

# **2021 State of the City Report To Portland City Council**

**From the Portland Design Commission**

**March 31, 2022**



**The Portland Design Commission in a typical 2021 Zoom Hearing**



## TO PORTLAND CITY COUNCIL

From Portland Design Commission  
Re: 2021 State of the City Design Commission  
Report

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

This is the **2021 State of the City Design Commission Report** and will introduce what the Design Commission is, who is on it, what we do in general, the tools we use to perform that duty and why and how it is more relevant than ever in Portland's future.

### **The Portland Design Commission**

The Portland Design Commission is an all-volunteer panel of design and development experts that review all development projects within Design Overlay Zones in the City. It works directly with the Bureau of Development Services as part of Portland's land use review and permit process. We have a strong and diverse Design Commission with a wide range of expertise. The development community recognizes this is a Design Commission they can work with. Neighborhoods and community members also recognize this Design Commission supports their vision within the limits of our authority. 2021 was a year of evolution and rotation of leadership. Your Portland Design Commission for 2022 is:

- Sam Rodriguez, **Chair**, architect and developer
- Chandra Robinson, **Vice Chair**, architect
- Julie Livingston, **Chair-Emeritus**, Architect, Project Manager for Home Forward
- Brian McCarter, retired, landscape architect/urban designer
- Jessica Molinar, architect
- Zari Santner, retired, landscape architect, liaison to Regional Arts and Culture Council
- Don Vallaster, retired, architect and developer

## HOW WE WORK

Design Review in Portland works in close coordination with our updated Code and the [2035 Comp Plan](#). Applicants and their design teams develop projects to meet code requirements and design guidelines. Code requirements are objective and often numeric. Zoning code supports the [2035 Comp Plan](#), but it is a blunt instrument. Design guidelines are discretionary and they allow the Design Commission to fine-tune project design to better meet the guideline's intent. We apply the guidelines consistently – whether it's market rate or affordable development. Everyone equally deserves quality of life in their built surroundings including the neighbors already living next to a project.

Portland's Design Guidelines are organized under **three major tenets – Context, Public Realm and Quality and Resilience**. They all matter and the projects we review must meet ALL the guidelines within these three tenets (unless a particular guideline is not applicable). The forums we use to conduct Design Review are Design Advice Request (**DAR**) and Land Use Review (**LUR**) hearings. We'll use examples from projects reviewed in 2021 to demonstrate how we apply these guidelines.

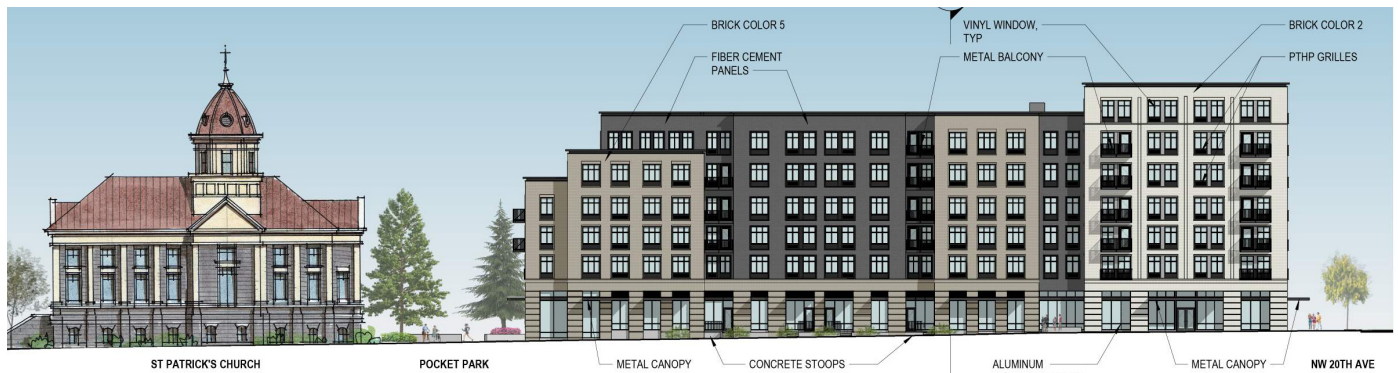
Design Review Activity	2019	2020	2021
Type III Land Use Review approvals (LUR)	19	21	8
Type III Appeals to Council	0	3	2
Type II Land Use Review approvals (staff)	100	74	53
Type II Appeals to Design Commission	3	3	2
Type I Land Use Review approvals (staff)	11	2	12
Design Advice Requests (DAR, Early Assistance)	30	9	15
Briefings, work sessions & retreats	20	8	13
Hearing dates	33	22	33

## CONTEXT

- Is the proposed project in a storefront retail district?
- An historic district with character-defining buildings and spaces?
- An established residential neighborhood with front yards and dense trees?
- Or is it in a tired, commercial strip that wants to establish a new, people-focused context? We consider all of these in our deliberations.

