

Housing and Growth Management Debates in Portland (OR): Conflicting Planning Views, Contrasting Architectural Typologies

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Since the 1970s, growth management debates have captured the imagination and practice of the planning field in the United States. They have been treated as epitomizations of the conflict between the spatial order of modern urbanism, mainly expressed by suburbanization and auto dependency, and the newer, growing concerns about the environment and the enhancement of urban livability. The results have been an ongoing, polemic climate of planning debate, and metropolitan environments where conflicting planning views get reflected in contrasting architectural typologies.

The architectural cases examined in Portland shed light on these processes. The result is a hybrid built environment where the political and/or theoretical disputes over planning concepts get localized, i.e., they are assigned specific, often counterposing spatial meanings and forms. This chapter examines two radically contrasting residential typologies in Portland – represented by the Street of Dreams and the Cascadian Tower. It analyzes the discursive ideas from which they are derived, and their impact on the official plans for the city regarding both the needs to accommodate growth within shrinking limits and secure housing affordability for all sectors of society.

STREET OF DREAMS VS. CASCADIAN TOWER

Metropolitan Portland, Oregon, is an area encompassing approximately 1.6 million people, 24 cities, and three counties. Portland is widely considered a well-designed, lively place. Yet, it was not always so. Starting in the late 1930s, the region of Portland was strongly shaped by the use of the automobile. Patterns of segregated uses, deficits of public space and parks, and overloading of roads and highways shaped the region. The most critical consequences likely to occur if current trends

continued were more dispersed development; loss of farm land and natural areas; greater dependency on the auto and increased traffic congestion; more air and water pollution; less mobility; and higher service costs; among others [Bureau of Planning, 1993]. To counter those trends and their negative implications, Portlanders decided to strongly and effectively address the problems of growth management. Henceforth, the process of reverting trends, whose results start to be more apparent these days, began several decades ago.

It was recognized that one of the key instruments to achieve a balanced growth was the management of the urban land supply. In 1973, Oregon's governor Tom McCall signed a law that required every city and county to write land-use plans that limited sprawl and protected farms, forests, and open space. They had to draw urban growth boundaries (UGB) around the cities. The Portland metropolitan area was recognized as a special case, for which there was one regional urban growth boundary, managed by Metro (the Portland's metropolitan planning agency) [Metro, 1996]. An UGB is a legally established boundary surrounding the metropolitan area that separates urban areas from forest, farm, and rural lands. The UGB concept is not unique to the Portland region, but it is singular there for being mandatory statewide and having strong authority. In Portland, the regional UGB is a long-term planning tool based on the region's 20-year projected need for urban land, in consistency with statewide planning goals [Metro, 1995b].

Since Portland has been struggling to find room for new residents since 1990 without significantly expanding its UGB, it becomes imperative for the city to review the way it is building. Portland must basically choose between growing up or spreading out. According to Metro 2040, the region blueprint for growth, 15,000 new housing units are outlined for downtown Portland alone. Moreover, in her first term as mayor, Vera Katz

lead a decision to add 70,000 housing units and 138,000 jobs within the city limits by 2020; exceeding the mandated addition of housing and jobs to the city by Metro. Accordingly, city officials in Portland are promoting the construction of more high-rise areas in the city.

All too often, the call to grow denser and higher in Portland has been met with residential projects that mix one floor of concrete and four floors of wood frame. This residential typology is the cheapest, largest, and faster-to-construct building type allowed by Portland's fire codes. Through this practice, however, Portland is under-building on increasingly scarce urban land. For example, out of the 15,000 new housing units for downtown that the Metro 2040 plan outlines, 2,500 should be located in the Lloyd District by 2010. It would take 50 city blocks to hold them, if five-story buildings were constructed.

Ever more, urban planners and scholars in Portland agree on the need to advocate for taller, more permanent buildings. Besides increasing density, city planners and officials would like to secure not only mixed-uses in the central city, but also a mixed society. Yet, housing affordability is a big issue in the central city. In light of these planning challenges – namely, the need to accommodate growth within shrinking space of the UGB, and the need to secure housing affordability for all sectors of society – I analyze the potential response of two contrasting residential typologies in Portland – represented by the Street of Dreams and the Cascadian Tower.

