



# Portland Design Commission

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**Date: April 1, 2021**  
**To: Portland City Council**  
**From: Portland Design Commission**  
**Re: 2019 & 2020 State of the City Design Report**

Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners Rubio, Ryan, Hardesty, and Mapps,

In a typical year, the Design Commission shares highlights from the past 12 months of design review with Council in the spring. We were polishing the final draft of the 2019 report when the pandemic upended our lives and the report was put on hold and subsequently canceled. The ensuing 12 months that have brought us to the 2020 report have been anything but typical as we've learned about the inadequacies of working from home, watched the unravelling of the fabric of our City, suffered irreparable damage from wildfires, and lost loved ones to Covid-19. Whatever it was, 2020 definitely wasn't the year of perfect vision we had hoped it would be.

With the devastation of the past year in mind, the Design Commission has taken a novel approach to this year's State of the City Design Report. Portland's Council-adopted Zoning Code cites the mission statement of our volunteer Commission to

*provide leadership and expertise on urban design and architecture and on maintaining and enhancing Portland's historical and architectural heritage, and to provide advice on design matters to the Hearings Officer, the Planning & Sustainability Commission, Prosper Portland, and City Council.*

Because so many members of Council are recently elected, and while you have recently reviewed two large Commission-approved projects on appeal, we felt an introduction to the design review process was warranted. For this 2019-2020 biennium of the State of the City Design Report, we've selected three projects to share with you as case studies. Each project exemplifies one of the three tenets of design around which our city's design guidelines are organized - **1. Context, 2. Public Realm, and 3. Quality & Resilience.** As proposed in the pending Design Overlay Zoning Assessment (DOZA) legislative project, *"the design overlay promotes design excellence in the built environment through the application of additional design standards and design guidelines that:*

1. Build on **context** by enhancing the distinctive physical, natural, historic and cultural qualities of the location while accommodating growth and change;
2. Contribute to a **public realm** that encourages social interaction and fosters inclusivity in people’s daily experience; and
3. Promote **quality and long-term resilience** in the face of changing demographics, climate and economy.”

Through these case studies, we hope to provide you with “advice” that demonstrates design review has been, currently is, and will continue to be good public policy for our city. Portland is a remarkably singular place. Our neighborhoods have distinct characters, active streets, and well-designed, sturdy buildings. All of these qualities have been developed and enhanced through the active engagement of members of design review – applicants, the public, City staff, and the Design Commission – in a process that demonstrates the best of our community’s values. Forty years of design review have made our commercial centers the vibrant, people-focused environments they were up until March 2020, but a walk through any of Portland’s commercial districts today is discouraging. These are not the energetic streets so loved by Portlanders and visitors to our city. Few people are out, storefronts are boarded up, many businesses are gone, and Portland’s thriving restaurant scene—to the extent it remains—has been forced to adapt to cold and wet winter streets. Our neighborhoods, streets, and buildings *will* recover, though the story told by Design Review’s level of activity in 2020, described in the table below, tells us the recovery may take some time.

<b>Design Review Activity</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>
Type III Land Use Review approvals	24	19	21
Type III Appeals to Council	0	0	3
Type II Land Use Review approvals (staff)	124	100	74
Type II Appeals to Design Commission	3	3	3
Type I Land Use Review approvals (staff)	0	11	2
Design Advice Requests (early assistance)	18	30	09
Briefings, work sessions & retreats	24	20	08
Hearing dates	34	33	22

Type III Land Use Reviews are the highest order of review and they are the bulk of the Commission’s workload. These projects are large and often in the Central City. The number of Type III approvals in 2020 improved slightly over the year prior, but whereas 2018 and 2019 saw many multi-block proposals, high-rise mixed-use towers, hotels, and large institutional projects, 2020 proposals were substantially

less ambitious than much of what we've seen over the past decade. With a few notable exceptions that were carryovers from the prior year, 2020 was largely about modestly scaled residential development, surgical renovations to existing buildings, and reducing the scope of large projects.

Most telling is the reduction in the number of Design Advice Requests. The DAR is a form of early assistance that provides feedback on early concepts during the due diligence phase—when developers and owners are vetting the financial viability of a project. The 70% reduction in DARs may represent a cratering of the near-term pipeline.