Examples of how we improved projects with a focus on "Context":

### Conway Blocks 261/262:



- Used the discretionary power Council gives us to grant Modifications that meet the Guidelines better than base Zoning Code regulations.
- Ensured this infill project respected the adjacent historic St. Patrick's Church by redistributing building mass and height, breaking up long block facades, and stepping back roof terraces.
- Added active uses along 20<sup>th</sup>, providing more 24-hour eyes on the street across from an office building and surface parking.





### 3000 SE Powell:



- Used DARs to evolve the design of new affordable housing, creating a newer, better context on SE Powell Blvd (a State highway).



- Evolved and developed a purpose for the entry court and resident's courtyard over multiple meetings with the Commission.

- Improved the site plan, including enhancements of a major public pedestrian connection through the site, limiting cut-through vehicular traffic out of the neighborhood to the south.
- Acknowledged the importance of generous screening and softening of surface parking for the adjacent residential and commercial, and the need to locate surface parking away from the busy civic corridor of Powell Blvd.

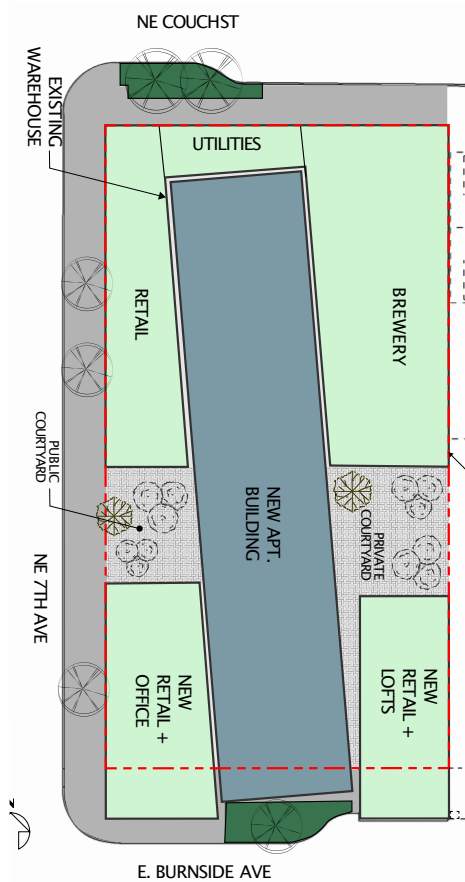


## PUBLIC REALM

Contribute to a **public realm** that encourages social interaction and fosters inclusivity in people's daily experience. This is the space where the public primarily experiences new development.

- Are the sidewalks, streetscapes and open spaces reinforcing livability and enjoyment by residents, visitors, and the general public?
- Is the ground floor of the building inviting and lively?
- Does the site feel safe to pedestrians?





Examples of how we improved projects with a focus on “Public Realm”:

### Great Scott Trio Housing:



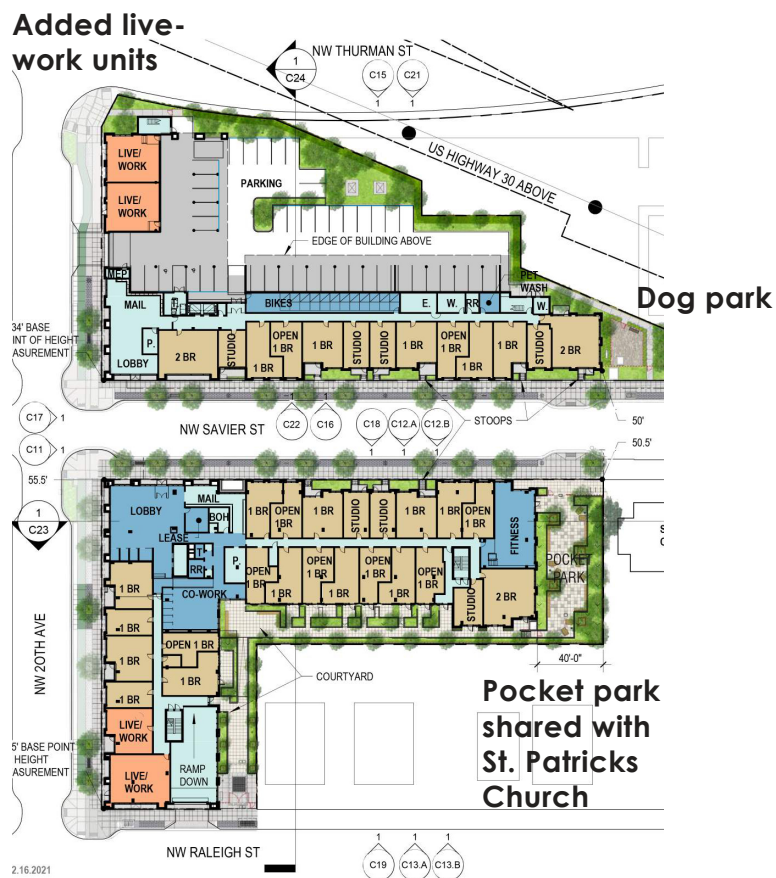
- Used DARs to encourage the development of a simple building massing concept for a small site, with straightforward windows and balconies and a street-level arcade along Burnside – a unique feature of Burnside in the Central Eastside Industrial District.