The Street of Dreams is an annual home tour and idea show in metropolitan Portland. Produced by the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland (HBAMP), the Street of Dreams is meant to showcase the work of Portland-area builders and the latest in new home construction, design and technology. The show lasts for approximately one month – usually during August. It is estimated that between 80,000 to 100,000 people tour the show each year. A few attendees to the show are looking to buy a home right away, others look for ideas to apply in their own homes; and still others use the show program as a wish book until they are ready to build their own dream houses, often years later. The HBAMP held the first Street of Dreams show in Portland in 1976. Since then, the Association has produced 26 years of shows.

More recently, the Street of Dreams has become a luxury home show, but it was not born as so: in 1976, the first year of the show, the 12 homes featured averaged 2,500 square feet, had four bedrooms, and cost less than \$100,000 each (about \$266,000 in today's dollars). The architectural critic of *The Oregonian*, Randy Gragg, claims that the annual show used to be relevant to regular people looking to own a house. Furthermore, it even anticipated the higher-density, affordable houses Portlanders were going to need so much today. Twenty years ago in 1981, for instance, the Street of Dreams featured "Cluster Homes," grouped four to a single lot, ranging from 936

to 1,440 square feet, and costing \$59,000 to \$64,000. This cluster homes catered to a growing market of aging, now-single baby-boomers. For Gragg, the Cluster Homes represented "the extreme of *urban correctness* in the history of the Street of Dreams" [Gragg, 1996: my emphasis].

Over the years, however, the houses have dramatically expanded in size and cost. The show has turned into a "Street of Fantasies" serving almost exclusively the home builders. By 1996, according to the Metro Area Multiple Listing Service, just under 1 percent of the home-buying public could afford the prices at the show. It was not a worry for the home builders, however, because by opening night that year, 4 out of 7 houses were sold. Gragg defined the 1996 Street of Dreams as "far more than a collection of expensive houses. It's a political argument. Just as [. . .] the Israelis construct settlements along the West Bank's highest ridges today, the HBAMP is staking its own high-elevation claim. Never mind the need for greater density and affordability, it is an American God-given right to build a palace" [Gragg, 1996]. Beyond the needs for greater density and affordability, over the 26 years of the Street of Dreams shows the amount of space needed for the shrinking, typical American household has diminished, making more evident the disparity between this decreasing need and the increasing amount of space usually offered by the show's houses.

The program for these houses has also changed, and it has not been to make the houses more functional or in-tune with Portland's planning goals. As Gragg noticed, "conspicuously present is circulation: two-story vestibules, soaring foyers, massive hallways, bridges, balconies, and in several cases, two staircases. With million-dollar views and, in one case, its own balcony, the bathroom mat truly be called the 'throne room' in these houses where, at every turn, excess has overtaken excellence."

The recent 26th annual showcase edition of the Street of Dreams in 2001 was located at Fishback Creek, Hillsboro, a suburb of Portland. Hillsboro is now home to the high tech industry in metropolitan Portland, known as the "Silicon Forest." The robust economy and lure of the area have beckoned people to migrate to Hillsboro, accounting for its recent, significant growth. Fishback Creek is a 25-lot project, the first high-end subdivision in Hillsboro. Heinze, from HBAMP, stated, "This project will provide the upper-end housing that many high tech employees in Hillsboro have found in areas much farther away. [. . .] We've already had a lot of interest in our project from executives [streetofdreamsusa.com, 2001]. Just as in previous shows, the names of the houses continued to evoke pleasurable images of nature in the American Northwest or traditional Italian town settings, such as The Oregon Fir or Via de Sorrento. They range from 4,550 square feet and \$695,000; to 5,495 square feet and \$1,300,000.

