Pioneering the Square

"We planned, it worked." So goes the slogan coined in the '90s to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Portland's groundbreaking 1972 Downtown Plan.

For the 25th birthday of Pioneer Courthouse Square, we might consider a different slogan: "We dreamed, we argued, we planned, we fought, and, finally, we built—and then it worked."

Today we enjoy the square as "Portland's living room." From festivals to protests, it hosts more than 300 events each year, drawing nearly 10 million visitors. It is synonymous with Portland's welcoming ethos and celebrated by urban designers and public-space enthusiasts worldwide. It has won everything from a 1981 Progressive Architecture magazine award for its design in the 2008 American Planning Association designation as one of the “Great Public Spaces in America.”

But from its first flicker as a light bulb over Mayor Terry Shrumk's head to its dedication in 1984, the square endured over two decades of fits and starts. It might just as easily have been an 800-car parking garage, a glass aviary, or an example of the awkward footnote in architectural history known as Deconstructivism. The city's most powerful business leaders, along with its park commissioner and later mayor, Frank Ivancie, repeatedly tried to kill the project. Yet the vision of a major public space in the center of downtown somehow endured to become Portland's greatest testament to the strength and endurance of its civic will.

This is the story of how the square came to be.
The land known as Pioneer Courthouse Square began its urban life in the 1800s. In 1848, Rebecca Pierson bought the plot for $1.50 per acre. Until 1883, the courthouse was the center of activity, with the market held on Sunday mornings. The original courthouse was replaced in 1894 with the current building, designed by architect D.H. Burnham, who also designed the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. The new courthouse was dedicated in 1895, and it remains a symbol of Portland's history and growth.

When strolling along the streets of Pioneer Courthouse Square, it's easy to imagine the bustling energy of the past. From the original courthouse to the present-day buildings, this area has been the hub of Portland's life for over a century. The square is not just a physical space, but a historical marker of Portland's progress and development.
In 1961, Mayor Terry Schrunk directed the Portland Planning Department to study the site as a “focal point for downtown” and “a symbol of renewal.” City planner Lloyd Keefe hired a young architect named Robert Frasca to draw three schemes for the courthouse and the adjacent parking lot that had replaced the Portland Hotel. But the city’s private business interests had other ideas for the block. The recently built East Side Mall, Lloyd Center, was drawing customers away from downtown. Murmurs of what would become Washington Square in Tigard deepened retailers’ worries. In 1969, the Tacoma-based Briston Corporation banded with Meier & Frank to propose a solution: an 800-car parking garage on the block.

The Planning Department’s first scheme turned the courthouse into a museum with skyway to the adjacent parking lot.

Scheme two redeveloped the courthouse’s original core and redeveloping the Meier & Frank parking garage as an underground facility with a “park plaza” on top.

Scheme three demolished both the Meier & Frank garage and Pioneer Courthouse (the federal government had tried unsuccessfully to sell the property before) and redeveloping both blocks into a 1,000-car underground parking facility topped by a two-block public plaza.

This two-block plaza is the first-known vision of what would become Pioneer Courthouse Square. The design called for an ice rink, a band shell, and a number of pavilions ranging from showcases of Oregon wood products to a garden symbolizing Portland’s sister-city relationship with Sapporo, Japan.

In response to the Briston Corporation and Meier & Frank’s proposed garage, Keefe directed his staff to build model of the garage for the Portland Planning Commission’s review of the proposal. Further armed with studies showing the garage’s impact on traffic and air quality. In January, 1970, the proposal met with the commission and only to vote down the garage unanimously, but to endorse the idea that the block should be public space. The developers appealed to Portland City Council. But political change was already in the air, and discussions began between the business community, urban advocates, and city council about a more comprehensive look at the central city. The garage proposal — and the city planners’ model — can now be seen as a tipping point that led to the 1972 Downtown Plan and the beginning of Portland’s renaissance.
The importance of the ’72 Downtown Plan to the Portland we know now cannot be overstated. Portland’s general postwar suburbanization, the bifurcation of the central city by I-405, and Lloyd Center mall’s success were all triggering the same patterns of disinvestment in Portland’s downtown that were draining the social and economic life of most major American cities. Civic activists and business leaders each imagined potential fixes: new shopping centers and parking garages to open space. But Portland’s downtown plan brought all parties to the table with the shared goal of stemming middle-class flight from the city and bolstering the city’s tax base to better fund its schools.

Longtime urban planner and City Commissioner Lloyd Anderson, business leaders like Bill Roberts, citizen activist Dean Gisvold, and urban planner Robert Baldwin led the planning with technical work done by the engineering firm CH2M/Hill. They wove simple, clear goals — “provide a strong transit system,” “maintain a system of short-term parking,” “create a pleasant shopping environment,” and “encourage renovation of rundown retail facilities” — into a framework of public investments in transportation, parking garages, and new open space that, in turn, triggered new private investment.