### Conway Blocks 261/262:

- Nearly doubled the amount of proposed balconies, added articulation, interest, eyes on street, and livability to the entire project.



- Increased the activation and public feel of a neighborhood pocket park by widening it, which evolved the abutting ground floor use into a more active space.
- Transformed unused area to an active outdoor dog park along Savier.
- Increased roof terraces overlooking the park.





## Choice Cambria Hotel:

- Guided the design through multiple DARs to create a simplified but inviting entry courtyard with a protected hotel entrance.
- Layered landscaping and café seating facing the North Park Blocks and the future Green Loop.
- Refined the ground floor of the building to create an active ground floor and a comfortable pedestrian environment along adjacent public sidewalks.



DAR #1 - undefined courtyard



DAR #2 - courtyard and hotel entrance defined



Final approved design for hotel entry and courtyard



### 3000 SE Powell:

- Created a more flexible space at the SE 30<sup>th</sup> ROW with interior building activation and improved paving options to make it appear like, and offer, a place for people and not just vehicles.



SE 30th



- Added places for people, off of the public accessways, to stop and rest with activation, landscape and weather protection.

## QUALITY AND PERMANENCE

Promote **quality and long-term resilience** in the face of changing demographics, climate and economy.

- Do the architects use form and materials to not only reinforce the appropriate context but make for a building with simple, understandable design and constructed with materials that will have integrity and beauty 20 years from now?
- 
- Do the materials choices support the city's sustainability goals?

Examples of how we improved projects with a focus on "Quality and Resilience":

### Choice Cambria Hotel:

- Guided the design from context-weak, early massing and materials concept, to improved massing but unnecessary complexity to a simpler, more cohesive design that incorporates high-quality materials and details.



DAR #1: L-shape massing and painted stucco





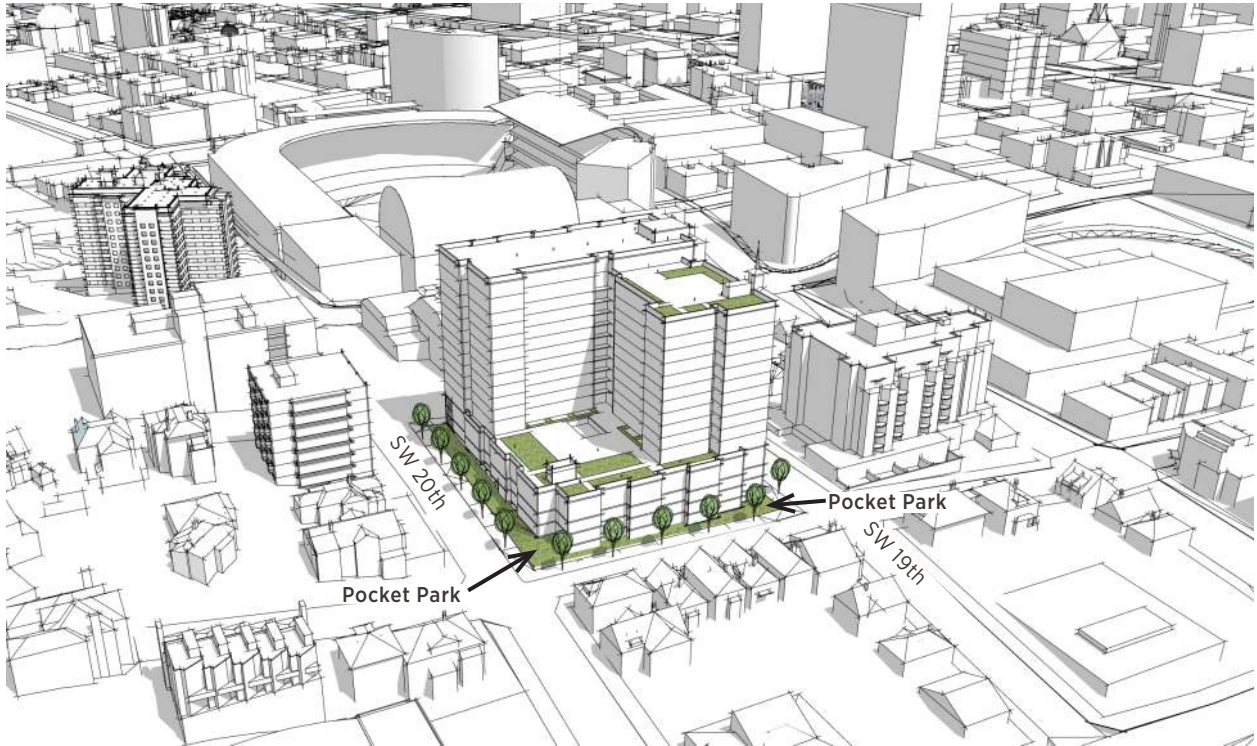
DAR #2: H-shaped massing and brick-stucco combination



Final approved design: two color, all-brick cladding, simplified window details and top cornice line

## Modera Main:

- Worked with the development team through preliminary design advice meetings and public hearings to refine the building's massing and façade design to help this large building better integrate with and relate to surrounding development and to ensure the building will stand the test of time in a timeless district.



