

Building to the Code: Tracing the Impact of the Regulatory Environment Through Northwest Portland



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Background

In early 2008, the Con-way Freight Company, a major landowner in Northwest Portland, presented a proposal to the Northwest District Association (NWDA) for the development of the company's property. At present, much of the land is surface parking; however, it is zoned EX, one of the most permissive designations in the code. Seeing their opportunity, Con-way proposed a series of 15 to 25 story residential towers for the sites, which would significantly alter the present urban fabric of small, partial-block, pedestrian-scaled development. The NWDA expressed its alarm at the proposal, and Con-way has since made no further mention of the plan (Korn).

Don Genasci's terminal studio, beginning winter quarter 2009, is charged with developing a counter-proposal for the site to bring fresh thinking to the masterplanning of the northern reaches of the Northwest District (fig. 2). The studio will focus initially on a masterplan for the area bounded by NW Lovejoy Street to the south, NW 23rd to the west, and I-405/US-30 to the east and north. Later, a specific building will be developed.

The focus of this paper is to present the legal framework through which future development is processed, as codified in the Portland Zoning Code (PZC) and the Northwest District Plan (NDP), and determine the ways that they reflect the built identity of the district. This effort is intended to serve as a guide for the development of a master plan in the author's terminal design studio.



Fig. 2: A site map of Northwest Portland.

preceding page: Fig. 1: An office building, a quonset hut, a warehouse, a house, a mixed use building; NW Thurman Street.

The Codes

The Northwest District Plan (NDP) is a document assembled by the Northwest District Association through Portland's Bureau of Planning. It is developed with extensive input from the community and serves to create a vision for the neighborhood over the next twenty years. These goals include creating a "vibrant and livable environment for its residents, businesses, institutions, and visitors," with, "a variety of housing sizes and types," and, "an eclectic inventory of buildings and businesses [that] reflect its history, as well as its adaptability to changes in the economy, technology and social conditions." (NWDP Sec. B) The Plan goes on to document the variety of sub-districts within the NWD, each with its own "Desired Characteristics and Traditions." These sub-areas, loosely defined on Fig. 3, are the Nob Hill Residential Areas, the Streetcar Main Streets, the Western Residential Areas and the Heights, the Eastern Edge, the Transition Area, the Vaughn Corridor, and the Upshur Warehouse District. (NWDP Sec. C) Despite the diversity of use in the district, several themes rise to the surface as qualities of the entire district: activity/vibrancy, walkability, diversity, and a fine-grained development pattern (typically operating on a 50' module or less). Vibrancy is promoted by encouraging active ground floor uses and street edges. Walkability is related to Portland's grid, but also has to do with maintaining an active environment at the street. Diversity is maintained by continuing to allow a wide variety of uses, types, and scales of building. The fine-grained urban pattern is maintained by breaking up building mass with setbacks or other architectural means.

The Portland Zoning Code attempts to put the desires expressed in the NWDP into a legal format to guide development in the district. The first section of the chapter on the Northwest District in the Portland Zoning Code (PZC) states the purpose of the code:

The regulations of this chapter:

- Promote housing and mixed-use development;
- Address the area's parking scarcity while discouraging auto-oriented developments;
- Enhance the pedestrian experience;
- Encourage a mixed-use environment, with transit supportive levels of development and a concentration of commercial uses, along main streets and the streetcar alignment;
- and
- Minimize conflicts between the mixed-uses of the plan district and the industrial uses of the adjacent Guild's Lake Industrial Sanctuary. (PZC 33.562.010)

In addition to promoting these goals, the PZC also regulates residential and commercial uses in specific areas, limits parking, defines allowed and conditional uses, building heights, and floor area ratios (FAR). Most of these regulations depend on the base zone of a property. In the NWD, the majority of property is zoned High Density Residential (RH), Central Employment (EX), Mixed Commercial/Residential (CM), and Storefront Commercial (CS). Toward the West Hills, the zoning transitions to almost entirely single-family residential, from R2 down to R5 and R7. Generally speaking, areas along the main commercial streets are designated as one of the commercial zones; just behind them on the quieter side streets are residential zones. Areas closer to the freeways are zoned as Central Employment, and in areas north of I-405/US-30 there is a collection of warehouses zoned General Industrial 1 (IG1). At a finer scale; however, the boundary between each of the zones gerrymanders a great deal, cutting through the middle of some blocks, seemingly at random. One can assume that the intent when the zoning maps were created was to both guide future development but also to reflect what was already built.

