

Discovering Public Space:

An Investigation of Portland's Civic Realm

Irie Searcy
Architectural Programming Seminar
J. Von Barga, Fall 2008
December 8, 2008

Discovering Public Space:

An Investigation of Portland's Civic Realm

Thesis Statement

A functional public environment can be achieved through a set of relevant adjacencies and “smooth” transitions.

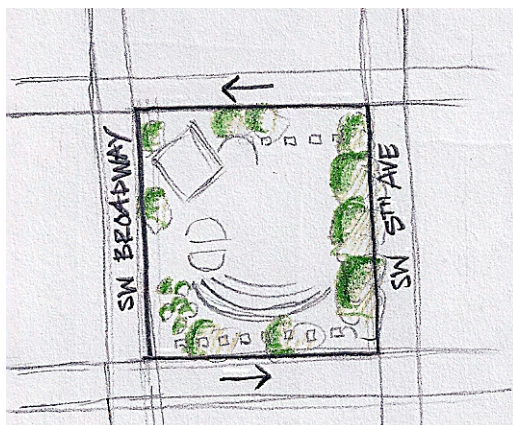
Introduction

Public spaces are a necessity within our cities. Not only do they improve our community fabric, but they bring individuals from different sectors of the city together in one place. Open spaces serve a variety of functions to the public. They are venues for concerts, lectures and rallies. They are places to rest during the day, and environments in which to meet, or simply to pass through from time to time.

After evaluating a few examples of open spaces near civic districts in Portland, Oregon, I determined that a set of principles could be derived to define what makes a public space successful. A few key components to building successful public spaces are: overall adaptability, proximity to services, and components within the public area such as places to sit, variation in scale and so forth.

Pioneer Courthouse Square

Pioneer courthouse square is located in the heart of downtown Portland. It has been a public living room to the city center for over twenty years. The square supports a multitude of downtown foot traffic on a daily basis, whether it is commuters,

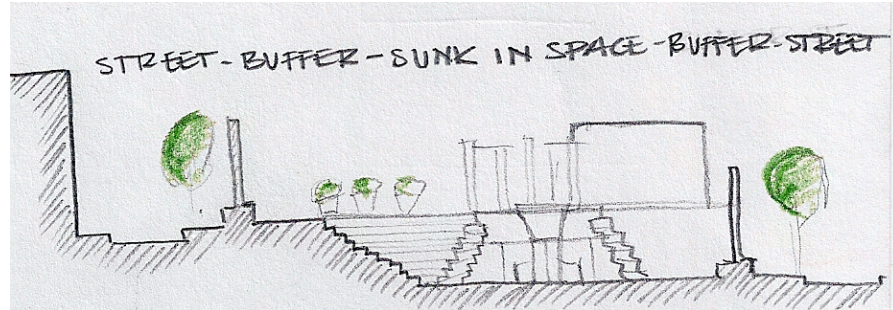


shoppers, or citizens gathering to take a break during the day. Due to its central location, this public plaza benefits from public transportation on the east, north and south sides. There is street and structured parking within walking distance.

Within the square itself there is a small Starbucks coffee shop and a visitor's information center where passers by can receive maps and

transit information.

There are a variety of places to sit and no two corners of the plaza are alike. One interesting fact is that



the amphitheater creates a number of different levels and niches within the square. In addition to this, the large amphitheater is surrounded on all sides by a set of transition zones. Coverings, stairwells, and half walls begin to define many sub sections. Both the west and north edges are framed with commercial storefronts, not to mention numerous shops only a quick MAX ride away, or within walking distance.

The city invited the public to pay a minimal fee to have their names etched in a number of the plaza bricks. The money raised contributed to construction costs. This gave the public a chance to have a sense of ownership of the square. The plaza has other inviting



components including but not limited to: fixed tables, chairs, fallen columns (which you can sit on), permanent chess boards, a wrought iron gate on the east edge from a nineteenth century hotel, a J. Steward Johnson sculpture *Man Holding Umbrella*, and more.

On average it costs \$75,000 annually to keep the square secure and active. Public events are what draw people to Pioneer Square. They confirm the relationship between the public and the environment.