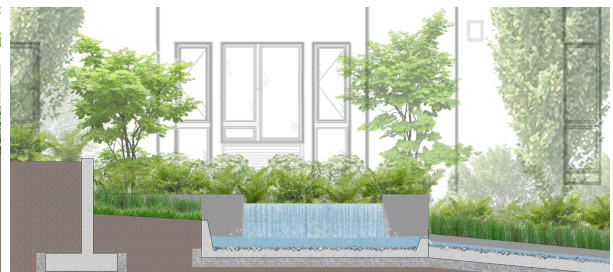
Early massing study setting tower to the north with townhouses facing historic homes







Evolution of facades, balconies, roof terraces, colors and materials; final approved design on the right



Refinement of street level landscape, front gardens





### 3000 SE Powell:

- Simplified insignificant aspects, like below grade parking, to facilitate better quality façade materials like brick.
- Refined materials and detailing to simplify complex transitions between materials, which will enhance and compliment the overall building language and provide a lasting, low-maintenance building.



Early massing and materials studies



Final approved design with significant use of brick, refined details for door and window systems, and enhanced landscaping



Final approved design details at entries, corners and courtyards

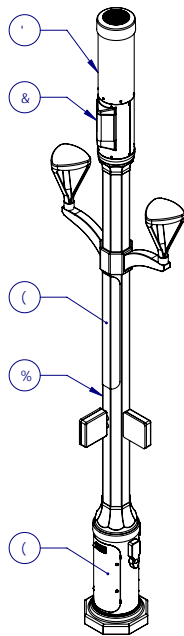




## OTHER DESIGN COMMISSION ACTIVITIES

In 2021, the Design Commission has also been busy on related work that has significance to Portland:

- *Vertical infrastructure:* Design Commission has been working closely with the Historic Landmarks Commission, PBOT and their design consultant to bring 4G/5G technology into Portland's rights-of-way in a thoughtful way.



7 HMC: DCFH5B8z897 CF5HJ 9GA 5@7 9@DC @989G: Bz  
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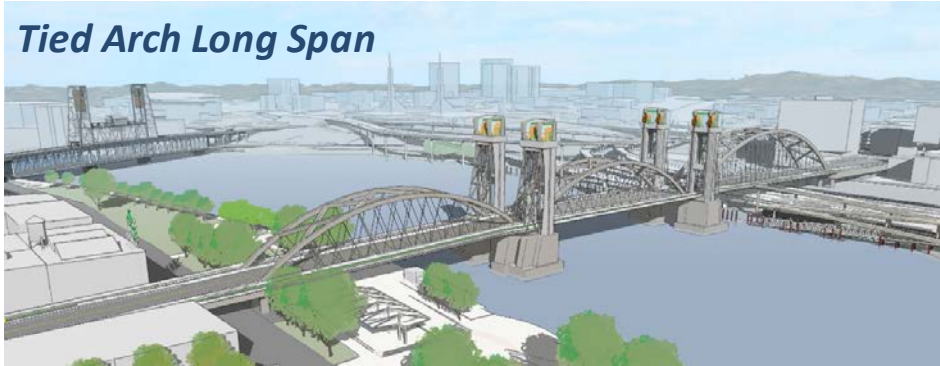
- Design Commission subcommittee helped guide this smart pole concept incorporating 4G/5G small cell service with street lighting



## **Burnside Bridge Replacement:**

- Design Commission has been working with the Historic Landmarks Commission, Multnomah County and their bridge design team and PBOT, advising on how we can successfully replace one of the most visible landmarks in our city

