Pioneering the Square

Presented by
Portland Spaces

With special thanks to those who contributed images, artifacts, and memories: Pauline Anderson, Marc Bevens, Mark Lakeman, Richard Lakeman, L. Douglas Macy, Gail Martin, Rod O'Hiser, Oregon Historical Society, Portland Development Commission, Sumner Sharpe, and Donald Stastny

Curated by Randy Gragg and Audrey Alverson

"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 Shrunk'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.

Pioneering the square

Early History

A

The land beneath Pioneer Courthouse Square began its urban life in the rapid wheeling and dealing of Portland's founders. In 1848 Francis Pettygrove sold the plot to Daniel Lownsdale, who, within months, bartered it to shoemaker Elijah Hill for $24 and a pair of boots. Within a decade the city bought the land back to build Portland's first public schoolhouse – Central School – the largest west of the Mississippi. In 1868, the future square's neighbor and namesake, Pioneer Courthouse, rose. And in 1883, the city relocated Central School so that renowned journalist, financier, and railroad tycoon Henry Villard could build Portland's first luxury hotel on the site.

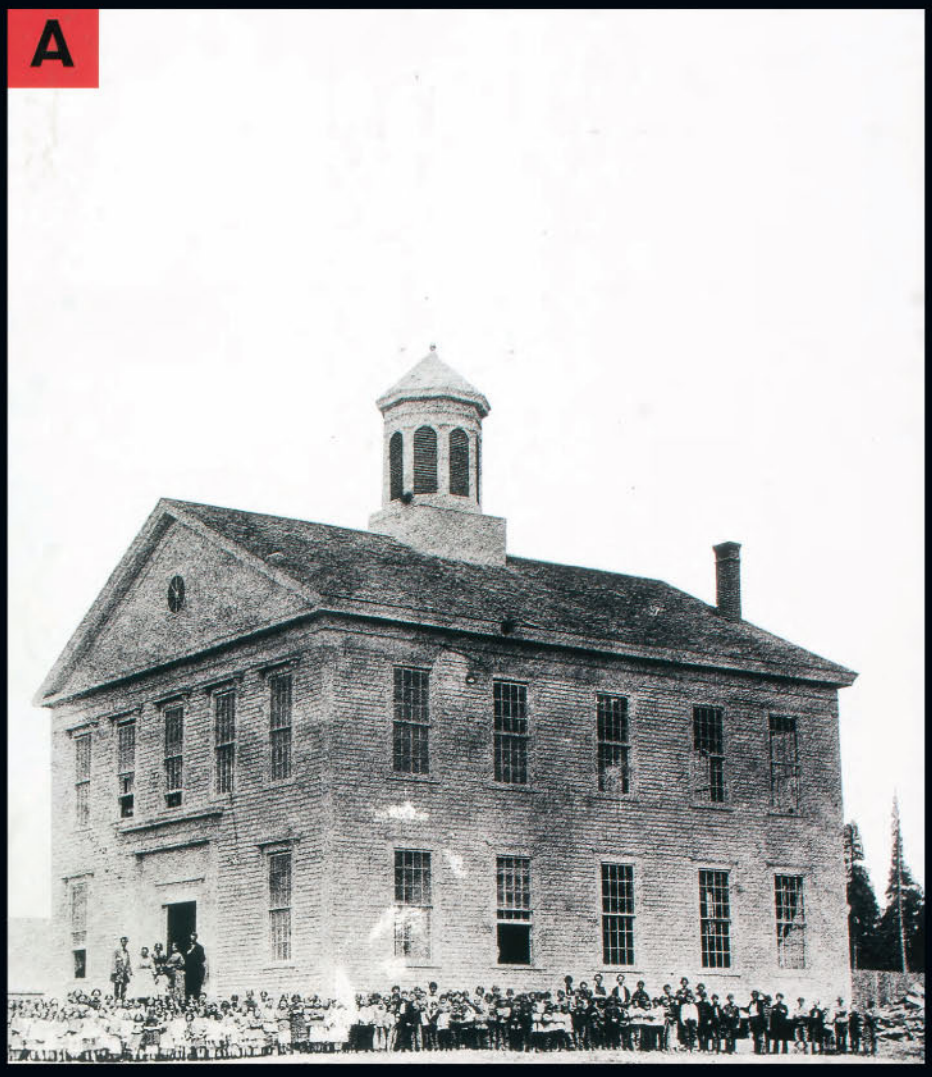
B

Villard built only the foundations before his fortunes fell. What locals dubbed "Villard's Ruins" sat untouched for five years, until Portland businessmen William Ladd, Henry Corbett, and Simeon Reed pledged $250,000 to finish the building – if others would match the contributions. And so began a tradition of community involvement with the block as 322 local citizens invested in the Portland Hotel Company. In 1890, the hotel's 326 elegant guest rooms, its ballroom, and its billiards, sewing, and writing rooms instantly became a destination for posh travelers and Portland's "fashionable set."

C

When luxury travel ground to a halt thanks to World War II, the hotel fell into disrepair. In 1944, department-store owners Julius Meier and Aaron Frank purchased the property in a rumored attempt to prevent another investor from building a competing store. A mere seven years later, Aaron Frank announced that the storied hotel would be razed and replaced with a two-level parking structure for Meier & Frank. Protesters called for the block to be reclaimed for public use.

