The Landscape: The Urban Center Plaza

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The Urban Center Plaza

By Carl Abbott

The Urban Center Plaza shares one of downtown Portland's 200-square-foot blocks with Portland State University's new Urban Center building and attached distance education wing and extends across a vacated street right-of-way to the south. The plaza and building, which houses the university's College of Urban and Public Affairs, are the newest of and standard-setting components of a University District plan to link the 23,000-student university to the thriving core of Portland. They open the campus to the city within ten blocks of the city center. The plaza's designer, Doug Macy of Walker Macy, the Portland-based landscape architecture and urban design firm, lists its functions: a forecourt to the Urban Center, "an inviting front door" for Portland State, and a gateway for Portlanders entering their downtown from the south.

Downtown Portland is elongated north and south between the Willamette river and a freeway. The plaza is ten blocks – and ten minutes – from Pioneer Courthouse Square at the heart of the city, and six blocks from the performing arts center and Portland Art Museum. It defines a downtown subdistrict and the southern end of downtown itself.

Adding the square footage and the plaza cost roughly $5-million. The bulk of the funds came from the Portland Development Commission, supplemented by a Federal transportation Administration grant to Tri-Met, the regional transit agency. Tri-Met managed the construction in coordination with bus facility improvements on Fifth and Sixth Avenues (the university is the single most active destination in the Tri-Met system).

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Will the plaza fulfill Macy's vision as a "crossroads of movement, a coming together and mixing of the diverse aspects of Portland State University"? The informality of the plaza with its many subareas and alternative use routes suggests that regular use will be constant but small scale—a quick spot for a slice of pizza, twenty minutes reading in the sun, five minutes of chatting on one of the fountain parapets. And that may be just what is needed for a campus in a bustling city.

Urban Plaza Commerce
Average Number of Weekly Customer Transactions at Plaza businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portland Streetcar</th>
<th>Seattle's Best Coffee</th>
<th>Pizzacato Gourmet Pizza</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2400</td>
<td>3648</td>
<td>1725</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Sources: Portland Streetcar, Seattle's Best, Pizzacato