***Tied Arch Long Span***



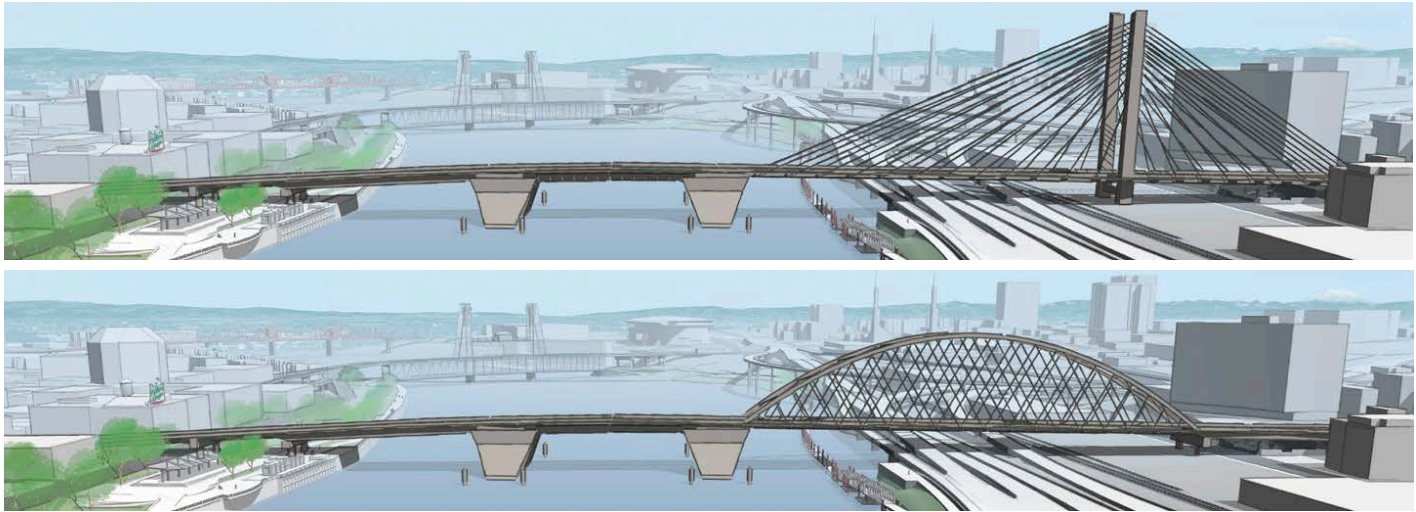
***Cable Stayed Long Span***



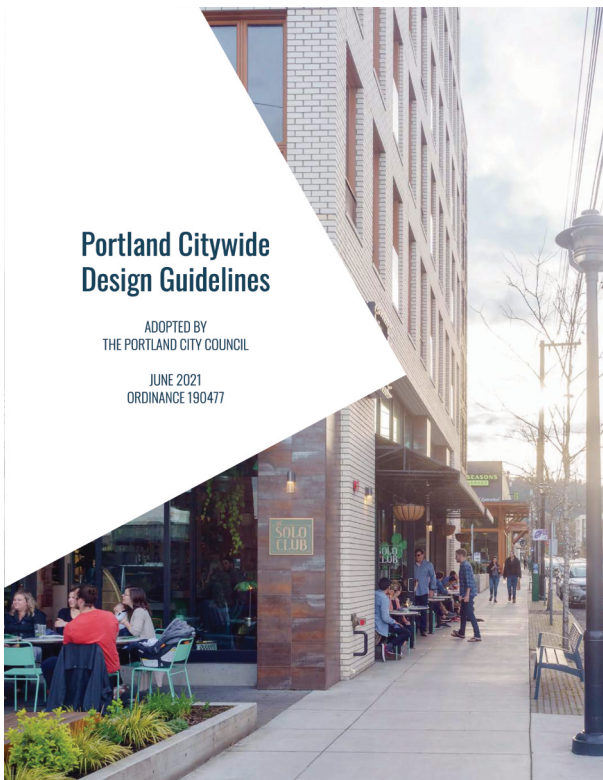
***Through Truss Long Span***



Long-span alternatives from Joint Commission briefings 1 and 2



Based on Joint Commission's feedback, refinement to **hybrid/asymmetrical options** for cable-stayed and tied arch structures combined with girder spans.



