

Program Research Exhibit: Can the Centennial Mills Framework Plan Serve as a Structure for Integrating Cities and Nature?

Abstract:

The Centennial Mills Framework Plan outlines how the City of Portland views the relationship between the urban Centennial Mills site and the nature surrounding it. While the plan begins to offer a strong environmental intent, it is relatively loose leaving ample room for an urban designer's vision. For this reason, the plan, alone, does not establish specific enough guidelines for creating a strong interrelationship between the urban site and its natural elements.

Introduction:

Throughout history, there has been a strong divisive dichotomy between cities and nature. Cities are viewed as the man-made realm of humans while nature is a pristine wilderness composed of plants and animals. The intent of my thesis project is to challenge this long held assumption by examining new ways to integrate nature and cities. The point is not to create nature parks set off from the more urban buildings, but to weave these elements together.

Centennial Mills is an old industrial grain mill seated on the Willamette River and will be the focus of this study. In September 2006 a Framework Plan was established that outlines the city of Portland's goals for the site's redevelopment. Most pertinent, this plan elaborates on a few key ways the city views the site's relationship with the surrounding natural environment.

In this short paper, I will consider whether the suggestions of the Framework Plan adequately allow for strong interrelationship between the urban and natural characteristics of the site, or if they need to be edited and expanded to better weave these ideas together. To do this, I will outline the key points of the Framework Plan and then analyze whether these points can be used in a way that integrates nature and cities.

Framework Plan Key Points:

Existing Conditions

Included in the Framework Plan is an Environmental Analysis that lists the existing ecological conditions of the site. The Analysis describes the site in terms of its natural adjacencies- it is situated on the Willamette River, within the floodplain, and in close proximity of native fish and avian wildlife (Framework Plan, 24). It also discusses the existing conditions of the site in terms of challenges and opportunities. The site is relatively isolated from other habitats and areas, but it does offer shallow water habitat that could be improved to support native fish populations (24). At present, the site is

mostly abandoned with several buildings in need of serious structural repair, but some could be restored or torn down to accommodate a larger park (2-3). The Greenway Trail ends just South of the site, but it could be extended to provide more access to the site (4). Lastly, the Environmental Analysis outlines key code issues that may influence the direction and funding of the urban design plan. The site is within the River District Urban Renewal Plan and that it is not within the Natural Resource Plan and it is not a resource site in the Willamette River inventory (24). Overall the Analysis uses a neutral tone in describing the site and does a strong job of covering all the main site considerations in a readable language.

Framework Plan Goals:

The Introduction of the Centennial Mills Framework Plan includes four main goals for the site's green space redevelopment that are less neutral and more directed in character. First, Centennial Mills should serve as the riverfront culmination of Tanner Springs and Jameson Parks and it should do this in a way that bridges a strong connection to the Pearl District (Framework Plan, 2). Second, Centennial Mills should link to the existing Greenway trail running to the South of the site (4). Third, the Greenway designs should include native plant species, interpretive displays, and support the habitat of native fish, and strengthen the views to the river (4). Forth, there need to be provisions for managing storm-water onsite that enhance, not hinder, salmon habitat. A sustainable and inventive solution is preferred (4).

Analysis of Framework Plan:

The Framework Plan provides very basic goals that bring more natural elements into the site from its adjacencies. The goals are very general and they are analogous to Portland's existing greenway and open space planning. Embedded within them are the strong environmental values of sustainability and habitat restoration. Yet, the goals lack the specificity needed to forge a strong interrelationship between nature and the urban industrial fabric. First, there is no direct reference to how buildings can be used alongside natural elements to achieve these goals. There is no mention of roof gardens, green walls, or creating microclimates in spaces like courtyards, patios, etc. Second, they do not mention the creation of ecosystems and true natural elements within these parks. General terms, like native plant vegetation, do not connote nature in the same way that the term coniferous forest does. The plan's strongest intersection between nature and cities, mentioned in a later section of the document rather than alongside the overall vision, is for a pedestrian boardwalk to extend between the parks. This will use the urban element of a street to pull people through different environments and bridge a connection from the more urban lofts of the Pearl to the more natural riparian ecosystem of the Willamette.

Given this analysis, the Centennial Mills Framework Plan is a loose document that offers general goals and values for the development and extension of nature into this old industrial site. They leave room for both a more conventional development and a

more innovative reconsideration of nature and cities. Unfortunately, without stronger strategic language the actual Master plan will most likely be conventional.

For the purposes of my project, I believe that I can follow the four guidelines, but use them in a way that creates a mutually inclusive relationship between cities and nature. In order to do this however, the Framework's guidelines must be expanded. Therefore I propose the following amendments to the plan:

- Defining the specific ecological opportunities and challenges of the site and listing how these characteristics may be translated into positive redevelopment. For example, the river bank is a riparian ecosystem. It could be strengthened by the addition of various riparian plants and extended higher along the riverbank to create more habitat.
- Including more specific guidelines on how the natural and man-made elements interact on the site. For example, the Greenway Trail could be pulled through part of the existing building structure to link the natural with industrial artifice and simultaneously connect the trail from South to North.
- Defining the experiential qualities of the intersecting natural and urban components. For example, a green wall could be added to the existing mill structure to create a cooler more relaxed climate during the summer.

To conclude, the Centennial Mills Framework Plan summarizes the overall vision the City has for redeveloping the site. It is very useful because it covers basic site analysis and general planning issues. Yet, it leaves ample room for interpretation. In terms of my own objectives, I must rely more on my own creativity and goals, rather than just this plan, to strongly communicate my concept of mutually inclusive urban environments. Yet, the plan cannot be entirely faulted. In general, documents like these must allow space for designers to put forth their own vision. However, until paradigms shift, framework plans must be strong and specific to serve as an avenue for integrating more progressive ideas into urban design.

Works Cited:

City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Portland Development Commission. *Centennial Mills Framework Plan: Existing Conditions*. Portland, Oregon. September 2006.