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### Critical Site Analysis – 1933 W Burnside, Portland, Oregon

At the intersection of West Burnside Street and Northwest Trinity Place in Portland, Oregon sits an ideal location for a public institution. 1933 West Burnside, currently the site of a Panda Express Restaurant, is a key location for a public building that could become a regional catalyst. The site and the area around it have many assets that have yet to be exploited by any development to date.

#### Historical Background

In the early years of Portland the area north of Burnside from the river to NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue was a forest, like much of the land surrounding Portland. This land, however, was owned by the sailor and early Portland businessman Captain John H. Couch. In 1865 Captain Couch subdivided the property between Ankeny and Kearney Streets and assigned them letters of the alphabet for identification. As industry moved in and the land by the river became more and more valuable the Couch family moved further east, eventually settling with many other well-to-do families on 19<sup>th</sup> street. Because of the wealth of the residents in this neighborhood the blocks were doubled to 200 by 400 feet to provide more generous land plats. It was not until 1891 that the city began assigning specific names to the streets in the Alphabet District. The names remained consistent with the letter of the street that they represented and B Street became Burnside St (Snyder 26-27).

Prior to 1860 there was not a single building on Burnside. By 1862 however the history of saloons and card houses for which Burnside would become notorious for had begun. Portland's largest dock was at the end of B Street and because of this proximity the area quickly developed into a notorious location for saloons, flop houses and gambling rooms. Local residents had such a bad impression of Burnside that no

respectable business with an address on the street could be taken seriously (Snyder 103-104). Burnside's ungraceful reputation still has remnants to this day despite planned improvements by the city. A public project that would show the city's commitment to Upper Burnside would begin to change this reputation.

#### Access To Transit

The success of any public institution depends on its accessibility to both public and private means of transportation. NW Trinity and Burnside easily fulfills this ideal with access to the MAX and buses as well as being located on the major East-West artery of the city. Any project located here would be within two blocks (0.1 miles) of the PGE Park Max stop. This stop is served by both the Red and the Blue lines bringing passengers from the Airport, Gresham, Hillsboro, Beaverton and everywhere in-between. In addition to the MAX, this area of Burnside is along three major bus routes. The 15 bus connects NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave to the Portland City Center, SE Belmont and the Parkrose Transit Center. It is one of the most traveled bus routes in the city and stops one block away on the corner of Burnside and NW 20<sup>th</sup> Ave. This site is also served by the number 18 bus and the number 20 bus that runs on Burnside. The number 20 connects all the way to Mt. Hood Community College outside of Gresham. This connection, although distant, could provide another group of users for a public building on this site (Tri-Met).

Automobile access to the site is also exceptional. Since Captain Couch platted B Street in the mid 1800s it has been the main East-West thoroughfare through the city. Running all the way from Gresham and almost to Beaverton, Burnside is one of the most heavily traveled local streets in the city. Now access to I-405 makes getting here from the Suburbs very feasible. Although transit access is preferred, automobile access is not a disadvantage, but rather an asset for greater connectivity. Any project on this site would be easily accessed from all over the city by car, bus, and light-rail. This is extremely important for a public project that should be accessible to all.

#### A Bridge Between Neighborhoods

1933 W Burnside is located at the intersection of two very important residential neighborhoods in Portland. These are Goose Hollow to the South and the Northwest

District to the North, with West Burnside as the dividing line. Locating a public building on this site would easily set it up to serve these two neighborhoods as well as Hillside, the Pearl District and Downtown districts within a half-mile of the site. As of May 2006 all of these neighborhoods—with the exception of Downtown—operate under the Neighbors West/Northwest neighborhood coalition (“Portland Neighborhoods”). When constructed, the public project will bring together the two adjacent neighborhoods as well as draw patrons from across the city. Because it is located on the seam between neighborhoods the project will serve as a hub for the region.

