans, while another has gone to Scottish capitalists. Large national corporations have engrossed other locally rooted corporations, including Jantzen (sportswear), Freightliner (trucks), Hyster (heavy equipment), and Fred
Meyer (retailing). The question is whether these corporate resources will continue to be available for creative responses to community problems or will their involvement be confined to safe contributions to the United Way?

Like many other provincial cities, Portland has also experienced the out-migration of individual wealth. Since the days of lumber king Simon Benson and lawyer-litterateur C.E.S. Wood early in the twentieth century, many Portland “swells” have chosen to retire to California. Peculiarities of state tax policy (no sales tax in Oregon, no state income tax in Washington) have made Clark County, Washington, just across the Columbia River from Portland, a junior-grade tax refuge that has drawn a number of affluent Portlanders to new mansions overlooking the river from the north. To date the tax refugees have remained engaged with the metropolis — as major contributors to the Oregon Symphony, for example — but it would be no surprise if their attention drifted away.

Another worry is the problem that consensual politics leave little room for principled dissent, for they assume basic agreement on community goals. For all of its virtues, the Portland style tends to muffle radically dissenting voices who are unwilling to work on the “team.” Although advocates of the Portland consensus would disagree, it is possible that a pattern of co-optation stIFes a serious hearing for good ideas by whittling away at genuine alternatives unless they fit the mold.

One example is Portland’s tradition of middle-class populism. Since the late nineteenth century, an economy of skilled workers and small businesses has nourished a dissenting political tradition that distrusts professional expertise and corporate leadership. Nearly every mayoral and city council election shows a divide between the outer east side neighborhoods and the central and close-in neighborhoods most benefited by the package created under Mayor Neil Goldschmidt in the early 1970s, with its emphasis on public transit, conservation of older neighborhoods, and revitalization of the downtown through public and private investment. Issues such as sewer infrastructure costs have exacerbated the underlying distrust between the progressive core on the one hand and “country” neighborhoods on the other. In socioeconomic terms, the divide pits anti-tax populists against quality-of-life liberals. The city’s system of at-large elections, however, combines with its dominant good government ideology to keep such dissent in the minority. In the 1990s, it has popped up instead in statewide antitax movements and in groups such as the Portland Organizing Project that consciously challenged the civic consensus on behalf of the poor.

At the metropolitan scale, a physically compact and institutionally integrated metropolis has left little elbow room for new social and economic interests. In the typical postwar metropolis, new suburban in-
dustries have been able to dominate suburban governments in the same way that downtown growth coalitions dominated central city administrations and politics. One result has been metropolitan fragmentation, but another has been an opportunity for new voices and forces to enter the political arena. In a sense, loosely knit metropolitan areas have contributed to political pluralism, perhaps functioning as political safety valves.

In Portland, older suburbs are partners in the compact city alliance, but they speak more for the classic local growth machine than for the region's most important new economic interest, the substantial electronics industry in Washington County, just west of Portland. The industry has been particularly frustrated by its inability to promote lateral highways to help get suburban workers to their jobs or to secure local and state funding for a major engineering school in the western suburbs (being dissatisfied with the small, private Oregon Graduate Institute in Washington County, with the downtown location of Portland State University, and with the downstate location of Oregon State University in Corvallis).

A third concern is about the balance of reactive politics and moral politics. The Portland and Oregon style at its best is rational and morally grounded, government by committee and consensus in the service of the commonweal. An ethic of process that stresses citizen participation and responsibility coexists with an ethic of product that stresses the value of a compact metropolis that sits lightly on the land. Portland's and Oregon's development history are filled with moral challenges: the sin of Celilo Falls — a millennia-old Native fishing site on the Columbia River that was inundated in 1957 by The Dalles Dam — and the challenge of salmon, the emotionally charged imperative to save agriculture, the desire to value the natural environment as a commons. It is filled with rhetorical challenges in the language of Old Testament prophets. "Are you good enough?" asked Lewis Mumford. We need to save the state from "grasping wastrels," intoned Governor Tom McCall as a moral teacher.13

But balancing community and environmental ethics is a politics of socioeconomic resentment and regional chauvinism, a reaction to globalization and the bureaucracy of the national state. Here we have the failure to dream big dreams, fear of change, and even the historic hope that the Pacific Northwest might be the "best white man's country." Neo-Nazi skinheads have found Portland inhospitable after flourishing there in the 1980s, but the Oregon hills are havens for militant survivalists in whom fears of nuclear disaster and racial war sometimes intermingle.