Evidently, not only does the Street of Dreams mean good real estate business to the HBAMP. It is also a clever way to put a philanthropic face to the Association, enhancing its image and ultimately, increasing commercial promotion and profitability. Marilyn Goodrich, wife of HBA executive vice president Jim Goodrich, came up in 1983 with the idea of a yearly pre-opening show, black-tie event. Thus, amid the opulence of the Street of Dreams, the HBAMP hosts the "Midsummer Night's Dream", an affair that includes dinner, entertainment, and an exclusive preview of the homes in the show. The party has benefited seven to ten charities each year, selected by the Midsummer Night's Dream Committee, and assigned to each builder. However, in a show in which each house ranges from over \$650,000 to \$1,300 million, the fact that each builder-plus a number of other sponsors that participate in the Street of Dreams shows—dedicates approximately \$7,000 to a charity through a one-night event that, in turn, gives each builder more publicity and prestige, does not seem outrageously philanthropic.

It is evident how the housing offer of the Street of Dreams is opposed—by all spatial standards, e.g., lot size and price, and housing size, price, program and typology—to Portland's planning expectations of accommodating growth without expanding the UGB, and creating denser, livable, transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly communities. Moreover, among the contractors participating in the show, there have been activists vigorously involved in working against the growth management program in Portland. Don Morisette, of Don Morisette Homes, for instance, has been a Metro counselor who has spent more than \$250,000 of his own money in a crusade to expand the urban Growth Boundary by 16 square miles.

Just as the residential typology of the Street of Dreams does not provide a model for Portland's growth demands, neither does it promote housing affordability for the majority. Indeed, in addition to promoting denser growth, another great challenge that Portland faces is to decrease a number of inequalities that afflicts the region, as perceived significantly through housing issues. In the last few years, several thousand new or rehabbed housing units have been accommodated in downtown Portland, but many more units are still required, especially when some thousand affordable units have also been lost to urban renewal and gentrification processes [Harmon, 1999]. The city needs to increase its number of affordable units of various types and pay more attention to neighborhood renewal (in order to control damaging gentrifying effects). It needs to address creative ways to overcome barriers to market-rate and affordable housing in city neighborhoods. The model of the Street of Dreams runs counter to such intents in Portland.

The single-family houses at the Streets of Dreams in Portland are fully private and detached, potentially expanding the levels of alienation and exclusion they produce. Life-style and wealth are the predominant bases of the Street of Dreams enclaves, with the new technologies of communication and the new

organization of work as key warps of social/community organization. The proliferation of these communities may downplay the role of the traditional public sphere of the streets. Furthermore, contemporary cities that are segregated by enclaves are not environments that generate conditions conducive to democracy. Rather, they foster inequality and the sense that different groups belong to separate universes and have irreconcilable claims [Caldeira, 1999].

What other housing typologies, different from the luxurious single-family, detached houses represented by the Street of Dreams, can be pursued in Portland in order to pursue a denser, more vertical model of growth without losing the city's character and quality of life? In their search for models, Portland architects and developers have tried several housing typologies in the metropolis, among them, mixed-use, middle-rise developments, rowhouses, lofts, and New Urbanism, Neo-Traditional or transit-oriented developments (TODs). Among these, the most evident opposite building typology to the suburban subdivision represented by the Street of Dreams is obviously the urban high-rise residential building. I discuss the current conditions for this typology to take root in Portland, mainly referring to an emblematic example—the Cascadian Tower. In addition to accommodating more compact growth, the residential typology represented by the Cascadian Tower can be instrumental in accomplishing the goal of more affordable housing downtown.

For many, the time in Portland to start building high-rises is long overdue. The city planted the seeds of densification 22 years ago, with the establishment of the metropolitan region's Urban Growth Boundary in 1979. The first attempts to densify the city, however, only happened in 1986 with the construction of the first row houses and a contemporary mixed-use building with apartment over retail. Many planning documents have since then been produced in Portland in order to motivate denser and mixed-use construction, with relatively little success yet. Among the most enthusiastic high-rise development advocates, nonetheless, is Portland's firm Sienna Architecture Company.