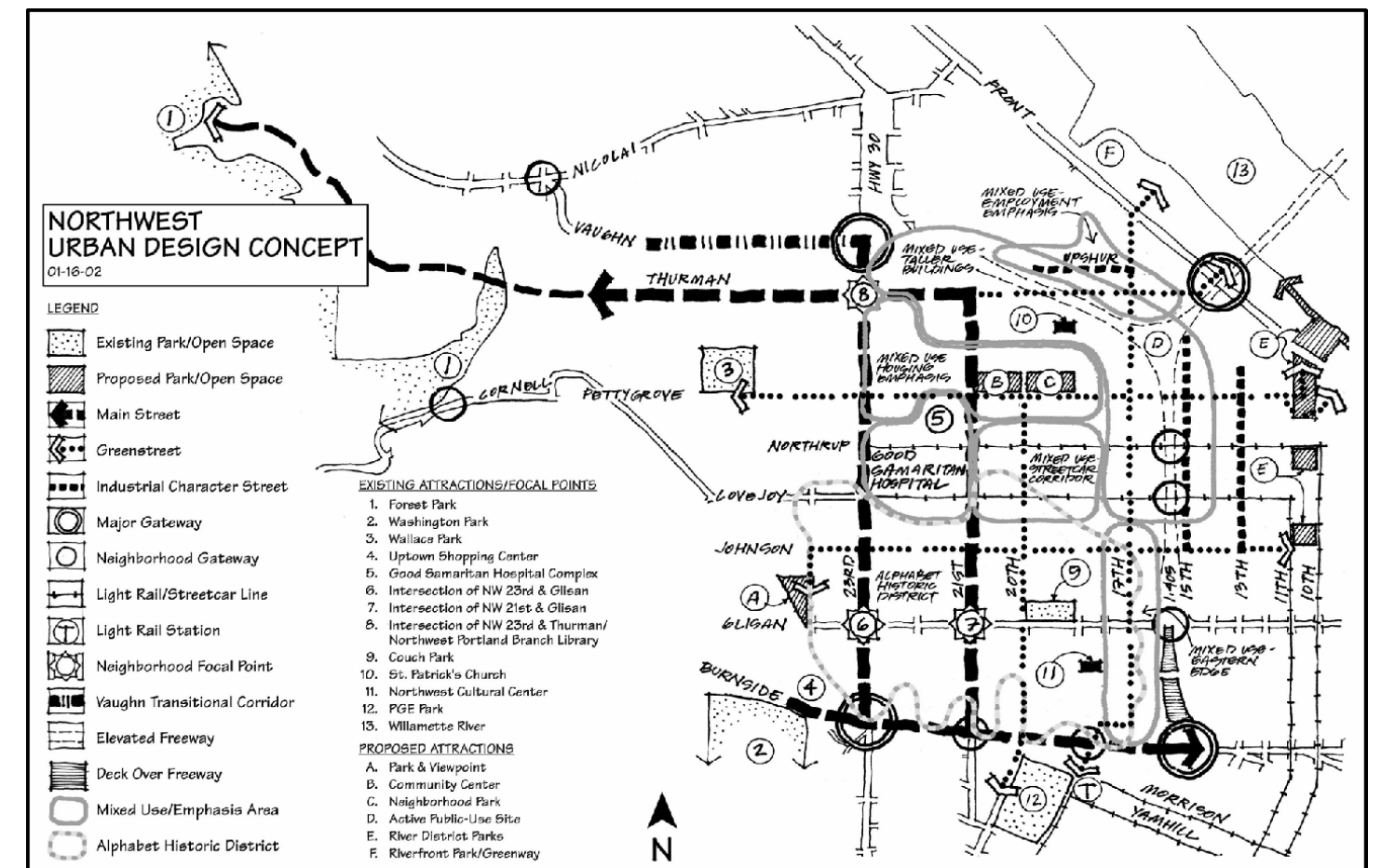


Fig. 3: Northwest Urban Design Concept (NWDP C-2)

The Sub-Areas

Streetcar Main Streets:

Along the historic streetcar routes (NW 21st and 23rd) are the primary shopping streets in the area. By and large, these are zoned for Storefront Commercial, and are intended to be pedestrian-oriented dense retail areas; in particular those that are located in established neighborhoods. (PZC 33.130.30.F) The character along NW 23rd Avenue is especially varied, with a wide variety of structures adapted to retail uses, from historic houses to warehouses to purpose-built structures, as seen in the photomontage from Quimby to Overton Streets (fig. 4). Though some of the historic houses might have problems being permitted due to other factors in the code (accessibility, for instance), the streetscape seems to be consistent with the values codified in the NWDP and PZC.