A



B

"Villards Ruins," circa 1880s

Portland Hotel, circa 1910s

C

Portland Hotel's demolition, 1953

Meier & Frank Department Store parking garage, circa 1950s

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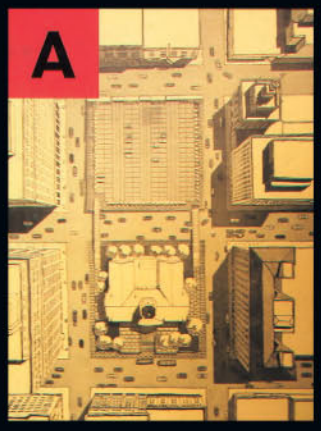
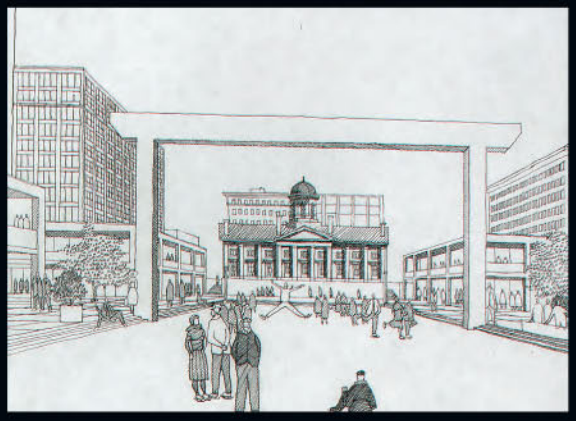
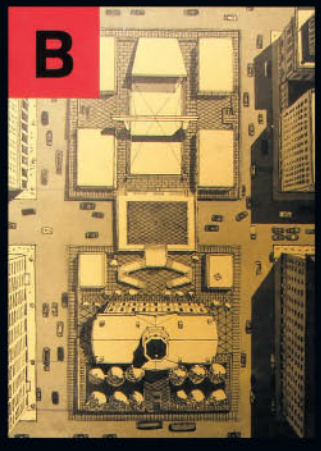
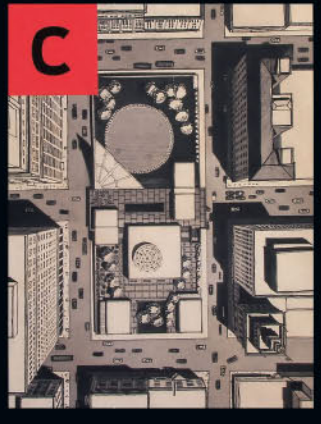
Early Aspirations

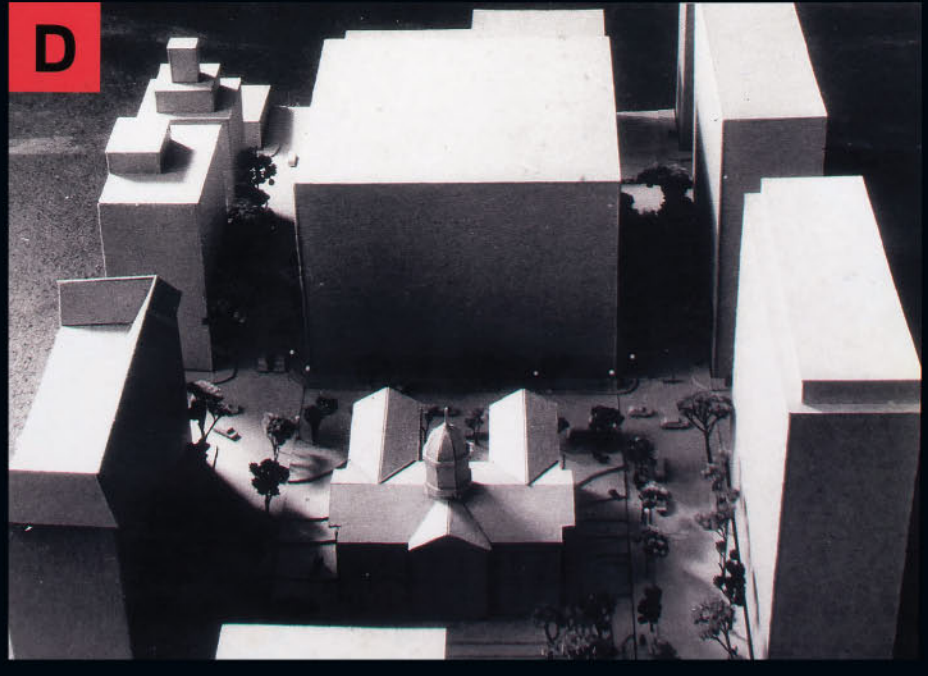
In 1961, Mayor Terry Schrunk directed the Portland Planning Department to study the site as a "focal point for downtown" and "a symbol of renewal." City planner Lloyd Keefe hired a young architect named Robert Frasca to draw three schemes for the courthouse and the adjacent parking lot that had replaced 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.











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

B 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.

C 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 1,100 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.

D In response to the Briston Corporation and Meier & Frank's proposed garage, Keefe directed his staff to build a 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, opponents convinced the commission not 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.

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Framework for Success

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, from 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."

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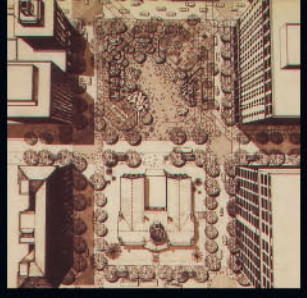
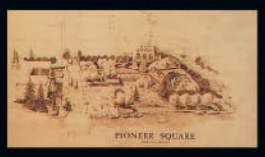
Variations on a Theme

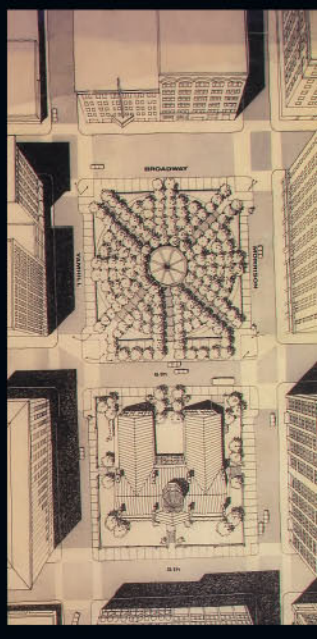
In 1975, Mayor Neil Goldschmidt began negotiating deals with major retailers (among them the Seattle-based Nordstrom company) that hinged on city initiatives to build 1,300 parking spaces in two garages on the east and west edges of the newly defined retail core and turn the Meier & Frank parking lot 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?

