The Landscape: Vancouver, WA

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Punkt Vancouver was named for British Captain George Vancouver by his troops in 1792, and later in 1806 Meriwether Lewis described the spot as “the only desired situation for settlement west of the Rocky Mountains.” Located directly on the Columbia River, just north of Portland and less than 100 miles from the Pacific Ocean, the settlement was known in its early years as Fort Vancouver and was home of the northwest division of the Hudson Bay Company and center of the fur trading industry from Alaska to Mexico. The City of Vancouver was officially incorporated in 1857. While the fort no longer commands a military presence, the city has preserved this historical element along with the adjoining “Officer’s Row” complex that now houses a variety of retail, commercial, and government endeavors.

Although Vancouver is often overshadowed by its namesake to the north and its sibling city, Portland, to the south, the city is certainly no shrinking violet. It is home to Washington State University Vancouver and Clark College. With a population of 143,560 (as of the 2000 census) and an area of nearly 45 square miles, it is only 20 minutes from the Portland International Airport. As pointed out by Ginger Metcalf, Executive Director of Identity Clark County, “Vancouver is a livable community that shares many of the same amenities that Portland enjoys, however, with relatively lower housing prices, lower property taxes, excellent schools and the absence of state income taxes.”

Vancouver holds an interesting position of duality as a key player in both the Portland metropolitan region and as the seat of Washington State’s southernmost county. The city has never forgotten its heritage as the outpost of the Northwest and continues to facilitate the region’s trade with the world. The Port of Vancouver in its current form was founded in 1912 and boasts over 5-million metric tons of total cargo processing annually. The Port of Vancouver also controls much of the available industrial land in the region. While early Vancouver industry included timber mills and a major shipyard during World War II, more recently the city has attracted high tech firms such as Hewlett Packard, SEH America, WaferTech, and Matsushita Kotobuki Electronics.

The downtown area currently is undergoing a renaissance. A new “Call to Action” coalition of businesses, government, and civic organizations already has downtown bustling with on-going construction. The task force is focusing on four key elements seen as vital to a thriving downtown: safety, transportation, image/marketing, and retail recruitment and enhancement. At the heart of the action is the charmingly redressed Esther Short Park, which might provide Vancouver a new identity. The surrounding mixed-use developments such as the Heritage Place Condominiums, Vancouvercenter and the proposed Esther Short Commons will all be connected to a proposed convention center and hotel complex via the public plaza meandering through the park.

Clearly poised, downtown Vancouver is starting to come into its own.
Clockwise top to bottom. Historic Officers Row; Vancouver Barracks; revitalization in the urban renewal district; new construction in downtown Vancouver; public art in the urban renewal district.
All photographs by Shelley Holly.