Fig. 4: Looking east across NW 23rd Avenue between Quimby and Overton

Vaughn Corridor

The Vaughn Corridor sub-area, between Thurman and Vaughn on NW 24th is an interesting scenario where existing mid-block single-family homes are zoned to a Mixed Commercial/Residential zone, while either end of the block is zoned CS (fig. 5). Buildings in the CM zone are intended to contain local-scaled retail or office uses on the ground floor with residential uses above. These small houses do not appear to have changed their use as of yet, but the Storefront Commercial zoned buildings on either end meet the intent of the codes. It is unclear how the rusty metal shed is permitted, however. Besides the shed, buildings here maintain a relationship to the street and do not exceed 50' in width, in keeping with the NWDP plan for a fine-grained pattern.



Fig. 5: Looking east across NW 24th Avenue between Vaughn and Thurman

Nob Hill Residential Areas

On Johnson Street between NW 23rd and 21st Streets (fig. 6) there are a variety of scales of residential development, typical of the Nob Hill Residential Areas. RH zones are meant to encourage a range of housing types, including high-rise. (PZC 33.120.030.D) In other parts of the NWD there are a few high-rise developments, though they are still the exception. In large part, this scale of development could be said to typify the residential areas of the neighborhood, and certainly conforms to the NWDP goals. In the few locations where a high rise has been built, the buildings often step back from the street edge to provide parking. This disruption in the fabric further separates these buildings from their context.



Fig. 6: Looking north across NW Johnson Street between 23rd & 22nd (top) & between 22nd & 21st (bottom).

Western Residential Areas & the Heights

In an R2 zoned portion of the Western Residential Areas, single-family homes are mixed in with small-scaled multifamily buildings of a variety of typologies. In the photomontage of Raleigh Street from 25th to 24th Avenues, small apartment buildings mix with single-family houses and courtyard housing developments (fig. 7). This clearly matches the intent in the NWDP and PZC.



Fig. 7: Looking north across NW Raleigh Street between 25th & 24th.

Eastern Edge

In the EX zone, the urban and architectural character varies widely from one area to another, and from the core of the district toward the fringes. The EX zone is mixed-use and “is intended for areas in the center of the City that have predominantly industrial type development.” (PZC 33.140.030.B) Many uses are allowed outright without a conditional use permit, from household living to vehicle repair to even agriculture. (PZC Table 140-1) Due to the lack of restrictions, the built fabric in this zone can vary greatly. For instance, the Pearl District is largely zoned EX, as are portions of the Central Eastside. This varied character of development is clearly already in existence on the eastern edges of the district, adjacent to I-405. As shown in a photomontage of Johnson Street from 16th to 19th Avenues (fig. 8), a mix of historic housing, surface parking, small-scale warehouses, and commercial office space characterize this zone. While more height and F.A.R. is available, this sort of development is still desired for the Eastern Edge sub-area in the NWDP and allowable in the PZC.



Fig. 8: Looking north across NW Johnson Street between 19th & 16th.

Transition Area

Further north, in the Transition Area, buildings in the EX zone increase in scale with the increase in the block length, as seen in the photomontage of Pettygrove Street from 19th to 21st Avenues (fig. 9). A mix of buildings are present, including a pet hospital, some townhomes, and a warehouse. Here, as with the EX zones further south, more height and F.A.R. is available, but the characteristics called for in the NWDP promote integrating new development into the existing fabric.



Fig. 9: Looking north across NW Pettygrove Street between 21st & 20th (top) & between 20th & 19th (bottom).

Upshur Warehouse District

The fine-grained scale typical in the majority of the NWD finally breaks down in the Upshur Warehouse District, zoned General Industrial (IG1), which is located entirely north of the I-405/US-30 interchange. In the photomontage of Upshur Street from NW 18th to 20th Avenues (fig. 10), the pedestrian environment has all but disappeared, replaced by loading docks and gravel sidewalks. Interestingly, the NWDP suggests the preservation of these elements despite the fact that they do not occur elsewhere in the district.



Fig. 10: Looking north across NW Upshur Street between 20th & 18th.

Conclusion

Despite the diversity of uses, scales, and types of construction, the NWDP and PZC seem to accurately reflect the built environment in the Northwest District as it currently exists. By giving equal weight to the myriad uses already in place when the plan was originally adopted, and by creating zoning boundaries that reinforce the traditional layout of the district, a walkable, diverse environment is achieved. As demands for greater density in the neighborhood increase, it will be interesting to see whether the neighborhood will continue to foster such a diverse built environment.

Bibliography

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Korn, Peter. "Con-way Plots Towers, a Canal Street." [Portland Tribune](#) 15 Jan 2008 <www.portlandtribune.com/news/print_story.php?story_id120035161860196100>.



Fig. 11: The Con-way site