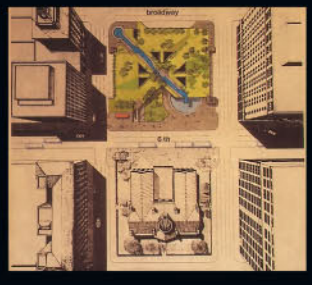
Over the next five years, the city's planning department, the Portland Development Commission, and private business interests hired a variety of designers to draw many possible versions of the square.. (Among them was Willard Martin, the square's eventual architect.) Downtown property owner Bill Roberts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

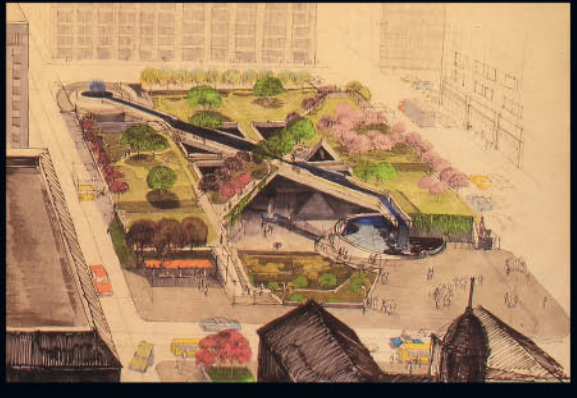
In 1978, the city hired local architect Donald Stastny to develop recommendations for the block's design process. Stastny proposed – and eventually oversaw – Portland's first national design competition. The 162 firms who applied included many then or soon-to-be internationally renowned designers (among 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.

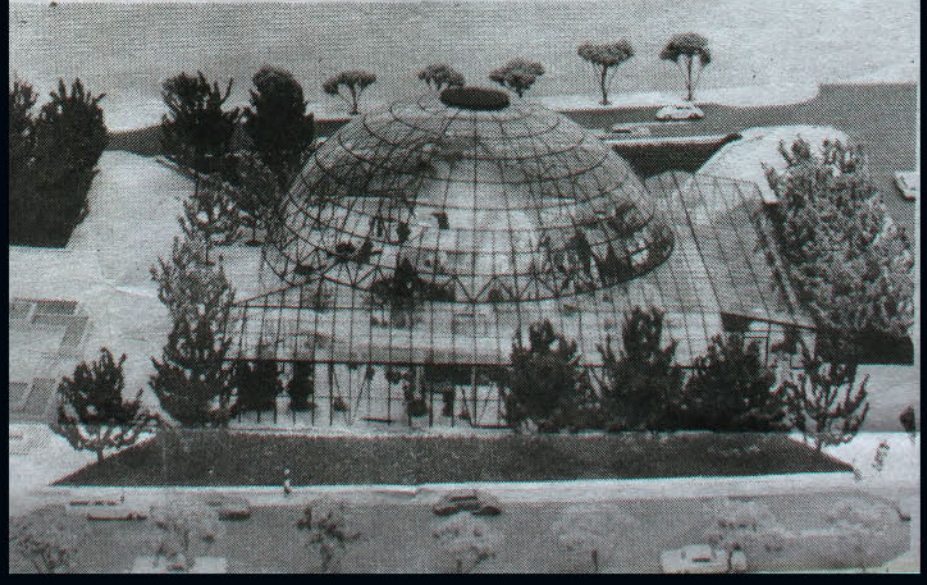


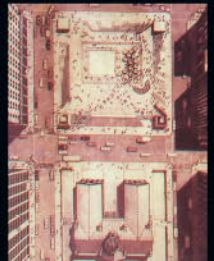


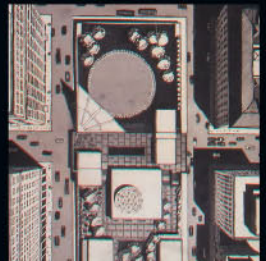












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The Competition

Unable to resolve the competing hopes for the square's future, the Portland Development Commission and competition manager Don Stastny 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.

A

Peter Eisenman and Jaquelin T. Robertson, New York City

WHO: One of the famed New York Five who were hailed and criticized for their allegiance to pure Modernist forms, Eisenman gained fame for his intellectually challenging, often theoretical designs that became grouped with those of so-called Deconstructivist architects like Bernard Tschumi and Daniel Libeskind. Having just begun his professional practice in hopes of seeing his work built, Eisenman was in many ways an unusual partner for Robertson who was well-experienced, Yale-trained architect and urban planner known for his devotion and traditional architecture.

THE CONCEPT: The Eisenman/Robertson design concept represented the fusion of garden and urban plaza – a dialogue between the natural and man-made – and was a perfect representation of the dichotomy between Eisenman's and Robertson's aesthetic leanings. The design of the ground surface included a warped plane and a superimposed grid, harbingers of Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Arts, in Ohio, and his Holocaust Memorial, in Berlin, both designed years later. The edge of the square was flanked by two pavilions, and sandwiched between those pavilions and Pioneer Courthouse was a terraced garden.

THE JUDGMENT: The members appreciated the physical simplicity and intellectual complexity of the concept, but ultimately felt that the pavilions were more symbolic than functional and that the design in general did not encourage the informal activities anticipated for the square.

WHERE THEY ARE NOW: The duo disbanded in 1987. Eisenman went on to become one of the famed Deconstructivist architects of the 1980s, designing, perhaps most notably, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in 2004. This controversial memorial has been described as both a cityscape and a graveyard, reflective of the theoretical and mysterious nature of Eisenman's work. Robertson co-founded Cooper, Robertson & Partners, a New York architecture and urban planning firm that has a staff of over 100 today. He has led numerous award-winning architectural and planning projects in the United States and abroad, ranging from New Urbanist communities in Florida to a waterfront park in Charleston, South Carolina.

