

“Whatever time and space mean, place and occasion mean more”:
A meditation on Pioneer Courthouse Square

I think I will do nothing now but listen. . .

I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following;

Sounds of the city, and sounds out of the city—sounds of the day and night;

Talkative young ones to those that like them—the loud laugh of work-people at their meals;

... The steam-whistle—the solid roll of the train of approaching cars;

The slow-march play'd at the head of the association, marching two and two. . .

—Walt Whitman

The block that Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square occupies —originally purchased for \$24 and a pair of high boots—has a rich history that reads like a circuitous list-poem.

In the mid-late 1850s it was home to Central School's 280 pupils and three teachers, before being sold to railroad magnate Henry Villard, who built the lavish, Gilded-Age Portland Hotel—which cost well over a million dollars and contained 326 sleeping rooms, a restaurant, ballroom, billiard room, bar, sitting rooms, dining rooms, sewing rooms, a reception room, ladies parlors, public restrooms, public telephones, a news and cigar stand, Western Union telegraph office, quarters for live-in staff, and elevators and was fashioned from some 4,000,000 bricks. The only President who didn't stay there during its 61-year history was Warren G. Harding, which isn't too surprising, considering his ineptitude and fundamental lack of presidential je-ne-sais what. In 1951, the Meier & Frank department store purchased the block, razed the hotel, and built a two-level parking structure (later proposing an 11-story parking garage on the block, which was denied by the City after a series of heated public hearings). Following a citizen-driven

Downtown Plan (1972–1974), an open-space development was proposed for the block—setting in play a dramatic series of political and bureaucratic navigations leading to the purchase of the block by the City, a high-profile international design competition, and the eventual selection of the Will Martin design for the Square (in collaboration with the crack team of Doug Macy, Robert Reynolds, Lee Kelly, Spencer Gill, and Terence O’Donnell) as we see it today.

Portland’s “living room” opened as one of the city’s signature public spaces (along with Tom McCall Waterfront Park and the serpentine Transit Mall) on April 6, 1984. These days, some 26,000 residents, workers, and tourists interact with the Square’s 63,000+ bricks daily, some 300 events a year animate the plaza. One of the ingredients that buoyed its success was an intertwining partnership with the TriMet MAX light rail system (which was planned concurrently with the Square). As a result the Square functions as both a vibrant “volksgarten” and transit hub—making it the nerve center of downtown Portland. Considered one of the world’s Best Squares and Plazas by the Project for Public Spaces—smack dab between Venice’s Campo Santa Margherita and Paris’ Hôtel de Ville— Pioneer Courthouse Square is a great park, even without a single blade of grass in sight.

The square illustrates perfectly how the notion of the park has evolved from its traditionally recreational role, to a more enzymatic one that accommodates multiple uses, buoys social capital, and supports a rich array of experiences. At the heart of those experiences is the message of the square’s design, framed on the north and south edges by maples and Greek terra cotta columns, with a subtle bi-level division that tracks a west-to-east change in grade offering a central arc of Greek-amphitheater-like seating. It is formal while maintaining an openness, an ambiguity that seems to inspire improvisational impulses that allow for the unexpected.

While the Square hosts many official events throughout the year— and has included a-then First Lady Hillary Clinton, the Dalai Lama, Renowned composer-singer Rinde Eckert lead-

ing hundreds of Portlanders in a sing-a-long concert for the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art's Time-Based Art Festival, Tuba Christmas (an annual oompah-rich carol-fest with 250+ tubas), a Love Rally where people gathered "to generate positive energy" and celebrate love through music, dance, art and peaceful action, the Festa Italiana, a yearly tree-lighting ceremony featuring a 75-foot Douglas Fir tree and 20,000-some folks—it's the everydayness, the thrum of workaday and the surprise encounter, the small rallies and marches with Portland Peaceful Response Coalition/Nor War Drum Corps and others that are a hallmark of the square.

The Square, from its inception, was meant as a place for communion and as a safe haven for those engaged in a Quarrel with Providence—one regularly finds citizens animated by challenging questions of conscience like war, social justice, seasonal celebrations, the call-and-response of the commons, the improvisational sense of insurgency and release that cities inspire. "Spontaneity achieves salience in a landscape of predictability," UC Berkeley's Dean Rowan tells us, "but planning ordinarily includes desirable accommodation of a level of discretionary freedom. Even the most precisely engineered machine is designed to maintain a measure of tolerance."

To gain some insight into the essence of Portland and Oregon, it's important to understand the complex never-ending dance that has played out between land-use planning and private property rights. The 200 x 200-foot blocks, an Urban Growth Boundary, a wine industry that developed on rural hillsides where tract housing was spurned, the Bottle Bill, a brick-by-brick campaign for public space, and so on. Portland proudly proclaims public rights to freedom and a defiant right to public space, while ironically patrolling liberties on the Square. In recent years, free speech (both in its pure and symbolic forms), camera tripods, and public assembly have been under fire as a privately contracted security firm has made it quite clear that will enforce private, exclusionary provenance over this very public of spaces. For many, that's a violation of the public investment (63,000 bricks and counting) and its social contract with the citizens of Portland.

In a recent white paper on alleged civil liberties violations in Pioneer Courthouse Square, Barbara G. Ellis, noted that a, “recent [tourism guide] description about this 1.56-acre spot in the heart of Portland emphasized the heavily public nature of this publicly financed Square... it would scarcely seem to be a private enclave admitting a group of visitors passing muster by the city or those contracted to manage this park. Indeed, the text not only concedes public ownership, but pride in Portlanders exercising the democratic freedoms conferred by First Amendment rights.” Sideways “free speech policies” aside—like a speaker’s vocal reach can not be farther than 10-feet—what is paramount is remembering that Pioneer Courthouse Square works best when it’s allowed to moderate itself.

