



MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 5, 2024
TO: Portland Historic Landmarks Commission
FROM: Ross Swanson and Lora Lillard, PP&R
SUBJECT: Darcelle XV Interim Plaza - briefing

On February 12, 2024, the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission will hold a briefing on the design of Darcelle XV Interim Plaza, formerly known as O'Bryant Square. In July 2023, the park was renamed "Darcelle XV Plaza" – after the late Darcelle XV, intended to reflect the City's commitment to fostering a more inclusive city.

The purpose of this briefing is to give an update of 1) the design, 2) public outreach efforts to activate Darcelle XV Plaza, and 3) a timeline for opening following the demolition of the parking garage and to hear feedback from the Commission.

BACKGROUND:

Closed and fenced for the last five years, the Darcelle XV site will be left "park ready" for an interim park design and park activation following the parking garage demolition. The funding mechanism to build a fully finished permanent park has not yet been identified.

PP&R has identified Downtown Portland Clean & Safe (C&S) as a community partner to be programming lead and provide enhanced security and cleaning for the park's interim phase (next 3-5 years). Programming for Darcelle XV Plaza will rotate to allow the "beta testing" of different events and activities and to engage the community. C&S will host regular programming and services at the site. Ideas proposed include lunchtime music, hosted games, artisan stalls, performances, temporary skate rink, global spring festivals, and Pride parade events.

Administration

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1. Design

Portland Parks and Recreation (PP&R) has hired NNA Landscape Architecture to design the interim plaza, in partnership with The Center for Public Interest Design (CPID) affiliated with Portland State University (PSU) and C&S.

In addition, the Project Team is working closely with the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) to ensure that the design for Darcelle XV Plaza and adjacent Green Loop and Street Plaza along SW 9th Avenue will be complementary.

The current interim plaza design includes the following features:

- Large, flat anchor space for revolving programming and events
- (2) Elevated Stages for performances (both formal and informal)
- Plaza with seating
- Dramatic gateway access points at corners
- Sail shade structures
- Six-foot-high security fence with maximum visibility
- Dog off-leash area
- Repurposed historic cast iron pillars as park gateways*
- Overhead string lighting*
- Opportunity locations for honoring LGBTQ+ community and history, possibly including a “Queer Heroes” or “Walk of Fame” feature*

* features under development that include a historic component are described in more detail below

Historic Cast Iron

The project team is working with Prosper Portland to explore the reuse of historic cast iron in three locations:

- Gateway entry markers at three corners
- Rebuilt Smith and Watson building façade along 9th Avenue (Green Loop),
- Community stage backdrop

Although the park is located just outside of the Old Town Historic District, use of the historic cast iron is a prominent architectural feature that surrounds the Darcelle XV Showplace on NW 3rd and Davis, a historic landmark and home of the longest running drag show on the west coast. Its use here as an invitation and sign of welcome pays homage to Darcelle’s as a destination for cabaret and drag performance and the venue that is most affiliated with the late luminary Darcelle XV.

Inclusion of cast iron at Darcelle XV Plaza also provides a unique opportunity to recognize and celebrate the contributions of two LGBTQ+ historic preservation heroes, Jerry Bosco and Ben Milligan, who cherished, collected and restored architectural pieces of Portland’s history, and without whom, many significantly historic artifacts may have been destroyed. They founded the Bosco-Milligan

Foundation of Portland in 1987 “to protect their collection of architectural elements and to further the cause of education about the city’s architectural history,” shortly after being diagnosed with AIDS and before they passed away. Walter Cole (better known as Darcelle XV), also an enthusiast for curating and restoring historic and ornate architectural details, commissioned the couple in the early 1980s to make custom stained glass windows and to recreate double-leaf, half-glass panels above the front doors of Darcelle’s Queen Anne house in Northeast Portland. Bosco’s and Milligan’s story is not well known beyond the historic preservation community, and this is an opportunity to share their passion for retaining and re-using historical structures.

The project team is grateful to the work of Bosco and Milligan, and before them, work of the historic preservationist Eric Ladd whose cast iron collection has been stored with Prosper Portland and the Architectural Heritage Center for many decades, waiting to be revealed. Special acknowledgement and thanks to Bill Hawkins, for consulting with the team, and for his diligent documentation, preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse of heritage resources and especially Portland’s cast iron.

Overhead String Lighting

Overhead string lighting is a proposed feature within the park parcel. The design team also intends to prepare the posts supporting the lighting along SW 9th/Green Loop with the structural capacity to eventually string lights across the street onto the historic Pittock block. Lighting over the right-of-way is outside of the scope of this project, and may be taken up at a later time when the Green Loop is developed, but it bears mentioning. The purpose for this work would be to continue the pattern along the Green Loop of string lights across SW 9th to the south, between the facades of the new Ritz Carlton and the Woodlark and Stevens Buildings.

Walk of Fame

The project team is collaborating with the Oregon Queer History Collective (OQHC) and Cayla McGrail, who is leading the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability’s LGBTQ+ Historic Sites Project, on the potential for a “Walk of Fame” at the park. This idea emerged from public outreach with the aim to elevate the histories of people, events, and places of significance to LGBTQ+ community. The concept is in development in partnership with the OQHC and still emerging.

2. Public Outreach

Many of these features were elements born out of public engagement over the past several months.

- In 2022-2023, the Portland Park Foundation (PPF) and the CPID sponsored the “Back to Square One” public series of events that engaged more than 1,000 Portlanders to reimagine O’Bryant Square with an eye toward interim design ideas for active programming and recreation. Ideas centered around how the park can be a harbinger of positive change.
- In the fall 2023, following the renaming of Darcelle XV Plaza to honor Portland’s iconic drag queen, the CPID worked with Poison Waters on a series of interviews with allies, friends, and family of Darcelle XV to hear their ideas about how to honor their legacy in the new design.
- PP&R is working with community partner C&S to activate both Director Park and the Darcelle XV Plaza site. PP&R will sign a multiyear agreement in the coming months to ensure the two sites are busy with programming and events.

A second wave of public outreach – this time to preview the current design of the interim park – has begun. The project team has briefed the Downtown Neighborhood Association and the Oregon Queer History Collective, with positive reception for the design. A public open house is scheduled for Sunday, February 4 at the Morgan Building, across from the park. PP&R and C&S are working in collaboration with OQHC on the public open house event and with Poison Waters on a focused event with Darcelle’s friends and family to complement the public open house event.

3. Timeline

The estimated timeline for opening is below.

- Spring/Summer 2024 – Parking garage demolition ends; Construction for Interim Plaza will begin.
- Spring/Summer 2025 – Darcelle XV Plaza opens

We are pleased to share the design for Darcelle XV Interim Plaza with the Historic Landmarks Commission and look forward to the discussion.

Attachments:

Darcelle XV Interim Plaza slide deck