B

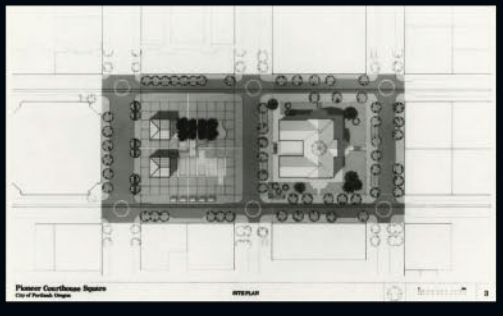
Lawrence Halprin and Charles Moore (Joint Venture), San Francisco and Los Angeles

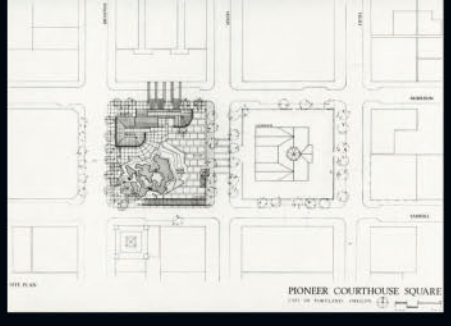
WHO: The renowned Halrpin and Moore, in many ways, were the team to beat. Together they designed the 1965 Sea Ranch, the iconic California coastal retreat, as well as Portland's groundbreaking Lovejoy Fountain. Halprin, a landscape architect, also designed Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco, Portland's transit mall, and Ira Keller Fountain (the last with Angela Danadjieva). He had begun work on the Haas Promenade in Jerusalem and the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC. Charles Moore was a widely published theorist and educator, best known for his playful, ironic, garishly iconoclastic 1978 emblem of post-modernism: Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans.

THE CONCEPT: The Halprin/Moore design for Pioneer Courthouse Square sought to evoke a local town center with a collection of symbolic elements – a water garden, an arcade, several stages and performing areas, a clock tower, and a colossal, tent-like glowing glass structure. The multitude of interior spaces for cafes, restaurants, an information center, and a garden of native and exotic flowers was clearly aimed at Portland's business interests.

THE JUDGMENT: The jury praised this design for its courageousness, invention, and its ability to attract people to the square. But ultimately, they believed the design was inappropriate for the site and context, and that it lacked sufficient flexibility. "It should be built," said the jury, "but alas, not as our major public square."

WHERE THEY ARE NOW: After six decades of designing parks and public spaces, Halprin, 92, has recently completes the Stern Grove Amphitheater in San Francisco and a redesign of the Yosemite Falls visitor area. Moore died in 1993, after a long career of eclectic designs, teaching positions, and a dozen published books. Among his final works were the Science Complex at the University of Oregon (1990) and the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, his final work before his death.





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The Competition

C Machado and Silvetti and Schwartz/Silver (Joint Venture), Boston

WHO: Born and educated in Argentina, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, like Eisenman were young educators with a long list of competition prizes. Warren Schwartz and Robert Silver, both Harvard graduates, joined to form Schwartz/Silver in 1980. Schwartz's work includes Grace Chapel in Rome and New York City Hall, which he designed jointly with Silver. Silver had worked on civic and educational projects, including the science center for Wellesley College.

THE CONCEPT: Intended to convey "today's equivalent of the 'cathedral/city hall/marketplace' of the medieval city," their concept featured a very open center square flanked by a glass greenhouse opposite of the courthouse. Garden and seating spaces on the north and south sides finished off the square.

THE JUDGMENT: The jury appreciated the civic respect conveyed by the design and its appropriateness to the site, but found the small-scale pieces on the north and south sides to be inconsistent with the site requirements. They balked at the interior arrangement of the glass structure, even though they acknowledged that its presence was a strong symbol for the square.

WHERE THEY ARE NOW: Both Machado and Silvetti are tenured professors at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Among their recent buildings are the restoration and addition for the Getty Villa in Malibu, California, and Scully Hall at Princeton University. Schwartz/Silver Architects went on to design MIT's Rotch Architecture Library and the Shaw Center for the Arts at Louisiana State University, which won the 2008 American Institute of Architects' National Honor Award.

D Robert Geddes and Michael A. Kihn of the firm Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, Cunningham, Philadelphia

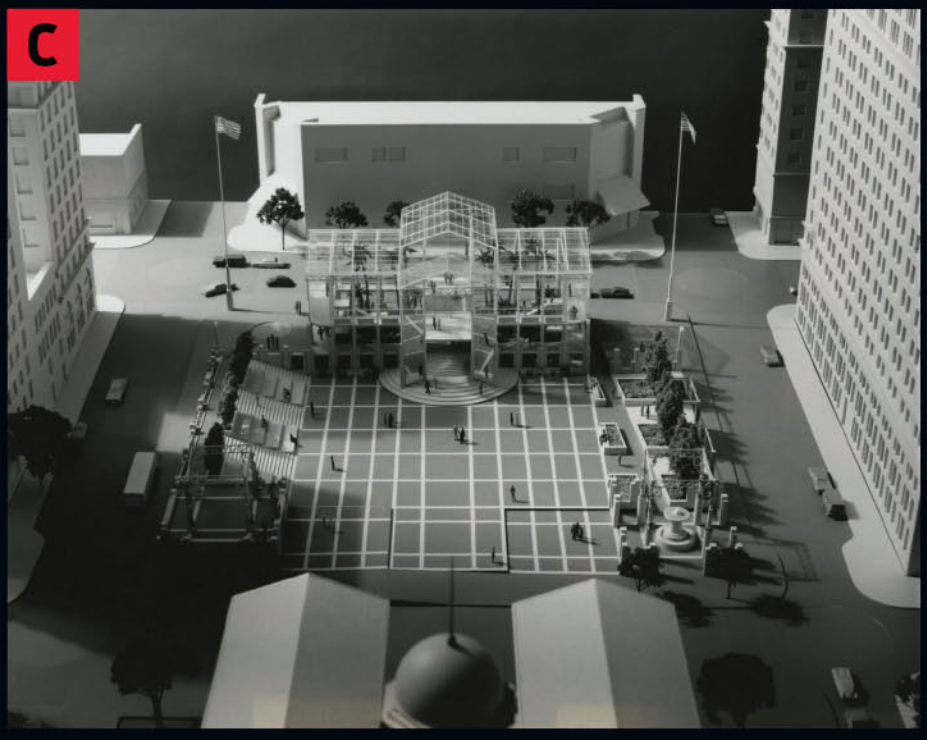
WHO: Geddes was the heavy hitter of this trio, with a three-pronged career as architect, educator, and urban designer. He was a dean of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at Princeton University and had extensive experience in design and planning in both public and private sectors.