Sienna transformation and current *modus operandi* constitute vivid testimonies to the profound impact that the new responses to the growth challenges in Portland can operate upon architectural traditions—conceived both as design and business practices. Starting in 1996, Gary Reddick, CEO and chairman of Sienna, got the firm its new name, new space, and new personnel. The boldest move, however, was the firm's new marketing strategy. As the UGB began to tighten and Portland's planners were claiming for more density and infill, underdeveloped properties constituted a new market to be exploited for higher-density, higher-profit developments. Reddick began looking for land to (re)develop, rather than clients. Sienna's common strategies are to give lectures and draw free architectural schemes for potential private clients and the Portland

Development Commission. Using aggressive marketing and lobbying strategies, the firm has become one of the best known and most effective advocate for Portland's bold density goals.

In a significant way, as Reddick and his Sienna colleagues go about adding stories to existing buildings and parking lots, and proselytizing about high-rise development, they are reconfiguring the traditional role of architects. In effect, Reddick does little designing. Rather, "he is lobbyist and pitchman, capitalizing on Portland's struggle to accommodate growth smartly. Reddick and his colleagues at Sienna Architecture Co. push prospective clients to see every underused square foot as a new source of income" [Cheek, 2000].

The firm's practices have also rose strong controversy and criticism, though. By aggressively proposing and promoting unconventional urban infill and refill projects, Reddick has being accused of "Manhattanizing" the town. Some Portland architects argue against high-rise development in Portland, contending that lower-rise buildings create more vital communities. They advocate against *Manhattanization* of Portland. Reddick has responded, "We can count on seeing that word in an op-ed piece or letter every couple of months. It makes me want to ask, 'Have you ever been to Manhattan?' We've heard that accusation - even when we were adding one story to a building. So we have to be as much educators as architects. [. . .] We're at a defining moment as a city. The choice is whether we're going to grow up and sparkle, or wave our hands and fall back" [Cheek, 2000]. As pro and con arguments are fleshed out, the controversy over the appropriateness of the high-rise residential building type is far from over in Portland.

In the midst of controversy, however, Sienna Architecture Co. was finally able to make the first attempt to a denser approach to urbanization in Portland's downtown in 1998. The firm designed the Cascadian Tower, a 23-story, modernist, concrete and glass condominium building. Located in the Lloyd District, the tower features 179 units. Developed by Enterprise Development, it is the first high-rise residential tower in Portland since the KOIN Tower in 1984. In January 1999, Portland's design commission reviewed Sienna's proposal for the Cascadian Tower. The presentation elicited praising comments. In February 2000, construction began on the \$85 million high-rise [Back, 2001].

According to Reddick, rather than taking 50 city blocks of five-story buildings to allocate the 2,500 housing units that should be located in the Lloyd District by 2010, it would only require 8.3 blocks at the Cascadian's density to reach that goal. It is not only sheer numbers what seem to make sense to promote higher development, though. The Cascadian Tower may also become "one of the most elegant additions to the Portland skyline in years," with only 65 feet wide, each level sheathed in glass, a bold podium with artwork, and a camouflaged parking garage. The tower features good views of downtown and Mount

Hood, is very central, and fits the surrounding, where there are other high-rises around [Gragg, 1999].

Apparently, there is a bigger market for those types of developments than the building industry in Portland is yet cognizant of. Nevertheless, the architecture and development firms of the Cascadian Tower are taking important risks in doing this project to test if there is truly a market. The bank appraisers in Portland may be the strongest barrier to high-rise development in the city. To estimate a project's value and finance it, they demand to have other projects to draw comparisons with. That requirement makes it very hard to try new architectural and urban ideas. Located at the current epicenter of this development trap, the Cascadian Tower may enact a quantum leap to the future in Portland. On the one hand, "[a] failure of architecture of successfully gauging the market could influence how high and how broad the city builds for years to come." On the other hand, if the Cascadian Tower sells successfully, both with banks and with home buyers, it may finally mark a necessary turning point in Portland housing construction, growth, and city image.

In addition, for Sienna, the Cascadian Tower represents both an outward and inward climax transformation: not only does the Cascadian represent Sienna's most aggressive effort to reinvent Portland as a more boldly designed city. Significantly enough, "[i]t's the highest expression of the firm's reinvention of itself" [Gragg, 1999]. At the end, "[i]f his firm doesn't reinvent the city, it may at least revolutionize the marketing of architecture" [Cheek, 2000]. If Sienna and other firms succeed in Portland, both their architectural marketing and building practices may also prove to work in other American cities, as growth boundaries become ever more commonly used instruments to contain sprawl-plagued cities.