These sources and voices of dissent notwithstanding, more Portlanders are pragmatists than ideologues. They know they have something special in their metropolis and hope to keep it that way. In
The first of many new public spaces that have reshaped downtown Portland in the past generation, Ira Keller (Forecourt) Fountain, built in 1970 across from the Civic Auditorium, was instantly popular.

1999, 83 percent of the residents of the city of Portland rated their neighborhood livability "good" or "very good," up from 77 percent in 1993 despite increased concerns about growing traffic congestion and other by-products of growth. An area-wide survey in 1999 found that nearly three times as many residents think Metro is doing a "pretty good" or "excellent" job as those who rate its performance as poor. As pollster Adam Davis points out, the general public is less critical of Metro than civic leaders are.

The larger the scale, however, the more tenuous the institutions and the vaguer the consensus. It is easy to organize around neighborhood stability or city schools and a city school district, but it is harder to mobilize around the needs of a Willamette Valley or a Cascadia. At least for the time being, Portland has solved the "planning puzzle" at the city level and is implementing a widely shared vision. At the metropolitan scale we find a more fragile consensus on planning implementation and a public that is divided down the middle in evaluating the growth of the 1990s. At the scale of eco-regions is a powerful but
diffuse sense of place without agreement on right action. We know that the Columbia River and its tributaries sustain both economy and culture, but we debate their best use. The very word “forest” elicits deep allegiance, but to multiple ends. Many Portlanders give as much commitment to the Northwest as to their city, but they do not agree on what that “Northwest” is or might become.

How widely can we institutionalize a sense of place? The question again is one of scale. Can we simultaneously value neighborhood, city, metropolitan area, river basin, weekend-land, and continental region? One of the issues is incompatible criteria. Do we define our place as a labor market or as an ecological system? The question is also one of cultural inclusiveness. Can we simultaneously value the natural environment as a source of livelihood and as a value in itself, as a site of production and an arena for enjoyment?

Readings about Portland

General

Politics and Planning

We can conclude this profile with education and civic life. From 1940 to 1970, Oregon was a state that used muscles more than minds, lagging behind the U.S. average in the percentage of its population with four-year college degrees. The state moved ahead in the 1970s, showed no change in the economically depressed 1980s, and surged again in the 1990s. In 1996, 24 percent of the American population held four-year college degrees, while 34 percent held those degrees in the Portland area (Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, and Yamhill counties).

Along with increasing educational levels is a deep commitment to public schools. Ninety-two percent of Portland schoolchildren attend public schools. The proportion is even higher in the suburbs. Throughout the 1990s, a series of statewide property tax limitation measures shifted school funding from local property taxes to the state legislature, views and documents about planning in the 1970s.

Social and Economic Dynamics

Portland’s Place in Its Region
Located in the heart of Old Town, at the corner of Southwest First and Ankeny avenues, Skidmore Fountain has weathered the changing fortunes of the neighborhood. The center of the downtown area in 1888, when the fountain was built, Old Town declined from the turn of the century until it was named a National Historic District in 1975. It is now part of a revitalized neighborhood with restaurants, bars, and the popular open-air Saturday Market.

which has offered one-size-fits-all appropriations from the general fund. In 1999, metropolitan-area parents and school districts found themselves begging the legislature and the governor — successfully — for the right to tax themselves in excess of statutory limits.

Education is certainly linked to individual achievement and family advancement, but it is also valued as a foundation of community. Education makes for civic interest and knowledgeable participation. What
did the staff of the Williamette Week newspaper most like about Portland, at least in 1995? Environmentalism and access to the outdoors, to be sure, but also “the fountain in front of Civic Auditorium. It is an incredible work of art — and you can play in the water.” The paper praised the city’s parks and green shades but also “the best public schools in the country. The best chance to make a difference through citizen involvement.” The people of the Portland region engage in intelligent dialogues on community issues ranging from homelessness to suburban growth. They also vote. Both voter registration and voter turnout, calculated as a percentage of those eligible, run roughly 10 percent higher in Oregon than in the United States as a whole.

“Good citizens are the riches of a city,” reads the inscription on the Skidmore Fountain in downtown Portland. Designed by Olin Warner, who is also known for the bronze entry doors to the Library of Congress, the fountain was erected in 1888 to serve the needs of “horses, men and dogs.” Its location in the heart of Portland’s nineteenth-century business district befuddled Scribner’s magazine, which thought it would look better in New York’s Central Park. Portlanders, however, have always admired the fountain as a symbol of early civic sophistication and the words — by Portland’s poetic attorney C.E.S. Wood — as a motto and a challenge.

Notes

10. Glasgow has made the transition from outmoded manufacturing city to a European cultural and information center. Barcelona’s planning efforts have made it a model for livability.
15. Adam Davis, personal communication.