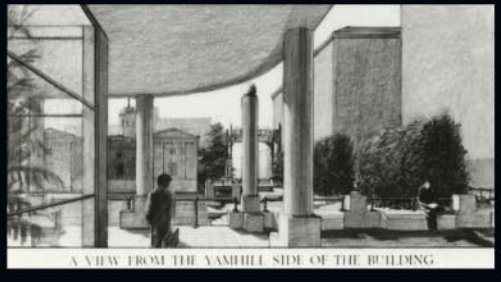
THE CONCEPT: Urban theater met place of retreat as an assembly area flanked a covered garden and conservatory. The trellis and glass wall of the conservatory were illuminated and became the most prominent element of the scheme at night. The square was completed with a variety of smaller spaces for shelter and enclosure: a glass-covered arcade, a canvas-covered arcade with removeable awnings, and a pergola-covered terrace.

THE JUDGMENT: While the jury valued the designs realization of program elements for both formal and informal activities, the members felt it did not achieve the kind of space and setting that would be enjoyed by Portlanders. They considered the trellis to be inconsistent and undesirable intrusion into the character and nature of the square.

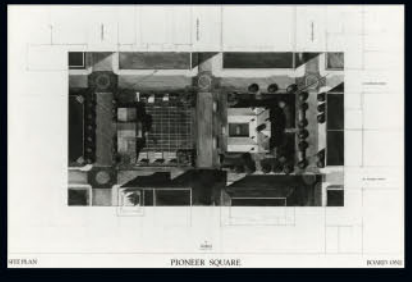
WHERE THEY ARE NOW: Eventually the firm became GBQC and then, through mergers, Cubellis, a fairly generic architectural service provider.

C



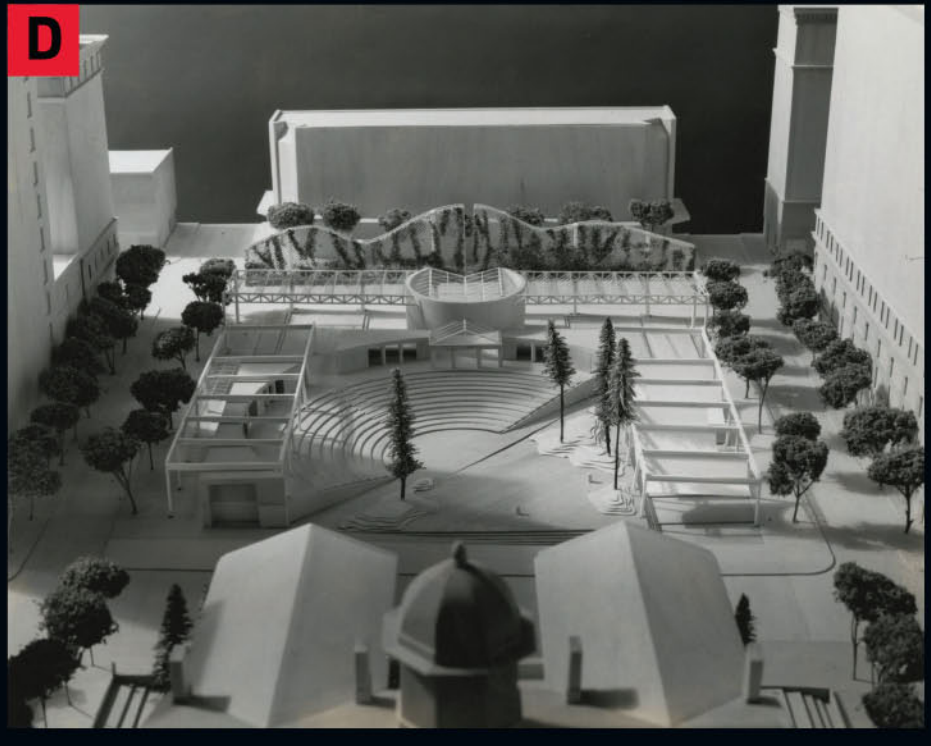


A VIEW FROM THE YAMHILL SIDE OF THE BUILDING



SITE PLAN PIONEER SQUARE BOARD (1981)