But amidst the crises of 2020, much good work has been completed. Notably,

- The Design Commission and the Planning & Sustainability Commission have wrapped up the **Design Overlay Zoning Amendments [DOZA]** project, a six-year effort to update and improve the design review process for all participants—applicants, the public, City staff, and the Commission. The DOZA Recommended Draft, which includes the new Portland Communitywide Design Guidelines for use in designated design districts outside the Central City, will be presented to Council in May 2021.
- The Design Commission and the Historic Landmarks Commission have done some early work with staff from the Bureau of Planning & Sustainability on **Character Statements** that describe the context and history of neighborhoods outside the Central City. Character Statements are a necessary tool to help developers, designers, and community members understand the city's physical and cultural history as the combined pressures of population growth and an easy path to demolition of significant buildings are unravelling the fragile fabric of Portland's historically Black neighborhoods. This critically important work is described in more detail in the DOZA Recommended Draft, and the Design Commission supports the Planning & Sustainability Commission's request to fund Character Statement work for all areas in the design review overlay.
- The Design Commission and the Historic Landmarks Commission worked with staff from the Bureaus of Transportation and Development Services to corral the rollout of 4G and 5G technologies with the **Vertical Infrastructure in the Right of Way** project. A mandate from the Federal Communications Commission gave the City little time to construct an implementation plan, but this important work both preserves the aesthetics of Portland's vertical infrastructure (streetlights and catenary poles in the right of way) and presents an opportunity to gently modernize aesthetics. This work will be presented again to Council by the Bureau of Transportation at a future date.

- For the years 2019 and 2020, approximately **2,100 housing units in the design districts** were proposed through Type III land use reviews and approved by Design Commission (this number does not include the many more housing units approved by staff through Type II land use reviews.) These housing units covered the spectrum of affordability and ranged in type from group living to memory care to condominiums.

It is important to know that many of the proposals that go through design review never appear in the Commission's hearings room. While the Commission is reviewing primarily Type III projects, the Bureau of Development Services design review staff are reviewing scores of Type II projects throughout Portland's design districts. Commission only sees these Type II projects when a staff decision is appealed by an applicant, a neighbor, or a concerned member of the public; appeals are infrequent because of the expertise, creativity, and compassion staff bring to their work. The design review process simply wouldn't be possible without BDS's excellent design review staff.

The case study projects that are the focus of this report are:

1. **Context**—The Pepsi Blocks Phase 1A, architecture and landscape architecture by Mithūn, approved Sept 5, 2019
2. **Public Realm**—Oregon Square Blocks 90 & 103, architecture by GBD Architects, landscape architecture by PLACE, approved October 1, 2020
3. **Quality & Permanence**—The Lincoln High School Replacement, architecture by Bora Architects, landscape architecture by Mayer/Reed, approved August 1, 2019

Following the presentation, we will present the annual Award for Design Excellence to the 2019 and 2020 proposals that best exemplify the three tenets of design.

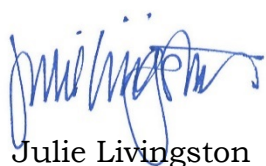
Hearings by teleconference present the unique opportunity to have all seven Design Commissioners participate in the presentation to Council. Members are:

- **Julie Livingston**, Chair. Julie is the Commission's development project manager; she works in the real estate development department at Home Forward.
- **Sam Rodriguez**, Vice Chair. Sam holds the public-at-large seat, he is a senior managing director at Mill Creek Residential Trust.
- **Brian McCarter** is our landscape architect; he is a principal at ZGF Architects.
- **Jessica Molinar** holds one of two seats for architects. Jessica is an associate at Bric Architecture.

- **Chandra Robinson** is also an architect; she is a principal at Lever Architecture.
- **Zari Santner** is the Regional Arts & Culture Council representative, which means Zari is Commission's liaison to RACC's Public Art Advisory Committee. She is a former Director of Portland Parks & Recreation.
- **Don Vallaster** is our developer. Don is responsible for many of Portland's perennially favorite spaces and buildings.

We appreciate the opportunity you've given us to play a role in shaping our city. Thank you for your consideration, and for your service to Portland.

Sincerely,



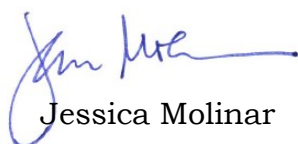
Julie Livingston



Sam Rodriguez



Brian McCarter



Jessica Molinar



Chandra Robinson



Zari Santner



Don Vallaster

cc: Staff, Bureau of Development Services