## Portland Citywide Design Guidelines

ADOPTED BY  
THE PORTLAND CITY COUNCIL

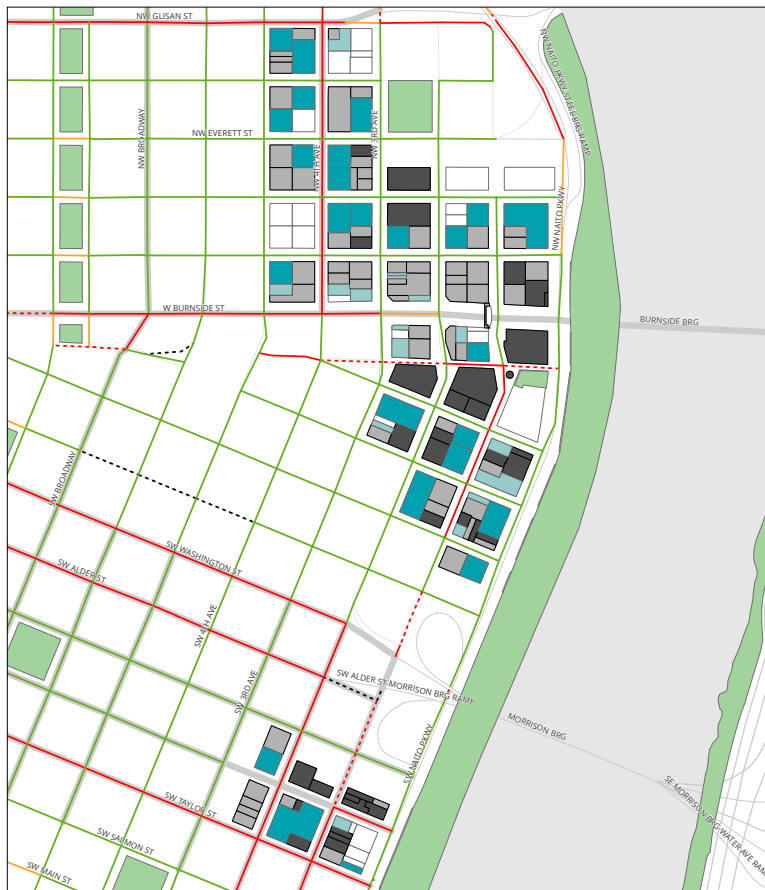
JUNE 2021  
ORDINANCE 190477

## DOZA:

We continued working with the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability in early 2021 on the new **Citywide Design Guidelines** Council adopted in July. These regulate design review for all design zones outside of Central City. They are also founded on **Context, Public Realm, and Quality and Resilience**.

## Portland Pedestrian Design Guide/PBOT:

- We've worked with the Historic Landmarks Commission and PBOT to review and guide PBOT's new pedestrian guidelines in Historic Resource areas to address **minimum sidewalk widths** while respecting historic building frontage patterns.



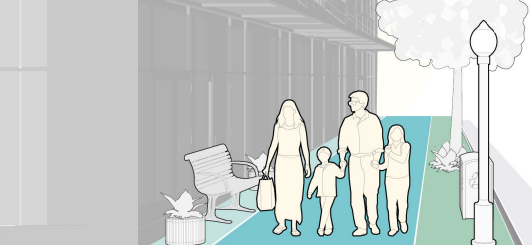
### Average Sidewalk Setback Requirement:

- ..... Missing Sidewalk
- ..... 6' - 11' Setback Required
- ..... 3' - 5' Setback Required
- ..... 1' - 2' Setback Required
- ..... No Additional Setback Required
- ..... Main Streets

- Parks
- District Taxlots
- Historic Landmarks
- Contributing Resources

### Parcels next to buildings with demolition protection:

- <100' Frontage  
(maintain existing sidewalk)
- >100' Frontage  
(setback the building)



Street Design Classification	Frontage Zone minimum width	Pedestrian Through Zone minimum width	Furnishing Zone minimum width exclusive of curb width	Total minimum width
Civic Main Street <sup>1,2</sup>	2.5'	8'	4'	15'
Neighborhood Main Street <sup>1,2</sup>	2.5'	8'	4'	15'
Civic Corridor	1.5'	6'	4'	12'
Neighborhood Corridor	1.5'	6'	4'	12'
Community Corridor	1.5'	6'	4'	12'
Regional Corridor	0.5'	6'	5'	12'
Industrial Road	0.5'	6'	5'	12'
Local Street <sup>3</sup>	0.5'	6'	4'	11'



## COMMISSION WORK CONTINUES BUT 2021 WAS ANYTHING BUT A NORMAL YEAR

As a continuation of trends beginning in 2020 with the worldwide pandemic, Portland has encountered additional Covid surges, supply chain shortages, inflation (including the construction industry), schools opening and closing, crime, empty commercial space downtown, continued social disruption, houselessness and camping, and a perception of un-safe public spaces.

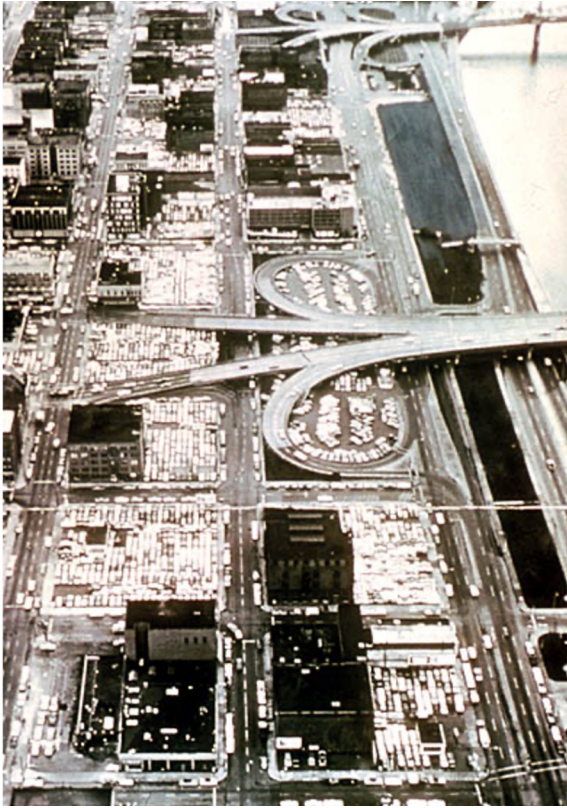
### Portland's Past Challenges

If we take a longer-term view, Portland has faced tough times before, reinvented itself and found ways to thrive. **Portland started in the mid-1800s with a strong plan** and built a robust city with human-scaled, multi modal streets, buildings with active street level and a lively public realm. Transportation, industry access to the river and construction capability favored a compact city.