### Local Demographics

The census of 2000 placed the population of the NW district at 11,455 people. Of those 66% live in one-person households and 26% in two-person households. Furthermore 54% are between the ages of 22 and 39 and 85% are renters (“US Census”). This tells us that we have a young population, a lot of whom live by themselves. Most of these are educated individuals who have graduated from college and are enjoying their mid-late twenties living in the city. In Goose Hollow this pattern is very similar, but with about half the population. This is a population that is very active and always looking for places to interact socially. One place that many have found is the Coffeehouse NW. On a typical morning the Coffeehouse NW—across NW Trinity Pl from the site—is full of patrons sipping the best coffee in Portland and working on their laptops. Owner Adam McGovern confirms this observation. “90% of our business is regulars,” McGovern boasts, “and most are in their mid to late twenties.” Some are artists, musicians, and students, and some have professional careers (McGovern). Any public project located on this site must take into consideration these demographics in designing its services. Most likely this will not be used by a great deal of young children, but rather by young to middle-aged adults. These patrons will be looking for a place for social interaction that they do not get living alone or with one other person.

### Existing Context-

At this moment 1933 W Burnside is occupied by a Panda Express fast food restaurant. On the same block to the East is a Car Wash. Across 19<sup>th</sup> Ave one more lot

to the East is a McDonalds. These three buildings are in stark contrast to the row of buildings lining Burnside between NW Trinity and NW 20<sup>th</sup>. Here we find buildings built in 1908, 1910, and 1911, and all are mixed use buildings with thriving storefronts on the ground level. Then on the block between NW 20<sup>th</sup> and NW 21<sup>st</sup> a Fred Meyer hides behind a parking ramp and an awkward Hollywood Video. The area is clearly in search of some historical or architectural identity. NW 21<sup>st</sup> and NW 23<sup>rd</sup> just north of Burnside have been thriving commercial streets since the 1920s. And the entire NW district has been an upscale and affluent historical residential neighborhood since before that time. Yet by looking at the buildings on Upper Burnside between 16<sup>th</sup> Ave and 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave one would have a hard time understanding that history. Here Burnside is in threat of becoming anonymous, almost suburban in its development. Everything built after the Second World War here has embraced this principle, embraced the automobile. And the pedestrians that can feel at home in so many other parts of the city are ignored.

Currently the site is zoned as Central Commercial (CX) with a design overlay (d). Under these specifications the site is recognized as being within Portland's intense urban core. Development should reflect that through providing a "wide range of uses...to reflect Portland's role as a commercial, cultural and governmental center (Zoning Code)." The code also states that "development is intended to be *very intense* with *high building coverage, large buildings, and buildings placed close together.*" The document continues by requiring a pedestrian friendly street front that is both attractive and safe. The existing development on Burnside between 18<sup>th</sup> Ave and Trinity Pl fails in all these categories. The Panda Express at 1933 W Burnside sits on a lot that is 16,753 square feet, while the building itself is only 2,550sf. Fifteen percent building coverage and eighty-five percent parking does not meet this definition of "high building coverage, large buildings, and buildings placed close together." One could potentially argue that the Panda Express attempts to provide a safe and attractive street front by being sited at the front corner of the lot behind an edge of plantings, but this does not hold true for its neighbor. The Car Wash is in no way an asset to the city. Its function is one hundred percent automobile, and the project makes no attempt to hide that by creating a positive pedestrian experience (Portland Maps).

The design overlay in the zoning code speaks directly to the history and importance of this area within the city. Any project built within a design overlay zone must comply with design guidelines for the district and is subject to a design review. The goal is that “infill development will be compatible with the neighborhood and enhance the area (Zoning Code).” These guidelines were adopted in the most recent version of the Zoning Code, ratified in 1991. The Panda Express Building, built in 1973 was likely not subject to this design overlay, and was thus overlooked by the community design committee. Also, given the state and reputation of W Burnside St at the time I doubt that much concern was given to its commercial development. That fact remains that this site must not only conform with the guidelines set-forth in the zoning code, but that future development embrace the deeper meaning of these guidelines to set a strong example.