D



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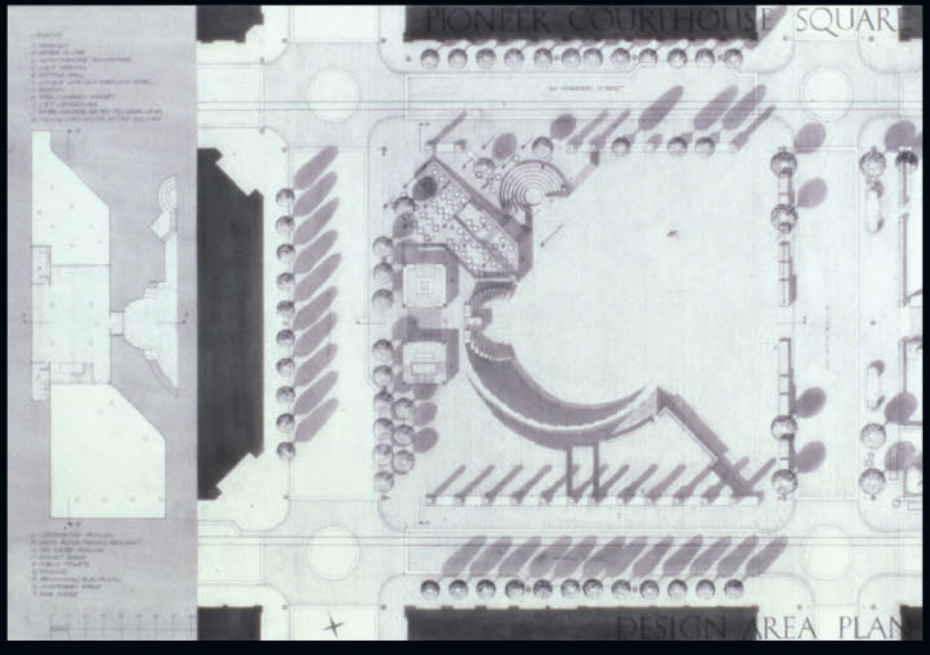
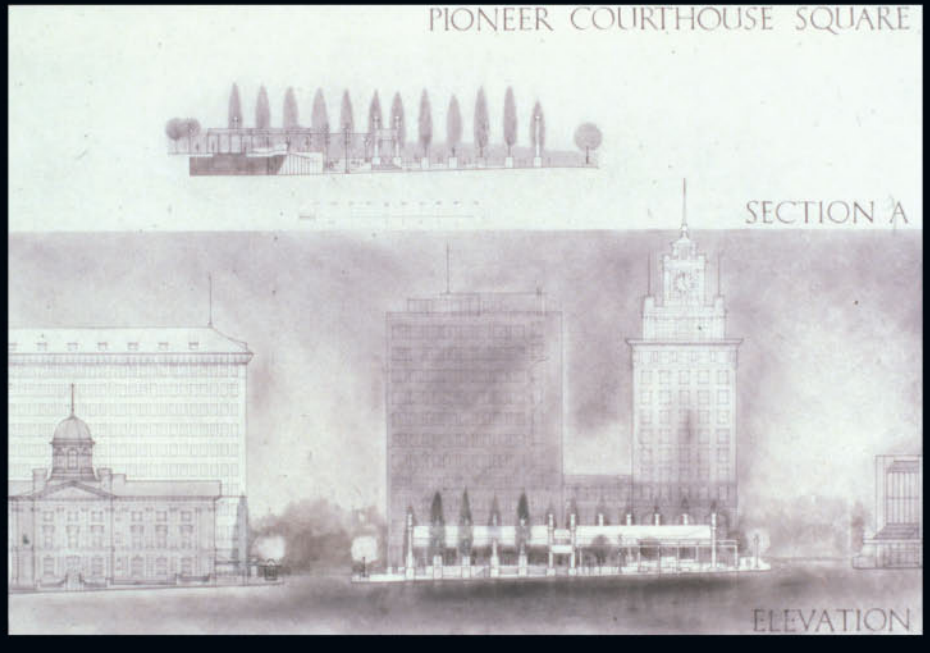
The Bowser's Club Wins





E

Willard K. Martin, J. Douglas Macy, Lee Kelly, Terence O'Donnell, Spencer Gill, and Robert Reynolds, Portland

WHO: With 22 years of professional practice under his belt at the time of the competition, Martin was best known for his quirky, colorful interpretations of Modernism, for his breathtaking drawings, and for the cultist silhouette he cut courtesy of a flat-brimmed hat and cigar. Macy had recently founded his own firm. Kelly, a nationally recognized contemporary sculptor, held many awards and prominent commissions, including work for the Portland transit mall and Candlestick Park in San Francisco. O'Donnell, beneficiary of the three Fulbright lectureships and an accomplished historian and writer, had been published in Smithsonian magazine and had coauthored a historical guide to Portland. Gill had written and edited books on Northwest Indian basketry and Chinese gardening. Reynolds had 30 years of experience in architectural graphics, publishings, and corporate communications for clients from Portland to New York. The group's cigar-chomping brainstorming sessions earned it a nickname, "The Bowsers Club," supposedly after the famed card-playing dog painting.

THE CONCEPT: Inspired in part by Piazza del Campo, in Siena, Italy, and an amphitheater in Epidaurus, Greece, the design sought to merge stage and audience, function and fun. The team proposed using the brick of the newly christened transit mall, but stretching it across the surrounding streets to liberate the square from its property lines and give both pedestrians and cars a sense of being "in" the square. A row of monumental columns along the south side provided a sense of shelter for departing light-rail riders while echoing the cornice line of the adjacent Jackson Tower. The salvaged wrought iron gate of the Portland Hotel showed a reverence to history. A small amphitheater, two small glass pavilion, "teahouses," and a "keystone" for public addresses offered theatrically functional pieces for all manner of uses, while a weather machine and programmable laser light shows promised spontaneous excitement. Instead of using typical architectural model, the team represented its scheme in hand-carved wood with images of the surrounding buildings' lines etched into lithographic plates.

THE JUDGMENT: The jury unanimously found the scheme to be the most appropriate for the site and the community courtesy of the diversity of uses offered by its many terraced levels and a combination of formal and informal spaces. The jurors appreciated how the designs humor and playfulness did not compromise dignity and elegance and commended the design team for its framing of the square, and its subtle yet sensitive response to the courthouse and local historical detail.

WHERE THEY ARE NOW: Just 17 months after the square's inauguration, Will Martin died flying his own plane to the Grand Canyon. Macy has gone on to design numerous high-profile projects, including the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He collaborated with TVA Architects to design the new home for Saturday Market in Waterfront Park. He serves on Pioneer Courthouse Square Inc's board of trustees. Kelly, one of the city's most prominent sculptors, is still working at age 76 and is represented by Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Terence O'Donnell spent much of his career at the Oregon Historical Society and lived most of his life in Portland. He authored several books, including Cannon Beach: A Place by the Sea, his last before his death in 2001. Spencer Gill went on to write Portland, Image of a City and contributed to numerous other books on photography and Southwest Indian art. Robert Reynolds went on to found Reynolds Wulf Inc., a graphics, photography, and publishing firm that has produced numerous books about Portland.