This push-me/pull-you energy is what Wallace Stevens’ “Connoisseur of Chaos” signifies: “A. A violent order is disorder; and / B. A great disorder is an order. These / Two things are one.”

And those are good things.

A nod to what Guy Debord and his Situationist compadres liked to call “Unitary Urbanism” — the condition that demands, “constant games in the urban labyrinth; it depended on free play and creativity, a subversion of the rational non-participation of spectacular society.” The Square is many things, but passive it is not. As John Dewey notes, “Vision is a spectator, hearing is a participator” — spend a lunch hour there and it is hard not to get caught up in the complicity of wonder that fuels this public space.

An enigmatic architect/patron-saint who might have felt right at home in Portland, was the brilliant Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck. Architectural writer Ken Worpole notes that, “Van Eyck thought of the ideal city as a labyrinth of small, intimate territories, or more poetically, a random constellation of stars. A playground on every street corner was just a first step on the journey to the “ludic city”: the city of play...In one of his essays van Eyck wrote of cities:

“If they are not meant for children, they are not meant for citizens either. If they are not meant for citizens – ourselves – they are not cities.” Van Eyck rejected the conception that the the essence of modernist architecture was the merger of space and time. When he famously said, “Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more,” he wished for us to co-create spaces, to establish collective, transitory playgrounds made up of both “place” and “occasion.”

Portland rarely traffics successfully in manufactured experiences, preferring authentic, unplanned vitality and placemaking. Sociologist Richard Sennett tells us, “Improvisation is a user’s craft. It draws on the metamorphoses of type-form over time. Good jazz improvisation follows rules of economy... Improvisation occurs in workshops, offices, and laboratories as much as on streets. As in jazz, other forms of improvisation involve skills that can be developed and improved. Anticipation can be strengthened; people can become better at negotiating borders and edges.”

The Square’s design provides subtle guidance; the terraced steps of the square’s amphitheater area are situated so workers might lunch there, parents can supervise small children playing nearby; lively snarls of adolescents and chess players colonize the upper corners near the MAX trains; tourists take a load off, watching the sea of activity; shoppers bisect the plaza, passing diagonally through space, momentarily interrupting a hacky-sack game at the Square’s center; as Sennett said of Aldo Van Eyck’s parks created from the liminal space and rubble of post-war Holland, “people physically mingled rather than verbally interacted. . . Yet the public realm was not neutral or indifferent; it drew young and old in the neighborhood. . . Here, then, were projects that realized concretely the goal of making a live edge, a porous membrane. Van Eyck found simple, clear ways to make the user of his parks, young and old, more skilled in anticipating and managing ambiguity at the edge.” As with Aldo Van Eyck’s public spaces, in Pioneer Courthouse Square children, adolescents, and adults team to use it together. This is improvisation manifest.

Part of its lively unpredictable energy and pedestrian klangenfarben can be chalked up to Portland's sense of public-ownership of Pioneer Courthouse Square. John Dewey once wrote (in his aptly titled, *The Public and Its Problems*), "In its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse . . . Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.. The local is the ultimate universal, and as near an absolute as exists." Since the late 1960s (beginning with the freeway revolts that led to the creation of Tom McCall Waterfront and the stopping of the Mount Hood Freeway to the citizen-centric Downtown Plan of the early 1970s) Portlanders have had a vested sense of activism, collaboration and collective efficacy around local issues of livability —it's deliberative democracy of a folksy variety. Case in point: when a progress-averse Mayor declared the project dead in 1981, Friends of Pioneer Square set about to raising, brick-by-brick, \$1.5 million dollars to see the project through. The Square's very fact owes its existence to those who were brazen enough to metaphorically proclaim, "we are the ones we've been waiting for."

As the Bruner Foundation has noted, "While most American cities of the 1970s and 1980s saw developers become the driving force, putting forth their proposals, then barely tolerating public input, Portland evolved the idea that the public's agenda comes first." That agenda included from time to time pulling a John Maynard Keynes and being able to say "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" That meant turning one's back on considerably less evolved forms of public space like parking lots and speaking one's mind, as civic activist Betty Merten did during a particularly impassioned City Planning Commission meeting in January of 1970—a testimonial that might just have tipped the scales in the right direction:

"I wish to speak on behalf of the women of Portland, upon whom the life or death of the downtown retail business largely depends. An additional parking structure in the core area will not bring about revitalization. Another parking structure will not bring shoppers back. Lloyd Center, with its wide malls, greenery and park-like setting makes shopping appealing. Could not

downtown Portland be equally appealing? Instead of cars, noise and air pollution, we can have walkways, parks and people. Or, City Hall can wait and see while pollution levels become higher and higher and livability falls lower and lower. The choice is ours, for our city, for our children. “

Public squares—and Pioneer Courthouse Square is no different—exist to remind us, as Martin Buber once said, “The unavowed secret of humanity is that we want to be confirmed in our being and our existence by our companions and that we wish to make it possible for us to confirm them...accompanied by a glance of well-wishing, a glance in which curiosity, mistrust, and routine will have been overcome by a mutual sympathy: the one gives the other to understand that each affirms the other’s presence. This is the indispensable minimum of humanity.” And oh, the humanity at the lunch hour.

—*Tim DuRoche*