

Industrial Adaptive Reuse for Riverside Grain Distribution Facility in Portland Oregon

Portland has earned worldwide recognition as one of the most sustainable cities in the US. This is a reputation that has been earned through its achievements in city planning, urban infill projects, LEED compliant construction, and adaptive reuse of a variety of building types. My appreciation for all of these is what brought me from Ohio to Portland four years ago. In the subsequent time I have had the pleasure of being able to witness, and at times be a part of, the implementation of those achievements. That experience has led me to have an even greater appreciation for Portland, but also the knowledge that Portland can be used as a continuing example for other American cities.

Having lived or worked in cities like Cleveland, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and several others, I was able to see a commonality among them: an industrial past that left the cities divided in the wake of an ever increasing departure of said industries. This was another reason that I looked to Portland several years ago. Portland's burgeoning success with the once neglected Pearl district has been a roadmap for the reuse of warehouse districts throughout the country. One thing that Portland has not yet faced in great abundance, but likely will in the not-too-distant future, is the question of what to do with uninhabited industrial-use facilities the likes of which are much more common place in any of the aforementioned cities.

The first inclination would likely be to tear them down and replace them with modern structures. This, however, would be doing the history of any city a great disservice and would forever remove an important character of the city. The better approach, the sustainable approach, the Portland approach, would be to reuse these facilities: to maintain as much of their unique character as possible while designing them to be viable 21st century occupied structures. The task that I am proposing to undertake is to do just that with one of Portland's own industrial facilities, the CLD Pacific Grain facility located on the east bank of the Willamette River north of the Steel Bridge.

This grain loading facility is the ideal location to study for a proposed reuse of an industrial site. It currently serves as the largest and most public symbol of one of Portland's initial reasons for being founded: as a port of harbor for various goods. It is located across from the heart of downtown Portland and adjacent to the Rose Quarter.

Portland's regional light rail transportation, the MAX, has its only Willamette River crossing in the shadow of the grain storage silos. Countless Portlanders pass this site to and from work, sporting events, concerts, water-front events, etc. without a passing thought about it.

The reason for this lack of attention is that while the facility is an important structure for the city, it also serves to divide the city and cut off one of the most public areas of the city from its greatest natural resource, the river. At some point in time CLD Pacific Grain will close this facility due to market demand or the need for a newer facility elsewhere; when that happens the city of Portland will have a unique opportunity to reconnect the west side of the river to the east side of the river and connect the Rose Quarter to the Willamette River through this great symbol of Portland's reason for existence. When that happens, Portland has the opportunity to create yet another sustainable landmark that can be used as an example to other cities for how to deal with their uninhabited industrial-use facilities.

The question then becomes: in order to achieve the above goals, what use or uses can best be found for this landmark? To answer that question a study of the surrounding city needed to be done. Not only did this study have to include existing infrastructure, uses, businesses, housing, etc., but it also had to include potential future plans and projects. A complete study would also include any potential plans already visited upon the selected site by other parties.

To study the existing infrastructure I created two site diagrams (Page 6). Figure 1 shows the existing public, private, and pedestrian traffic patterns as well as the intended connections mentioned earlier. Figure 2 shows detailed use studies of the surrounding area. Large public gathering areas, hotels, small commercial gathering areas, and multifamily housing are specifically noted and underlaid by the current zoning patterns for the City of Portland. For this figure it is important to note that the blue dots include restaurants, cafés, taverns, and eateries. The yellow dots include apartments, condominiums, and senior living facilities. Only small local-drawing convenience stores operate within the studied area, so retail was consequently omitted from this study. Other uses were not included in the specific study because they were not deemed to provide the 24-hour activity draw being sought for the project.

To study the potential future plans and projects for the area, I conducted phone interviews of individuals from the Portland Development Commission, the Portland Bureau of Planning, and the Rose Quarter Director of Public Services, as well as searched recent local publications.

Through this research I was able to determine that the only foreseeable project that could significantly alter the face of the Rose Quarter would deal with the reuse or replacement of the Memorial Coliseum. According the Willamette Weekly, “mayor-to-be Sam Adams will push for any new minor league ballpark to be in the Rose Quarter (possibly where Memorial Coliseum is now)” (#34.52). Prior to this mentioning, any discussion of a new minor league ballpark surrounded the Lents neighborhood in southeast Portland. When discussing this possibility with Irene Bowers of the Portland Development Commission, however, she was under the impression that any minor league ballpark would still be located in the Lents neighborhood. This impression was also confirmed by Kristen Bells with the Portland Bureau of Planning. Both Irene and Kristen did hint, however, that there have been plans to revisit the use of the Memorial Coliseum, but neither had any forthcoming information beyond that.

Moving outside the immediate Rose Quarter, there are other notable projects that may have an impact on the area. According the Portland Business Journal, a new four-star, 600-room Westin hotel could be built one block east of the Oregon Convention Center (July 1, 2008); this hotel would be the largest and likely most prestigious to join the ranks of the seven other hospitality brands in the immediate area. This large concentration of hotel presence and influence of the Oregon Convention Center and MAX lines provide an obvious intent to appeal to and attract visitors to the area.

Across from the convention center, the Portland Development Commission has two potential projects slated along the MAX lines. The 100 NE Multnomah project is a potential office tower that could also house ground floor retail and upper floor residential uses (http://www.pdc.us/ura/convention_center/100-ne-multnomah.asp). The Cosmopolitan project is under consideration as a condominium tower with ground floor commercial space (http://www.pdc.us/ura/convention_center/block45.asp).

North of the Rose Quarter, the Portland Daily Journal of Commerce recently reported that three mixed-use projects could soon be under development along the NE

Broadway and NE Weidler streets (May 7, 2008). These projects seem to be in response to the city's plans to extend the Portland Streetcar lines from the Pearl District up the Broadway Bridge and along that Broadway bridgehead couplet. Judging by Portland's development history then, it can be assumed that similar development and growth in that immediate vicinity will take place in response to the new streetcar's presence and existing projects that have already broken ground.

It's clear from these studies that there is a vision for the Rose Quarter and its neighbors. The increase in development around the Oregon Convention Center reflects an honest attempt to bolster convention attraction and with it some degree of tourism. Bringing the Portland Streetcar in along NE Broadway and NE Weidler and encouraging mixed-use development to support that move will bring in permanent residents and business to the area.

How then can an adaptive reuse of the CLD Pacific Grain facility best enhance this vision to draw people into the city as well as create an important connection between the disparate sides of the Willamette River and reconnect the Rose Quarter to the river? Any project that would be located here would have to be a public project, something to enhance the visibility and attraction of downtown Portland not just to Oregonians but also to visitors from outside the state. Simply converting the grain silos into apartments or condominiums, then, does not seem like an appropriate response. Likewise a straight conversion into a hotel does not seem wise, but there may be room for some aspect of the project to take on this program. The lack of current retail development in the studied area proves that there could easily be room for this type of programmatic function.

Contrasting the number of restaurants and taverns between the east side of the river and the west side of the river, this type of program could easily be used to bring balance and connection to the Rose Quarter. There is also a noticeable lack of humanities-related functions in the studied area; a programmatic function that related to this concern could be very successful at attracting visitors and bolstering the appeal to various conventions for the Oregon Convention Center. It is also possible that the program for this project could absorb some convention or gathering elements. Given this direction, feasibility studies, detailed programmatic investigation, and conceptual design would be the next steps before schematic design and design development.

Works Cited

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