LOCALIZING PLANNING DISCOURSES IN PORTLAND:

Conflicting Planning Views, Contrasting Architectural Typologies

Recent types of housing in Portland – exemplified by the Street of Dreams and the Cascadian Tower – are subverting or reinterpreting in novel ways the meaning and form of some of the main planning tenets of Portland and Oregon's urban vision. These typologies are the direct result of different takes on the debates about growth management strategies in the city.

To be sure, Portland has not been entirely successful in preventing suburban sprawl through its UGB and its use of transit. In the process of the years, it has been observed that the UGB does not necessarily control sprawl. It merely prevents it from spilling into the countryside. The UGB has contained the development of farm and forest lands outside it, but it has failed to have the desired effect of creating compact, pedestrian-

oriented communities in the fast-growing suburbs within. By failing to create and enforce zoning codes and incentives that permit, encourage, or even force compact growth *within* the UGB, the region's governments are permitting a lot of auto-dependent sprawl. Part of the problem also seems to be developers and architects who continue to produce old-fashioned suburbs thinking that is all the market can bear. Another conundrum is that while most people may understand the need of higher densities, some resist it on their neighborhoods.

As a spatial model born within this dynamics, the residential typology represented by the Street of Dreams constitutes an unsustainable way of growing, and it works counter to the goal of improving housing affordability in the region. The Street of Dreams model is opposed to Portland's planning expectations of both accommodating growth without expanding the UGB, and creating denser, livable, transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly communities. The consequences of the reproduction of this typology in Portland may attack far more than the possibilities of realizing the metropolis' spatial plans. It may even attack the very heart of Portland participatory, democratic culture.

On the other hand, NIMBY-type attitudes and fears are tampering the acceptance of higher residential typologies in Portland—the emblematic extreme of this model represented by the Cascadian Tower.

But the fact remains that Portland will grow one way or another. In addition to accommodating more compact growth, the residential typology represented by the Cascadian Tower can be instrumental in accomplishing the goal of more affordable housing. The Cascadian Tower may influence how high and how broad the city builds for years to come. If the building sells successfully, it may mark a necessary turning point in Portland housing construction, growth, and city image. The Cascadian is a test to whether Portland will ultimately dare to change its model of architecture and urban development to reach the densities the city requires to accomplish its housing goals.

At the end, if the Cascadian does not propitiate a revision and reinvention of the city, it may at least revolutionize the marketing of architecture. However, much more than financing, legislation, and marketing is needed in order to embrace this typology as a model of growth. The synergy of developers, bankers, and architects willing to take chances is required. In addition, more drastic approaches than high-rise redevelopment are needed to build the affordable housing Portland needs—e.g., the condemnation of vacant and underdeveloped city lots to assemble them into larger, easier-to-develop parcels. The problem is that this type of urban renewal requires more centralized government decisions, when political ethos move Portlanders towards more participatory planning democracy and suspicion of central government.

The current condition of spatiality in Portland expresses the polemical nature of planning in the metropolis, i.e., the condition of constant political, theoretical, and practical confrontation regarding architectural and urban issues within Portland's broad participatory culture. Tensions between different urban stances as well as the local and the global in Portland get expressed through the production of specific types of architecture and urbanism, resulting in a discontinued, hybrid built environment where architectural and urban global traditions are localized.

In addition to impacting both the growth plans and the actual growth taking place in the metropolis, the new types of housing reviewed transform polity in Portland, as they promote changes in the character of public space and of citizens' participation in public life. Within the ongoing transformations of this society, there remains the challenge to fully foster social promotion and spatial conditions that ameliorate urban alienation, anomie, and the unchecked quest for social status, avoiding the progressive abandonment of the public realm. Portlanders face the great task of increasing their awareness, dialogue, and commitment for constructing a more pluralistic and equitable architecture and urbanism in the city, if the urban planning visioning process that has gained so much quality of life and recognition for the city is not to be lost.

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