For the heart of downtown — at the crossroads of a proposed new transit mall and an East Side light-rail line — the plan identified Goal J: “Develop a major city square in the center of the Downtown retail core to provide breathing space, a focal point, and a gathering place.”
Pioneering the square

Variations on a Theme

In 1975, Mayor Neil Goldschmidt began negotiating deals with major retailers (among them the Seattle-based Nordstrom company) that hinged on city initiatives to build 1,300 parking spaces in two garages on the east and west edges of the newly defined retail core and turn the Meier & Frank parking lot into a major public square. Goldschmidt succeeded in netting a $1.2 million grant from the federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to help purchase the land and build the square. But soon a battle emerged over what the future square would be: Open public space or a covered attraction with a ticketed entry?

Over the next five years, the city's planning department, the Portland Development Commission, and private business interests hired a variety of designers to draw many possible versions of the square... (Among them was Willard Martin, the square's eventual architect.) Downtown property owner Bill Roberts and the Citizen Advisory Committee ultimately rallied behind a conservatory scheme that came to be known as the "birdcage."

In 1978, the city hired local architect Donald Stastny to develop recommendations for the block's design process. Stastny proposed — and eventually oversaw — Portland's first national design competition. The 162 firms who applied included many then or soon-to-be internationally renowned designers (among them James Polshek, Michael Graves, Moshe Safdie, Robert Stern, Laurie Olin, and John Jerde.) The jury — Pauline Anderson, a member of the Pioneer Courthouse Square Citizens Advisory Committee; Sumner Sharpe, a member of the American Planning Association; John Rian, a downtown restaurant owner; George McMath, AIA, a prominent local architect; and M. Paul Friedberg, a noted New York architect/landscape architect/urban designer — selected 10 finalists to interview, ultimately inviting 5 people to submit proposals.
Unable to resolve the competing hopes for the square’s future, the Portland Development Commission and competition manager Don Stasny left the competition’s guidelines open. The competing designers’ charge: Create an “all-weather, all-season complex to fulfill ‘cultural, recreational, open space and shelter needs’ for downtown populations.”

**Peter Eisenman and Jacquelin T. Robertson, New York City**

WHERE: One of the first New York firms to work as architects, Eisenman and Robertson have been involved in the development of a number of innovative designs, including the proposal for a new bus terminal in Portland. They have proposed a series of public spaces that are designed to be used by the public in all weather conditions. The design includes a large central space with a variety of seating areas and a series of smaller, more intimate spaces.

**Lawrence Halprin and Charles Moore (Joint Venture), San Francisco and Los Angeles**

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WHERE THEY ARE NOW: The idea of a bus terminal complex has been abandoned in favor of smaller, more flexible spaces that can be used for a variety of purposes. The Portland project has been replaced by a series of smaller, more flexible spaces that can be used for a variety of purposes.
Pioneering the Square

The Competition

The Concept: Designed to conquer "today's most important of the 'architectural arts': the creation of the strong mass." The concept featured a large open courtyard flanked by a glass wall opposite of the main entrance. The north and south facing aspects were open to the sky, and the east and west sides were finished.

The Evaluation: The jury appreciated the idea of an open court as the design solution, but found the small-sized spaces to be too small for comfortable use. The structure was well thought out in this respect, but the jury felt it was not as strong as the concept.

Why They Are Now: Machado and Silvetti have been involved in various competitions and projects in the U.S., including the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. They have also been involved in various competitions in Europe and Asia.

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The Bowser's Club Wins


With 20 years of experience in commercial and residential design, E. Willard K. Martin, AIA, has designed and supervised the execution of many large architectural projects. He has also been a principal architect for a number of noted architectural practices, including Martin, Riddick, and Associates, Inc., where he has been involved in the design and supervision of numerous large-scale projects. Mr. Martin has been a member of the American Institute of Architects since 1956 and has received numerous awards for his work, including the AIA's Honor Award for Excellence in Architecture. Mr. Martin is currently the President of the Portland Development Commission.

The Bowser's Club

The Bowser's Club is a place where people come together to enjoy each other's company and discuss the latest in architecture and design. It is located in the heart of Portland, Oregon, and offers a unique environment for business meetings, social events, and cultural activities.

The Club was founded in 1989 by a group of friends who shared a common interest in architecture and design. Over the years, the Club has become a hub for the local architectural community, hosting events and discussions on a wide range of topics.

The Club's mission is to promote the exchange of ideas and to provide a platform for the sharing of knowledge and experience. It is a place where architects, designers, and enthusiasts can come together to learn, network, and enjoy each other's company.

The Club's facilities include a large meeting room, a lounge area, and a state-of-the-art audiovisual system. The Club also offers catering services, which can be arranged to fit any budget or occasion.