Small blocks, human-scaled streets, pedestrian-friendly buildings in early Portland

**But after WWII**, we lost our way in the surge of automobile ownership and changing living and travel patterns. We tore down historic buildings to make surface parking lots.



We cleared neighborhoods for Urban Renewal and built highways along our waterfront.

We abandoned transit and became an **air quality non-attainment area** resulting in a warning from the Federal government to either clean up our air or lose all Federal transportation funding.





When we did build new office buildings downtown, we forgot how buildings make streets feel inviting and safe – instead **we built fortresses.**

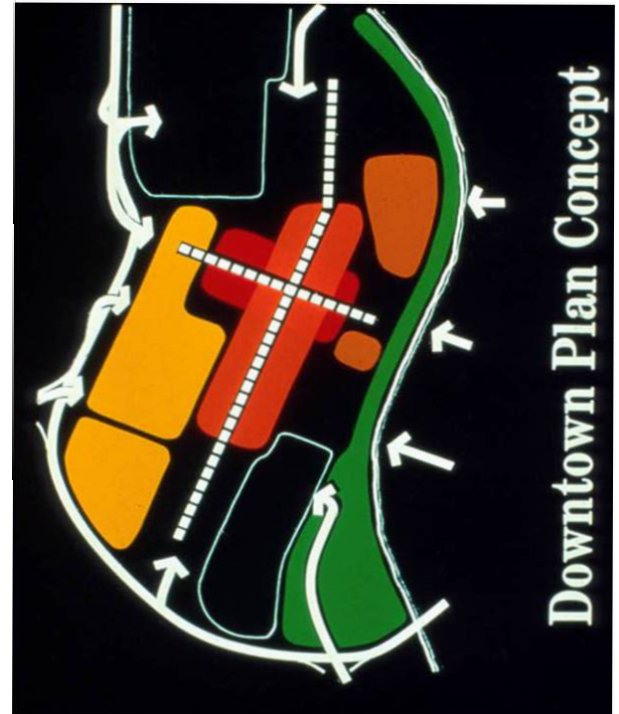




Public and private sector leaders recognized the negative trends, came together to stop the deterioration and to develop a vision going forward. The result was the **1972 Downtown Plan**: a re-set that called for mixed uses, public investment in placemaking and public open space, culture and arts, public transportation, higher education, and incentives to encourage renovation of historic properties.



Out of that bold plan came the **Transit Mall**, a cap on downtown parking, **Waterfront Park** and the removal of Harbor Drive, **Pioneer Square**, new housing downtown, historic districts and, importantly, the **Design Review process in 1982**.





With a new vision, over the last 40 years, we have built a walkable, vibrant, diverse and easily accessible Central City that is admired by the world for its planning and design innovation.



But worldwide and local events of the past two years have been very tough on Portland. However, now is the time we need to uncover the city, clean it off, re-commit to manage/program/maintain the great legacy we have and use Design Review to shape excellence in future development that will reinforce that legacy.



## HOW AND WHY DESIGN REVIEW MATTERS TO PORTLAND NOW

These are unusual times – rising crime, houselessness, rapidly rising housing costs and still a shortage of housing. Yet Portland's economy remains strong and development continues, albeit at a slower pace.

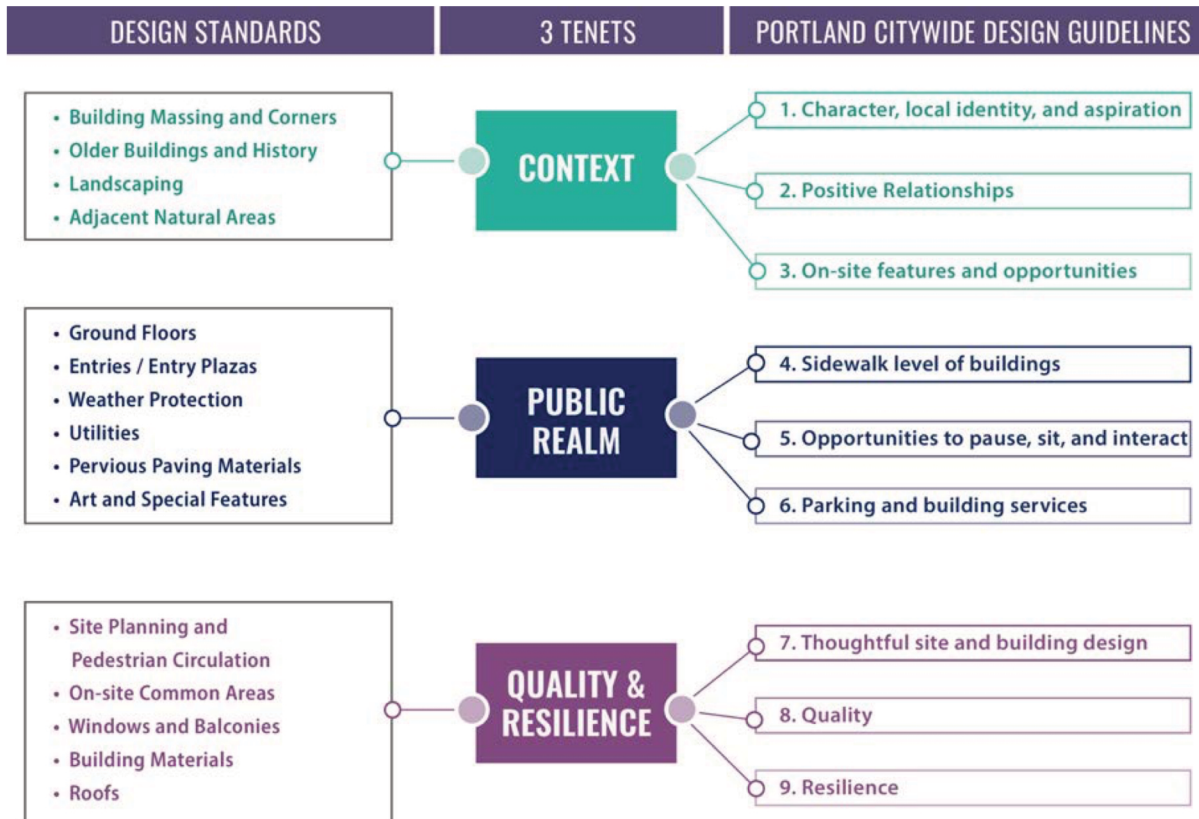
Crime - we know from 40 years of Design Review that **active ground floor uses, high transparency** and visibility, and a mix of uses with day and night activity - all contribute to a sense of safety and a place that feels inviting.