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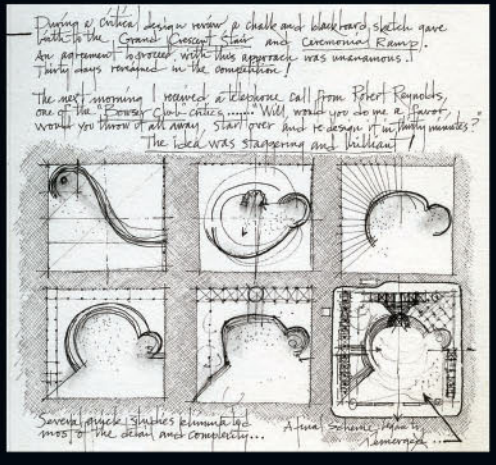
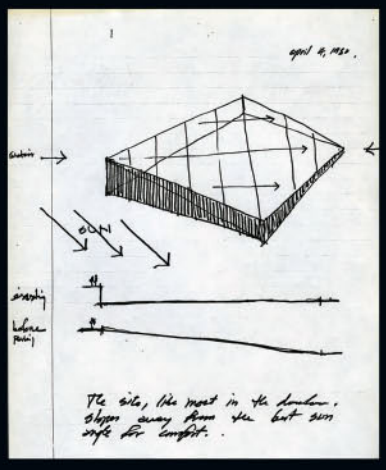
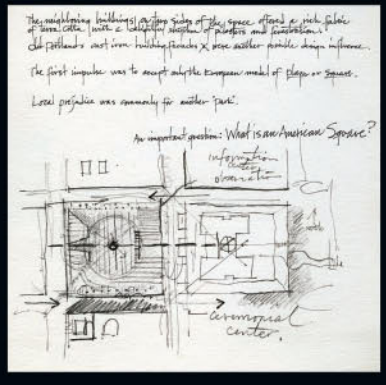
A Study of Context

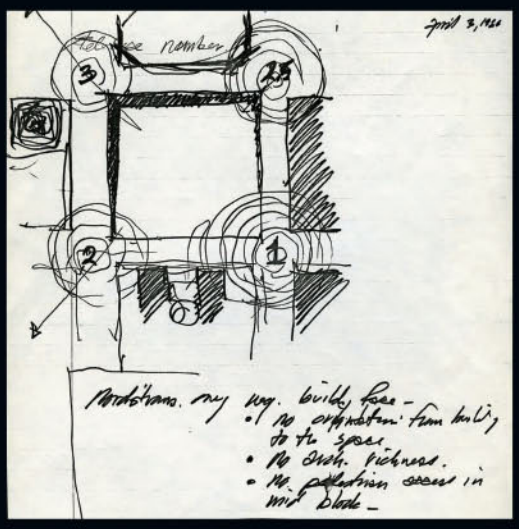
"Most of the world's great public squares are simple in concept and complete in their design only when used by people: places to pass through or to linger in, to promenade or to sit, to wait for a friend or the LRT, to sniff at the flowers, to shop or eat, to listen to music or a politician, to pause 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."

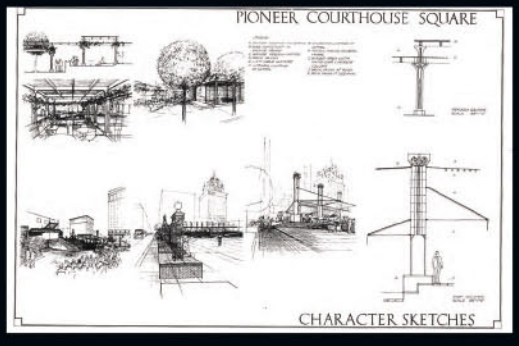
– Terence O'Donnell, from the competition entry

