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# Shaping neighborhoods and nature: Urban political ecologies of urban waterfront transformations in Portland, Oregon

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**This research critically examines the planning and redevelopment of historic industrial waterfronts adjacent to downtown Portland, Oregon. While the city's economy once centered on its waterfronts, economic restructuring and industrial decline rendered obsolete many of these spaces and their ancillary warehouses and railyards. The city and the region have pinned their hopes for the future on real estate development, biotech and the creative economy. The waterfront has become the site of considerable residential and commercial redevelopment that transforms underutilized areas into an expanded downtown following a familiar model of condos, restaurants, offices and galleries. These remade waterfront districts must be considered within the way in which articulations of nature and urbanity are mobilized in order to shape expectations and consumption of the new neighbourhoods. This is particularly relevant given the city's prominence in academic and mainstream media regarding its liveability and environmentalism. Waterfront ecological restoration, urban liveability, and sustainable technologies all appeal to the urban imaginaries of planners, developers and residents while potentially displacing other concerns or questions. Public-private partnerships and strategic rescaling suggest new governance regimes are articulated in the visioning, planning and development of these districts, simultaneously reconstructing neighbourhoods and ecologies. Portland is often considered (and considers itself) at the leading edge of progressive urban development and politics. Careful criticism of the city's production of new urban spaces should be pursued to avoid foreclosing opportunities for articulating alternate urban futures.**

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## Introduction: Portland planning and waterfront redevelopment

Nearly everyone loves Portland, Oregon. It is beautiful, has a mild climate, progressive politics and strong environmental ethics. Common stories of Portland circle around outdoor activities, unique civic spaces and institutions, and a variety of transit

options including: light rail, streetcars, a soon to be completed aerial tram, walkable neighbourhoods, an award winning bus system, and bicycle friendly streets. In a word, it's *liveable*. Organizations such as Partners for Liveable Communities and publications from *Inc.* magazine to *Outside* and *Bicycling* have touted the city as a leader in various components of liveability (Partners for Liveable Communities, 2005; Frisk, 2006; Grudowski, 2005; Inc., 2005). A focus on planning, a high degree of civic engagement, and a pervasive environmental consciousness come together in a city where inclusive government

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touts a 'get along' ethos and compromise politics (Abbott, 1997). 1970s civic and environmental activists, reacting against modernist planning and governance, incorporated elements of public participation and community planning into urban policy-making, focusing their attention on halting the decline of downtown neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup>

The reversal in the fortunes of the city's downtown has become an oft repeated and rare success story of planning for redevelopment in American cities. The regional government's Urban Growth Boundary and ambitious 2040 Plan advocate for further increasing urban densities, particularly in the urban core, in order to limit suburban sprawl as the metropolitan area continues to grow by an expected 1.8% a year (Edmonston and Hasan, 2005; Metro, 1994; Central City Plan, 1988). The city's extensive downtown riverfronts were once the focus of economic activity, serving as trans-shipment points and processing centers for the resources extracted from Portland's hinterland before later becoming vast shipyards and sites of industrial production (Robbins, 1997; Robbins, 2004). By the 1980s, the historic riverfronts had become increasingly economically marginal, while their physical proximity to downtown encouraged their reconsideration within the city's planning networks as potential spaces of new central residential, office and retail districts (River District Steering Committee, 1994).

Announced in a press release in 1996, Portland's newest central city neighbourhoods occupy two historic waterfront areas on opposite sides of the downtown, and have been remade through a public planning process that contained strategic appeals to ideals of community and environmentalism intertwined within a discourse of *liveability* that recasts understandings of the city and nature (City of Portland, 1996; PDC, 1999). To interrogate the redevelopment of Portland's new waterfront residential neighbourhoods requires investigating the role that reintroduced forms of nature play in framing these waterfront districts. The *liveability* discourses that circulate widely within planning and development networks, particularly in Portland, are not easily restricted to conservative or progressive politics, and highlight limitations in the gentrification literature. In order to trace the articulations of power in making decisions about Portland's new urban riverfront landscapes it is necessary to broaden understandings of governance, to include the networks of non-profits, environmentalists and neighbours that plan for

redevelopment, as well as the spatial conceptualizations of waterfront districts to include the warehouses and worker housing integrated into the areas historically defined by riverfront commerce. How nature is reinserted into these particular areas of the city—sites of longstanding intersections between economic, riparian, and social systems—is a key component of the political and ideological reconstruction of urban areas, involving networks of power between numerous actors, and resulting in new and contradictory understandings (Castree and Braun, 1998). To examine these understandings contained within the term *liveability*, this research draws on official plans and documents supporting the planning efforts in these neighbourhoods, landscape analysis, participant observation of public planning and policy related events, and interviews with a broad array of actors. Considering the urban political ecologies of redevelopment of the historical waterfront neighbourhoods within the Portland model demonstrates how the reclamation of modernist social and industrial riverfronts with references to 'liveability', reframes waterfronts within specific articulations of nature that work to mitigate anxieties of social and ecological dislocation, but also marginalizes issues of social justice.

#### *The Portland model*

For the last quarter century, Oregon has followed a State-mandated program designed to limit urban growth and maintain its agricultural and forest lands. Drawing inspiration from a historic Olmstead plan for the city, and emboldened by the writings of Jane Jacobs, community activists in the 1970s created an integrated vision of small scale neighbourhoods within a regional park system and restored waterfront ecologies (Abbott, 1997; Lang and Hornburg, 1997; Orfield, 1997; Newman and Kenworthy, 1999; Duany et al., 2000; Partners for Liveable Communities, 2005). Comprehensive planning and expanded building codes and regulations required new forms of development and design, creating new urban landscapes that meet many of the criteria of a now-extensive literature on *liveability*, while also garnering accolades for the level of citizen participation and compromise on social issues.

Because planners, politicians and developers internationally have looked at Portland and the State of Oregon for best practices, the shifting social constructions of nature implied by references to green values such as 'liveability' are critical. The act of framing these new urban neighbourhoods is a spatial practice encompassing both symbolic and material effects. New visions incorporate particular memories and not others, articulate social exclusions, and recast places within new forms of cultural capital (Till, 1993). The reclamation of industrial spaces utilizes devalued industrial buildings and machinery, now reclaimed as aesthetic touchstones

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<sup>1</sup> The downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods of Portland are commonly referred to as the Central City. It is not analogous to the entire metropolitan area of the city of Portland. The 1998 Central City Plan expands the area of concern in the 1972 Downtown Plan to include nearby neighborhoods and the convention center and sports center complexes on the east side of the river (see *Figure 1*).

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