Houselessness and equity – major efforts are underway to address Portland's significant houselessness and urban camping issues. Production of **new affordable housing** is a component of that effort.

Design Review's role is to ensure, while we accelerate production of new housing, that we also **maintain the good design characteristics** that make Portland a great place to live, work, learn and play. Quality of life in one's physical surroundings, should be universal.



The last four years of **Design Overlay and Zoning Amendments [DOZA]** have produced the new Portland Citywide Design Guidelines for 'd' overlay zones outside Central City, that Council adopted August 1, 2021. DOZA maps out two paths to approval:



**1) Design Standards path** – codifies a number of good design concepts and best practices. Those standards are a synthesis of many years of Design Commission deliberation about what makes good projects. These new standards are a significant improvement over the previous “Community Design Standards”.

**2) Design Guidelines path** - now features only 9 guidelines – streamlined and simplified for applicant's, staff's, public and the Commission's benefit and to create a clearer path to approval, and structured as three tenets: Context, Public Realm and Quality and Resilience.

However, these paths are different.



For the past several years, multi-family housing has been the dominant type of new development in Central City and our city-wide design zones. The 2035 Comprehensive Plan gives broad direction on urban pattern areas; our updated Zoning Code makes precise development requirements.



As an example, the 2035 Comprehensive Plan and updated zoning code have enabled greater density and height with minimal or no off-street parking requirements. The result is new proposals with large, bulky buildings proposed on sites without adequate outdoor space for new residents and awkward juxtapositions of ground floor activities next to our public realm.

By contrast, Design Review is where **big picture goals, codified criteria and good design judgment** are reconciled into projects that truly contribute to Portland's excellence and in a forum that is open to the public. Portland's Design Review process is the forum where professional expertise and statutory flexibility come together to reach good design solutions. Design Review is a safeguard against proposals where design circumstances are not adequately resolved. Many of the city's design professionals and citizen activists understand and appreciate how the **DAR** and **LUR** processes help guide projects to better outcomes.

The results of the two paths to approval and implementation will play out over the new few years. We believe Council and Design Commission



should closely monitor projects that take the Design Standards path of 33.420.050 to completion to understand if they are making Portland better or not. We should compare these results with the results of the Design Guidelines path. This should be a topic of discussion for future State of the City Design Commission Reports to Council.

## 2022 AND BEYOND

- As Covid-19 impacts begin to slowly decrease, we think Portland is poised to re-vitalize itself;
- Our urban neighborhoods are beginning to thrive and grow again;
- People are rediscovering there is something meaningful about 'going to work' and working together in the same space;
- The investments we made in public spaces and public realm over the last generation are still there and of great value – they need to be cleaned up, re-managed and re-programmed to become good places again and to attract new growth;
- There might not be a better time to invest in projects like the Green Loop and O'Bryant Square - just as we built Waterfront Park, Pioneer Square, the Transit Mall, and Jamison Square a generation ago.

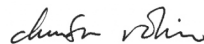
## Quality of design has/does/and will continue to matter:

The features we mandate of all development – active ground floors, eyes on the street, quality/durable materials, coherent and sustainable design – will still be important when the plywood comes down and we re-start the process of building our city again. This is Portland's Build Back Better moment and Design Commission is key to its implementation.

Thank You! The Portland Design Commission



Sam Rodriguez



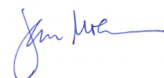
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