South Park Blocks

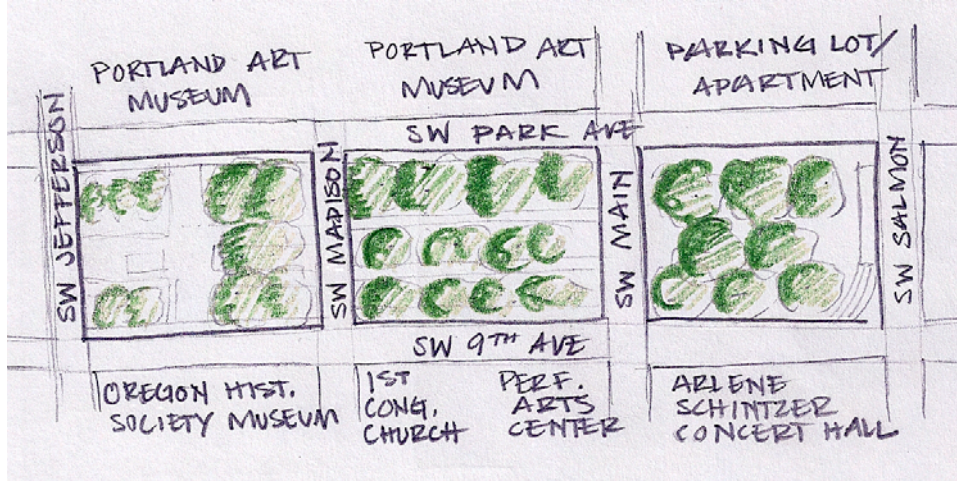
From SW Salmon to SW Jefferson on SW Park Avenue

The south park blocks are framed with a combination of civic buildings, commercial retailers/restaurants, and apartment complexes. There are a total of six civic buildings framing these blocks that consist of: Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland Center for the Performing Arts, The Portland



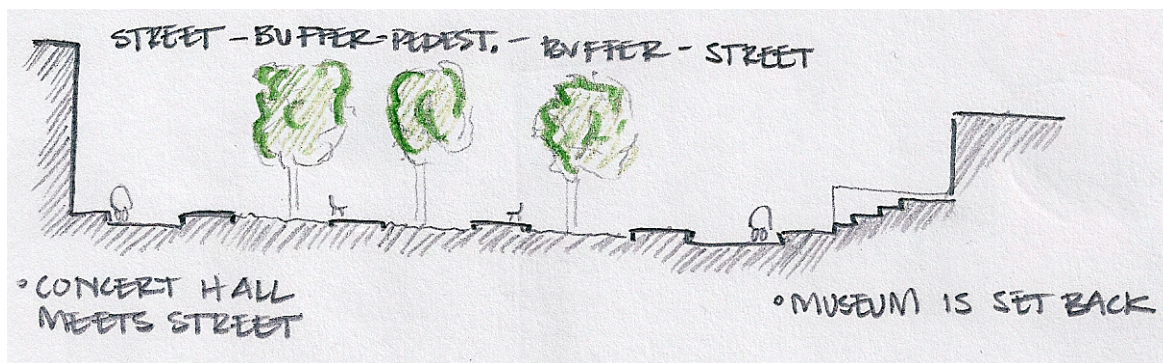
Art Museum, The Portland Art Museum MARK BUILDING, First Congregational Church, and the Oregon Historical Society Museum.

The pedestrian paths are set back from the street and buffered by a canopy of trees and on street parking. The three-block section evaluated has minor traffic on Park Avenue with slightly heavier traffic on the SW Jefferson and SW Salmon edges. The park space is separated from the street by a sidewalk on both sides and a row of trees. Framing the



pedestrian paths are park benches, which face an interior court of trees, or on other blocks, statues and small floral gardens.

The South Park Blocks are within walking distance of the downtown shopping district, structured and on street parking. The variety of buildings framing the blocks provides the opportunity for many different experiences within the park space.



The activity within the blocks varies throughout the week as well. On weekends the farmer's market congregates farther south, in front of the Portland State University buildings. Pedestrian traffic increases at these times.

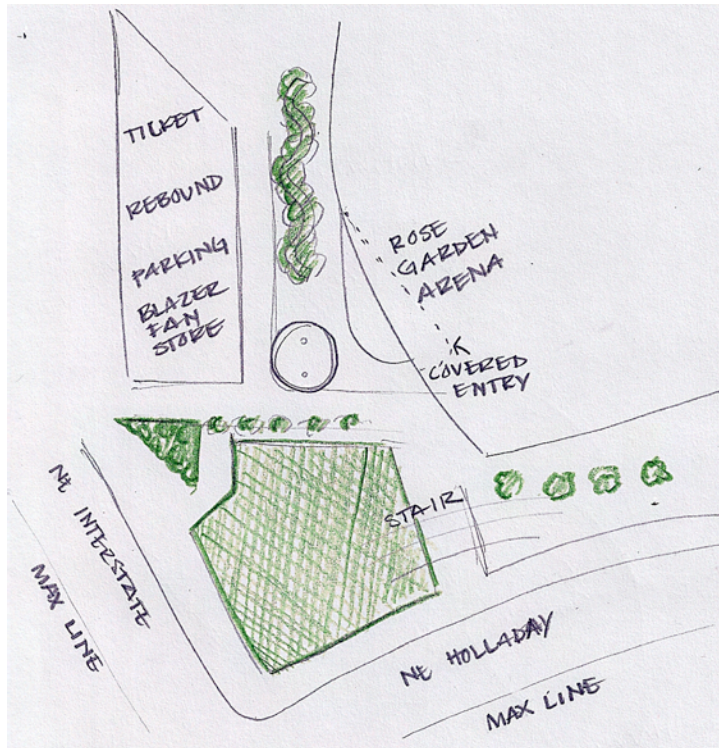
The success of the South Park Blocks is in their adaptability to the surrounding context and to the buffer zones that are created between the street and pedestrian paths.