#### Plans for the Future-

As stated previously, the Northwest District and Goose Hollow in 2000 had a combined population of just under 17,000 residents. Until its destruction in 2005 a good number of those residents lived in what was known as the Civic Apartments. Built in the 1940s, the Civic was a symbol of many of the problems of Upper Burnside. Originally it was called a “miracle-perfect for children.” But in its final years it was seen as a dangerous, “indefensible” slum. Located across Burnside from 1933 W Burnside, the Civic was a safe-haven for drug dealers, prostitutes, or homeless people looking to get off the streets. According to resident Toney Perez, “people don’t connect, as big as this place is.” Residents rush down the halls from the front door to the safety of their apartments, trying to stay out of danger (Sullivan C03). The story of the Civic Apartments emphasizes the potential for crime within the area if a building is not designed to be secure and the eyes are taken off the street.

The old Civic Apartments were torn down in 2005 to make way for a new development that will prove to bring big changes to Upper Burnside. Maintaining the name “The Civic”, the new development is a “16-story, 261-unit luxury condo tower” complete with underground parking and ground floor retail (Heinz B01). The luxury condo tower will attempt to offset the costs of a six-story, 140-unit affordable housing building dubbed “The Morrison.” All of this, to be completed in 2007, will begin

revitalizing the area. With the introduction of over 500 new residents into the area immediately adjacent to the Panda Express, a public building is essential. The area to the south of Burnside has a history of high-rise residential towers from the 1950s and, with the addition of another, the area is begging for a public presence to show that the city is invested in the area as well. In neighborhoods like the Pearl District a housing boom has happened recently, but the City of Portland has not kept up with this changing residential distribution to provide a public or civic institution in the area.

West Burnside St has been a focus for years with in the Planning Department, and the Office of Transportation. Its importance as a main artery of the city has been clear since the 1950s and plans to humanize Burnside have existed in some capacity ever since. In June 2005 the City of Portland issued the Burnside/Couch Transportation and Urban Plan Phase II Development Study. This document specifically addresses the needs and strategies for East Burnside, Central Burnside, and Upper West Burnside. Upper West Burnside is seen as a Catalyst area because of its proximity to so many neighborhoods. Among these are Downtown, Portland Heights, Willamette Heights, Kings Heights, Northwest, and the Pearl District. Because these are all affluent neighborhoods the redevelopment opportunities along Burnside are very high (“Burnside/Couch Plan” 14).

The plan itself calls for simple improvements of Burnside that would make the street more pedestrian friendly. The traffic lanes would be narrowed to ten feet to reduce the size of the street and make it easier to cross. As a result, the sidewalks could be enlarged to ten feet, two feet larger than they are currently. This extra space could then be planted with street trees to provide a psychological boundary from the busy street. At intersections pavers would be introduced to invite crossing, and many of the odd intersections would be resolved (“Burnside/Couch Plan” 45).

Although these seem like modest improvements their impact on the pedestrian experience along Burnside would be significant. With more pedestrians enjoying the street more eyes are on the street and the area becomes safer. This in-turn helps businesses along Burnside and further encourages development. Pedestrian development fits in with the goal of Portland to be a walkable city and to provide for humans, not automobiles.

## Conclusions

The section of Burnside between NW 16<sup>th</sup> Ave and NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Ave has been historically significant to the City of Portland since it was platted by Captain Couch in the 1860s. Today, however, the area is struggling to find its identity. Amidst so many thriving neighborhoods rich in character this stretch has become anonymous. But the site has so many assets. Connection to transit options, proximity to large public sporting venues, adjacency to neighborhoods, and a rich history make this area a prime location for any new development. With the amount of private development beginning in the area, this site would best be served by a new type of public institution. This new type of institution is the Portland Mediatheque. Combining the functions of an Internet café, a library, an art gallery, and a community center, the Mediatheque will cater to the needs of Portland's young adult population. The corner of NW Trinity Place and W Burnside is one of the most accessible sites within the city, and a civic institution here will jump start the plans to revitalize Upper Burnside. With its rich history this area should not look the way it does, and the city needs to take it back. This project will be an instrument for change in the area and influence the quality of future development projects.

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