The Bowser's Club is open to members of the architectural community and is available for rental by non-members for special events. The Club is located at 123 Main Street, Portland, Oregon, and can be reached by calling (503) 123-4567.
Pioneering the square

A Study of Context

“Most of the world’s great public squares are simple in concept and complete in their design only when used by people: places to pass through or to linger in, to promenade or to sit, to wait for a friend or the LRT, to sniff at the flowers, to shop or eat, to listen to music or a politician, to pause at a painting, above all, places in which to gaze at the passing parade...ourselves. It is out of a desire for activities such as these that we have developed our design.”
— Terence O’Donnell, from the competition entry

“Let the space be ambiguous, fragmented and eternally changing, rich in local symbols and metaphor reflecting Portland’s history as well as bringing meaning to citizens of all categories. We hope to bring together many different meanings to be enjoyed and understood by varying tastes... hoping to stimulate discourse between different and often opposed taste groupings with meanings that add up and work together in the deepest combination.”
— Will Martin diary, 1980
Soon after the jury selected the winning entry, Portland’s Planning Commission, Landmarks Commission, and Design Review Commission endorsed the results. But the Association for Portland Progress, a 65-member downtown business group, quickly blasted the winning design and threatened to withhold all contributions towards the $1.7 million private funding needed to build it. They even lobbied for rejecting $1.2 million in federal monies so the city could free itself from the grant’s requirement for the open space.

In the summer of 1980, the Portland City Council met to consider the design. A three-vote majority teetered on the vote of Commissioner Mildred Schwab, who liked the square but remained skeptical about the funding. During a brief recess during the heated meeting, competition juror Summer Sharpe wrote a personal check for $100, gathered a dozen other checks, and when the meeting resumed, dramatically presented them to the council. As Schwab cast her vote for the square, she quipped, “I’m holding Summer Sharpe personally responsible” for the rest of the $1.8 million. Sharpe recalls worrying that his check might bounce.

Soon after, to further galvanize public support — and to oppose the continuing behind-the-scenes efforts to kill the square — designer Will Martin gathered his team and, with a donation of paint from Miller Paint Co., painted their design — all 40,000 square feet of it — on the empty parking lot.
Six months after the competition, longtime square opponent Bill Roberts became the chairman of the Portland Development Commission and promptly called the project a “dead letter.” With another staunch opponent, Frank Ivancie, freshly elected as mayor, the winning designs prospects seemed dire. But a series of rapid-fire events ensued: the design won a prestigious national award from Progressive Architecture magazine; the fledgling Friends of Pioneer Courthouse Square found a major ally in one of downtown’s most powerful company owners, Melvin “Pete” Mark; and Karen Whitman, then director of the annual city festival AtrioPase, hatched the idea of selling bricks engraved with donors’ names to help fund the square. And perhaps most influentially, charismatic former Governor Tom McCall blasted opponents of the square on his weekly TV commentary, saying the business leaders’ hopes for holding a new competition would “stigmatize Portland as a really sort of phony place.”

In October 1981, the Association for Portland Progress Board voted unanimously to support the competition-winning design. And in the summer of 1982, Mayor Ivancie led Portland City Council to contribute the final $350,000 needed to complete the square. In the end, the $4.5 million construction cost was paid for with $1.7 million in private contributions — none larger than $100,000, and over 60,000 of them in the form of $15 and $30 bricks.

More than two decades after the planning department’s first drawings of a major, new, centrally located public space, the city dedicated Pioneer Courthouse Square on April 6, 1984 — auspiciously, the anniversary of the city’s founding, the Portland Hotel’s opening, and architect Will Martin’s birth.
Today, as the Square turns 30 years old, it faces the wear of time and the tear of the 10 million citizens and tourists who visit each year. The waterproof membrane beneath the bricks that protects the offices and public spaces below, like any roof, is leaking. Many bricks and terra cotta tiles are cracking, steel rebar is corroding, and the aging skylights, plumbing, and HVAC systems need to be replaced. Both public and private dollars have been raised for short term fixes. Our city’s “Living Room” is like an old house—still beautiful but in need of care.

Together, the City of Portland and Pioneer Courthouse Square’s non-profit management organization are working to assure that this unique public asset serves the next generation of Portlanders. Look for your upcoming opportunities to get involved.
From hacky-sackers and guitar punks to self-promoting corporations and nonprofits, from connoisseurs of symphonies and rock music to war protesters and supporters of both Israel and Palestine, each day Pioneer Courthouse Square captures a cross-section of Portland’s life and times, and often the world’s. On one day, the Dalai Lama spoke to thousands from the speaker stand. On another, at the ping of a text message, swarms of pillow-fighters once covered the bricks in feathers.

The civic spirit initiated by the 322 Portlanders who wrote checks to turn “Villians’ Ruins” into the city’s first luxury hotel has been carried on by the supporters (71,000 and counting) who have paid to have their names etched into the square’s bricks. But so, too, have the tensions continued between civics and commercial visions for the space. For instance, in 2002, a group of downtown businessmen concerned about the square’s emptiness during the winter months proposed redesigning it with a seasonal ice rink. The emotional debate that ensued echoed the arguments of two decades ago over whether the square should be an enclosed glass “birdcage.”

Indeed, as much as the square fulfills Mayor Terry Schum’s 1961 dream and the 1972 Downtown Plan’s Goal of “breathing space, a focal point and gathering place” it also fosters the essential ingredient of any healthy city: free speech in all its forms and, when needed, spirited debate.