Additionally, the park blocks draw a lot of people to them as a nice place for a leisurely walk. This is due to their convenient location to the downtown area and popular civic structures.

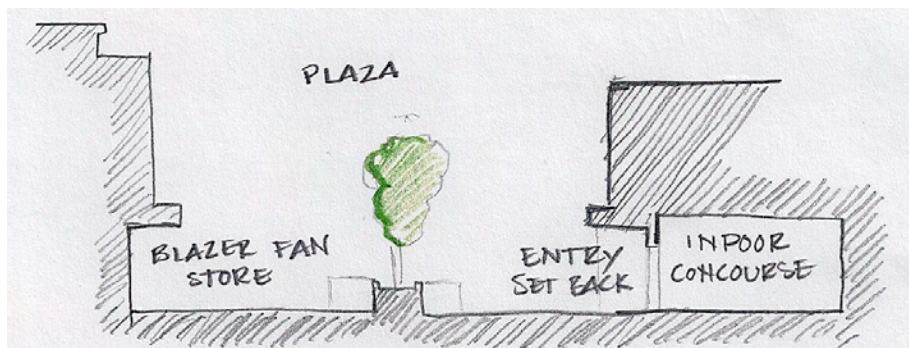
Rose Garden Arena & Memorial Coliseum

Section Between the Rose Garden Arena, Rebound Sports Clinic and Event Ticket Office

The Rose Garden Arena is located just over the Steel Bridge, in Northeast Portland. Public transit lines run on the west and south edges. The I-5 freeway is to the east and the connection of NE Broadway and NE Weidler streets are located on the north end.



There are three parking structures that overshadow the arenas on two edges. While they obscure the view of the arena from the surrounding streets, they create a sheltered environment for those entering and leaving the venue. However, the major roads that frame this site increase its disconnection from the surrounding context.



The small plaza evaluated is located on the south end of the site. It is framed by the Rose Quarter Arena to the east, and the Rebound Sports Clinic and ticket office to the west. A thin serpentine raised planter houses a few trees and divides this

space in half. On the south end of the plaza is a small fountain, circular in form, and surrounded by park benches. The middle of the fountain is dedicated to a large torch that is lit on event days. The entrances to the buildings on either end are highlighted by protruding forms and set back doorways.

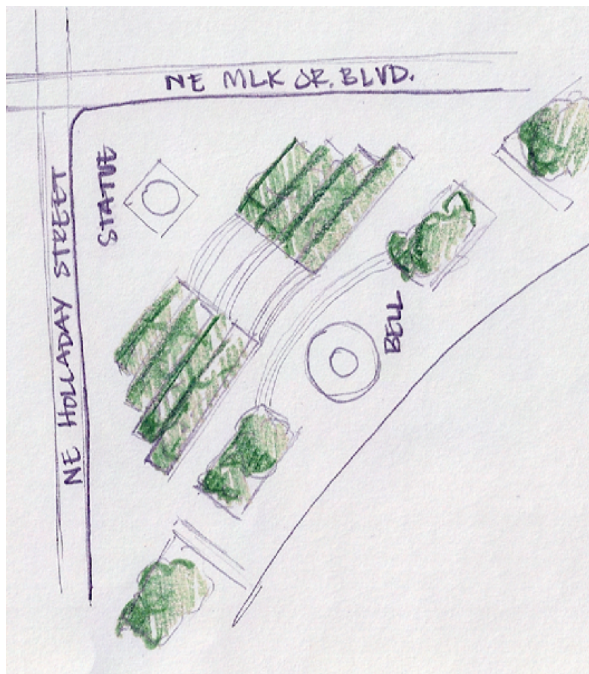
With the exception of the Blazer fan store, ticket office and the Rebound Sports Clinic not much is available to draw the public to this plaza. A majority of the public program is located within the buildings that close down as soon as events are over. On business days, the plaza is bursting with activity. However, on non-event days it is a dead zone mostly used as a pedestrian thoroughway to reach the public transit lines.

Public draw is lacking. The addition of restaurants and other services could conceivably invigorate the area.

Portland Convention Center

Northeast Corner

The Portland Convention Center is located just one block away from the Rose Garden Arena. The building is framed by the light rail to the north and the I-84 freeway to the south. The west side of the building, adjacent to the I-5 freeway, is primarily dedicated to services and a parking garage entrance.