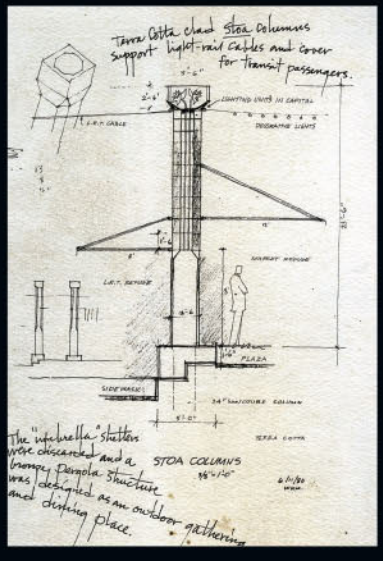


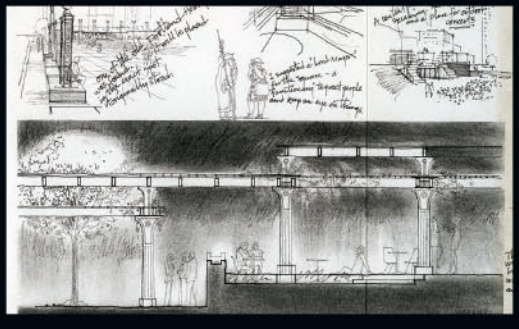






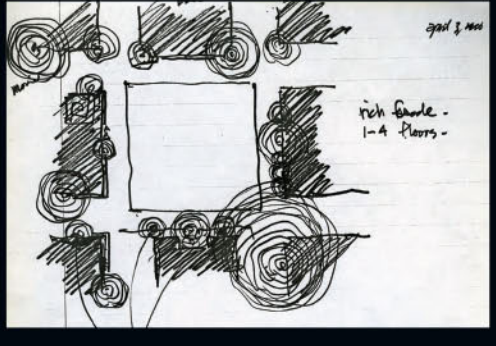


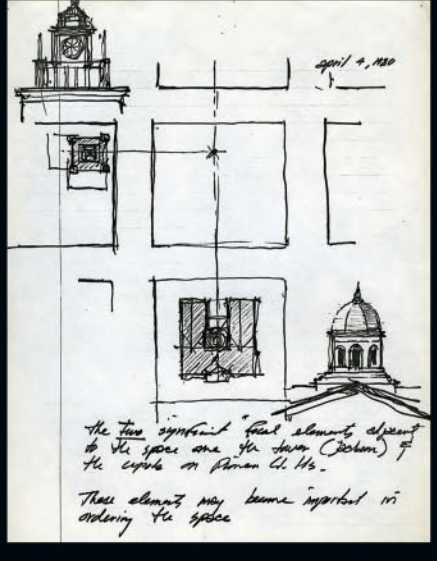


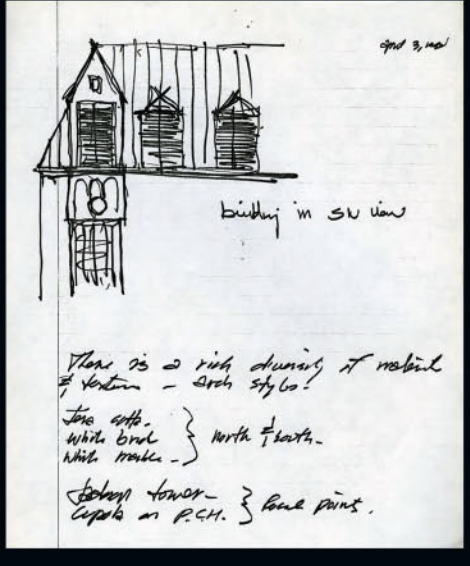


"Let the space be ambiguous, fragmented and eternally changing, rich in local symbols and metaphor reflecting Portland's history as well and bring meaning to citizens of all categories. We hope to bring together many different meanings to be enjoyed and understood by varying tastes... hoping to stimulate discourse between different and often opposed taste groupings with meanings that add up and work together in the deepest combination."

– Will Martin diary, 1980







Pioneering
the square

Paint the Town

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 Sumner 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 Sumner 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.

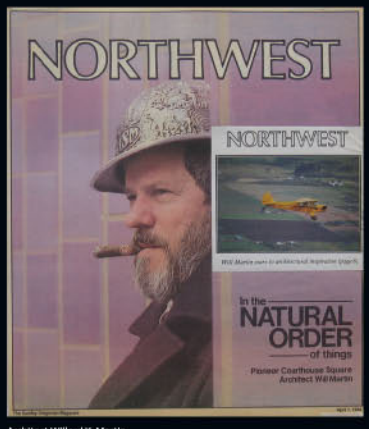
Pioneering the square

Brick by Brick

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 Artquake, 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 Ivnancie 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.



Architect Willard K. Martin

Bricks and cast-iron columns readied for installation

Melvin "Pete" Mark, leader of the private fundraising effort

Opening day, April 6, 1984

Pioneering
the square

Bricks on the Brink

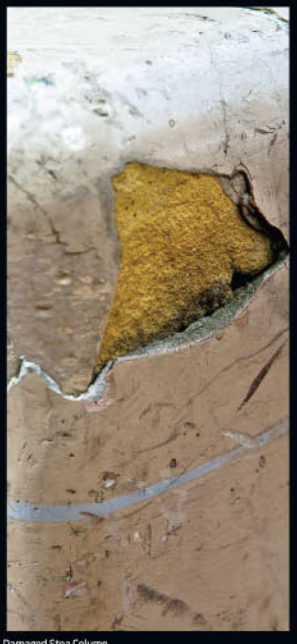
Today, as the Square turns 30 years old, it faces the wear of time and the tear of the 10 million citizens and tourists who visit each year. The waterproof membrane beneath the bricks that protects the offices and public spaces below, like any roof, is leaking. Many bricks and terra cotta tiles are cracking, 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.

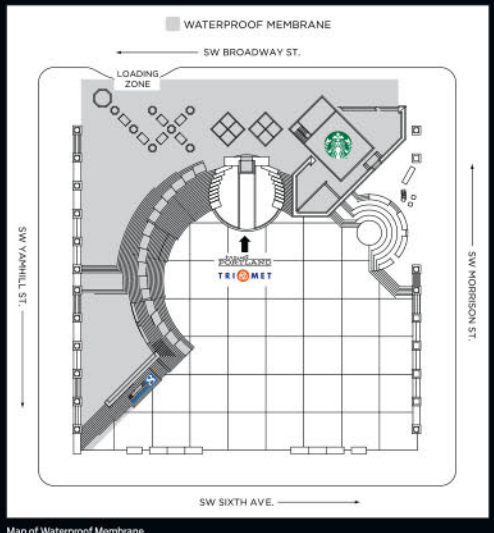
Together, the City of Portland and Pioneer Courthouse Square's non-profit management organization are working to assure that this unique public asset serves the next generation of Portlanders. Look for your upcoming opportunities to get involved.

Festival of Flowers, 2013


Damaged Stoa Column

Damaged Bricks


Damaged Stoa Column



Map of Waterproof Membrane


Damaged Bricks

Damaged Sign

Pioneering
the square

Postscript

From hacky-sackers and gutter 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.

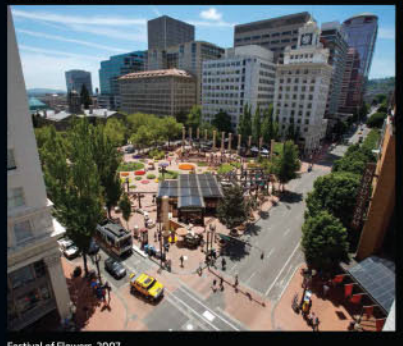
The civic spirit initiated by the 322 Portlanders who wrote checks to turn "Villiard's Ruins" into the city's first luxury hotel has been carried on by the supporters (71,000 and counting) who have paid to have their names etched into the square's bricks. But so, too, have the tensions continued between civics and commercial visions for the space. For instance, in 2002, a group of downtown businesspeople 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 Shrunk'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.

Festival of Flowers, 2007

Flicks on the Bricks, 2013

Sand in the City, 2011



Festival of Flowers, 2007

Singin' in the Square, 2014

Dave Chappelle, 2009

Cuervo Beach City Challenge, 1998

Tree Lighting Ceremony, 2013