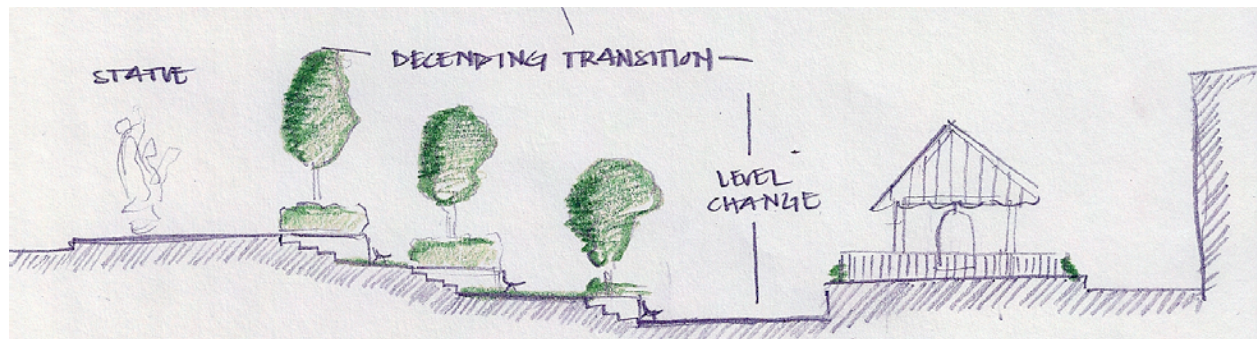
On the east side, along Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., the structure is set back quite a way from the street, protecting visitors from the heavy traffic.

The Convention Center acts as a way-finding device for the city. Its two glass towers can be seen from a great distance. The entire public program is located within the building with the exception of a small outdoor garden area. This outdoor room, located in the northeast corner of the site, is set back



from the street and into the ground. There are stairs leading into the space from both the street and building edges. Within the space are park benches; in addition the steps themselves can be used as seating.

Landscaped planters with trees and shrubs act as a buffer between the street and the plaza. Due to the constant activity within the Convention Center it is plausible to see this space being used during event breaks. Though the site is located on a heavy transit line, the changes in plane give it a nice feel that separate it from the street activity.



This plaza is not a destination space, however, the Convention Center has the traffic volume to support it. A change that could improve the effectiveness of the space on a site similar to this could be through an interior courtyard instead.

Design Principles for Public Space

All of these locations were either directly connected to a transit line, or in close proximity to parking. The issues that impacted the sites the most were in regards to the amount of business that supported these spaces. Without the supplementation of restaurants and retailers bringing people to a public outdoor space is difficult. The building edges play a large role in shaping outdoor rooms, but, it is important that the space is also adaptable to fulfill a variety of functions.

The key things that were either strong components to, or lacking in these public areas were as follows:

Set Back From the Street

It is important that the pedestrian does not feel that they need to hug the sidewalk edge. The ability to enter the public space gradually adds to the anticipation of occupying

the space. Slow transitions give the outdoor rooms a sense of definition. In the case of the South Park Blocks the trees and grassy areas between the sidewalk and pedestrian paths create a buffer from traffic on Park Avenue.

A Sense of Ownership Within the Space

The public likes to claim ownership of communal space. Value and pride are attached to projects that people feel they contributed to. In the instance of Pioneer Square the purchase of a brick gave the donor an opportunity to be a part of this public plaza forever.

Close Proximity to Major Transit Line/Parking

Can one get to the space with little to no effort? How convenient is it? Parking structures on site make things extremely easy, but they can also detract from the design if location is not well thought out.

Relationship to Adjacent Structures and Streets/Purpose On A Pedestrian Scale

What factors bring the occupant to this space and what does it have to offer them? Retail shops and restaurants are the biggest draw to public space. Open space adjacent to public structures should provide a variety of seating and variations in scale.

Variation of Spatial Qualities

Are there changes in plane and a division of spaces that help to define this space? How can the space change and adapt to meet needs over time? Open space tends to die if it cannot change to meet future growth. Adaptability of spatial relations is hugely important. The factors effecting public space are not easily defined. When scale and adjacencies are not taken into consideration a public space is less successful. Supporting components are needed to supplement the activities taking place within the park, plaza, amphitheater, garden, etc.

These components are some of the main factors that affect the spaces we occupy from day to day. Though there is no one set of rules, it is important for a designer to recognize what aspects of a site they have control over. The issues associated with unsuccessful open space are often rectifiable through the effective use of adjacencies and spatial relationships.

Bibliography

Whitman, Karen. Nurturing Public Space. Arcade, 2001 Winter, v. 20, n. 2, p. 21

Leccese, Michael. Portland's Pioneer Square. Landscape Architecture, 1980 August, v. 79, n. 6, p. 61